Muggle Fairy Tales Are Mad!

by Meltha

Summary

During the endless camping trip in book 7, Ron asks Hermione to tell the story of that "disease sounding" fairy tale to pass the time. This becomes something of a habit, and Hermione tells the boys a series of traditional Muggle fairy tales.

Notes

Each of these stories is indeed based on the original versions of the fairy tale Hermione is telling, though sometimes elements from several different versions show up in one place.
Another day had passed, and Harry knew they weren’t any closer to finding the rest of the Horcruxes. What was worse, a sense of despair was beginning to touch everything around them, infusing the old tent with an almost palpable feeling of futility. Ron gazed blandly at the kitchen table in front of him, staring at the empty plate that had held only a few undercooked scraps to begin with. Hermione, on the other hand, was pacing again. She seemed desperate to move, to find answers, but her repetitive steps from bunks to table to door and back again were not only purposeless but becoming annoying, even to herself.

Harry fished about for a topic of conversation, but after months stranded in the wilderness with no one but each other, he couldn’t come up with a single thing that hadn’t been discussed three times over from his Aunt Marge’s bulldogs to Hermione’s parents’ rules for flossing to Ron’s earliest memories of Percy being a prat. Silence was straining them to the breaking point. If they had to discuss the possible locations of the remaining Horcruxes one more time, Harry was sure there was going to be a very nasty fight.

Finally, Ron sighed.

“Hermione,” Ron said, getting her to stop her caged pacing, “tell us a story.”

“What?” she asked, looking at him as though he’d grown an extra head. “You mean you want to hear Beedle again?”

“No, that’s the last thing I want to hear,” Ron said with a shudder. “If I have to listen again to Babbity Rabbity, I think I’ll go mad.”

“Then, what…?” she asked again, deeply confused.
“Didn’t you say that Muggles had other stories they told their kids, like that White Snow and the Six Gnomes and that disease thing?” Ron asked.

Hermione smiled, and Harry realized it was the first time she’d really smiled in weeks.

“It’s Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and the ‘disease thing’ was Cinderella,” she said, sitting down.

“Yeah, that one,” Ron said. “Harry, did you hear those growing up?”

“Not really,” he replied. “The Dursleys sort of censored anything that had magic in it.”

“There’s magic in them?” Ron asked, curious.

“In some of them,” Hermione said. “There are witches in quite a few, but all of them seem to wind up being evil.”

“What about the disease thing?” Ron asked.

“Cinderella,” Hermione repeated, slightly exasperated. “And she’s not a disease. That’s her name.”

“Bloody hell, Hermione, and I thought your name was cruel,” Ron said, laughing. “Who’d go and name their kid that?”

“Well, it wasn’t her real name, originally,” Hermione said. “The way my mum always told it, her name was Ella, but because she always sat in the cinders, everyone called her Cinderella.”

“What’d she want to do that for?” Ron asked.

Harry found himself settling back in his chair and listening with amusement. He could almost pretend they were back in Gryffindor Tower, sitting in front of the fire in the common room and chatting away in that time that seemed so long ago, back when they were just students and the worst thing they had to fear was a surprise test from Snape.

“If you want to hear the story properly, I have to begin at the beginning,” Hermione said, and the tone in her voice suggested she was having a bit of fun as well for once. “Once upon a time…”

“What?” Ron asked.

“What do you mean ‘what’?” Hermione said.

“What’s ‘once upon a time’?” he asked.

Hermione scrunched up her nose at this, then said, “Well, it’s how all Muggle fairy stories begin, really. It’s like saying ‘This happened a long time ago’ but not saying quite when.”

“Then why don’t they just say that?” Ron asked, genuinely bemused.

“Because it’s not as poetic and it’s not how it’s done,” Hermione said firmly. “Anyway, once upon a time, in a kingdom far away there lived a rich nobleman and his little daughter.”

“That’d be Ella,” Ron said helpfully.

“Yes,” Hermione said, giving him a look that was a cross between fond tolerance and impatience.

“Where’s her mum?” Ron asked.
“She died,” Hermione said.

“Of what?” Ron asked.

“It’s not really important. Come to think of it, mothers tend to have a very high mortality rate in most Muggle fairy stories,” Hermione said, her expression going back to the days when she had sat in class and made a connection between two ideas a professor had been discussing. “That’s actually quite interesting, now I think of it.”

“So, anyway, this bloke and his daughter are rich,” Ron said, drawing her back to the story.

“Right,” Hermione said, returning to her role as Scheherazade for the night. “Anyway, the man thought that his daughter should have a mother’s influence, so he married again. The woman he married was very beautiful.”

“Well done, then,” Ron said, grinning widely.

“But she was also cruel and cold-hearted,” Hermione said, annoyed. “Pretty isn’t always as nice on the inside as the outside, you know.”

“Oh,” Ron said, sneaking an ashamed look at Harry. “Not so well done, then.”

“She’d also been married before and had two daughters of her own who were around Ella’s age,” Hermione told him. “But they were both spoiled rotten and very mean.”

“Were they pretty, too?” Ron asked carefully.

“Ehm, no,” Hermione admitted. “They were ugly step-sisters.”

“So sometimes ugly on the outside means ugly on the inside too, then,” Ron said triumphantly.

“It just means, Ronald,” Hermione said testily, “that you can’t tell what someone’s like from the outside! The ugly step-sisters might have been very nice people, you know!”

“Except they weren’t,” he pointed out.

“In this particular case,” she admitted, “no, they weren’t. But just because someone’s got a nose that’s not perfectly centered or-or buck teeth that doesn’t mean it’s a personal moral failing!”

“We get the point, Hermione,” Harry said, fighting back a smile. “From what I remember, fairy tales aren’t always the most… feminist friendly things out there.”

“True,” she said. “Anyway, shortly after the father married the step-mother, he died.”

“Did she kill him?” Ron asked with interest.

“No!” Hermione said immediately, then paused. “You know, now that you mention it, that really does seem sort of suspicious, doesn’t it?”

“Marries him, gets her name on all the money and such, then bumps him off,” Ron said sagely, nodding his head.

Harry stared at the pair of them. Hermione’s brow furrowed in thought and Ron picking in an almost playful manner at the few bits left stuck to his plate. He wondered if the wizarding world would ever guess what their last and best hope was doing tonight.
“At any rate,” Hermione said, getting her train of thought back, “the second the father was dead, the step-mother really showed her character. She made Ella into a servant in her own house, dressing her in rags.”

“So… they turned her into a House-elf?” Ron said, very carefully.

Harry winced. Perhaps getting Hermione going on the subject of house-elves wasn’t the wisest thing to do.

“Actually, when you put it that way, they sort of did,” Hermione agreed. “She had to work from morning to night, ate next to nothing, got no wages, no benefits, no sick days, no rights…”

“Okay, we get the idea, Hermione,” Harry interrupted, stopping her as her voice began to rise in indignation. “She was having a very bad time of it.”

“She was indeed,” Hermione said firmly.

“But she didn’t actually look like a house-elf, right?” Ron said.

“No,” Hermione said. “She was beautiful in spite of her rags. I think the step-mother wanted to make her own daughters look better by comparison.”

“But it backfired,” Ron said.

“Pretty much,” Hermione agreed. “They were still mean, rotten, awful girls.”

“Remind me of female Dudleys,” Harry chimed in.

“You know, your life story does sound a bit like Cinderella’s, actually,” Hermione said thoughtfully.

“Yeah, ‘cept instead of sleeping in the cinders, you had to sleep in a cupboard with the spiders. Say, would that make you Spiderharry?” Ron asked, and the laugh that accompanied it felt good.

“I guess it would at that,” Harry said. “Go on with the story, Hermione.”

“Nothing much happened for several years, and then one day the king of land decided that his son needed to find a wife, so he decided to hold a ball and invite all the unmarried young ladies in the whole country to it so the prince could choose one of them to be his bride.”

Ron stared open-mouthed for a second, then said, “Okay, let me see if I’ve got this straight. He’s going to invite every single girl in the whole kingdom to a ball?”

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“He’s either got a really big ballroom or a really tiny country,” Ron said, wrinkling his nose. “Not only that, but the prince is going to pick a girl on what? How she does the mambo? Now there’s a great sign that they’ll be compatible.”

“I know it’s silly, but I guess it was really like one big beauty contest with the prince as a judge,” Hermione said with a shrug, then paused. “Wizards do the mambo?”

“Nah,” Ron said. “It’s the only Muggle dance I know. Fred and George nicked a copy of some movie a few years ago thinking it was a blue film and rigged up a Muggle VCR back home to watch it while Mum and Dad were out to dinner one night, and I snuck down to watch a bit of it. I don’t think it was what they were expecting, though. Something about not putting a baby in a corner.”
Hermione’s face crinkled as she broke out into a laugh that got louder with each passing moment.

“Are you telling me that your entire understanding of Muggle culture is based on *Dirty Dancing*?” she got out between giggles.

“Pretty much, yeah,” Ron admitted sheepishly.

Harry couldn’t help feeling this explained a lot, including his rather glaringly overly enthusiastic snogging with Lavender last year.

“Anyway,” Hermione said after she stopped laughing, though her cheeks remained a bright shade of cherry pink, “the invitation to the ball came on the same day the ball was to be held, and the step-mother of course wanted her daughters to go but not Cinderella because she was prettier than either of them. But when Cinderella asked if she could go, the step-mother agreed on the conditions that she finish all her work first, make her own dress, and find her own carriage to get there, all in one day.”

“So, basically, she said no,” Ron said.

“Pretty much, but Cinderella took her at her word, but by the time she finished all the extra work the step-mother gave her to keep her busy, there was no time left to do anything else. The step-mother and step-sisters rode away in their carriage to the ball, but Cinderella sat down to cry in the cinders,” Hermione said.

“Why in the cinders?” Ron asked.

“What?” Hermione said.

“I mean, why didn’t she run out in the garden or go pout in a corner or something? Stupid, that, sitting in the cinders and sobbing,” Ron said.

“It makes the story more pathetic, I suppose,” Hermione said. “Just then, though, who should appear but her fairy godmother.”

“Her what?” Ron said in disbelief.

“Her fairy godmother,” Hermione repeated.

“Who in their right mind would pick a fairy as a godmother? Don’t they know how dangerous those things are?” Ron said. “I mean, really, why not just give her a banshee godmother; they’re about as deadly.”

“Muggles think of fairies differently,” Hermione explained. “They don’t really understand them.”

“Yeah,” Harry chimed in. “They think they sneak into the house in the middle of the night and swap kids’ fallen-out teeth with money.”

“Now there’s a comforting image: one of the fae walking in and stealing body parts. Don’t they know how much trouble giving a magical being a body part can lead to?” Ron said, still flabbergasted. “Everyone knows that!”

“Well, Muggles don’t,” Hermione said. “Besides, the Tooth Fairy is something only children believe in. Mostly Muggles just think of fairies as tiny, cute, pudgy things with wings to put on greeting cards with flowers and bunnies.”
“There really ought to be a public service campaign for them, then,” Ron said pityingly. “So how’d Cinderella’s Muggle mum and dad even know a fairy to make a godmother to begin with?”

“Well, I… I don’t know. They never really explain how she wound up with a fairy as a godmother,” Hermione said, tilting her head to one side in consideration. “It is sort of an odd loose end to leave, isn’t it?”

“No kidding,” Ron agreed. “Hermione, no offense, but this is a really weird story.”

“I’m realizing that myself,” she said. “At any rate, the fairy godmother said that she’d come to help Cinderella go to the ball.”

“Why didn’t she help her before?” Ron asked.

“If you mean why didn’t the fairy godmother show up and stop the step-mother treating Cinderella horribly or taking away her inheritance or being all-around abusive to her, I don’t really know,” Hermione said. “She just… didn’t.”

“Blimey, that’s a slouch of a godmother,” Ron said, glancing over at Harry. “At least Sirius had the excuse that he was in Azkaban for not stepping in.”

Harry had a brief image of Sirius as his fairy godfather, sweeping in to save the day and keep Harry safe from the Dursleys, and the picture brought a wistful smile to his face. It would have been nice had that happened, he thought sadly. Still, a rather silly mental picture of Sirius suddenly having pink, sparkly wings sprang to mind, and he did have to chuckle a little at that, particularly when he imagined what his very cool godfather would have had to say about the costume.

“Well, at least she did do her best though for Cinderella that particular night, and she transformed Cinderella’s drab dress into a beautiful gown, a bunch of mice into horses, a pumpkin into a carriage, and a dog into a footman for her,” Hermione said.

“So, Transfiguration,” Ron said, grinning that there was finally something in this story he could understand. “Hey, for a Muggle story, that’s actually pretty accurate, isn’t it?”

“It is, really,” Hermione agreed. “It makes me wonder if there wasn’t a witch or wizard who wrote at least part of it. Oh, then she gave her the most important thing: a pair of glass slippers.”

“Glass… slippers…,” Ron said slowly. “What the hell was she thinking of?!?”

“Oh, come on, it’s not that strange!” Hermione said.

“Yes it is! Seriously, was she trying to kill her or what? Who dances in glass slippers? Wouldn’t they shatter and cut up her feet?”

“Well, I guess the point is that she’d have to be really graceful to dance in them, and Cinderella had no trouble at all,” Hermione said.

“Lethal footwear, of all things,” Ron said, shaking his head. “Muggles are mental, I’m telling ya.”

“The fairy godmother told Cinderella that she had to be home before the last stroke of midnight because that’s when the enchantment would end, and Cinderella took off for the ball,” Hermione went on, leaving the problem of the glass slippers behind.

“Midnight? Bit of an early curfew for her, wasn’t it?” Ron threw in.
“Oh, I suppose so,” Hermione said in frustration.

Harry couldn’t help grinning as his two friends continuously bickered about something as pointless as an old fairy story. It was refreshing not to be the one directing things or making plans, pleasant not to be arguing about life and death matters but just shoes.

“Cinderella arrived at the ball, and the prince immediately stopped dancing with all the other girls and fell head over heels in love with her at first sight, and she did with him as well, and they danced and danced until Cinderella completely forgot to check what time it was,” Hermione said, and Harry noticed a bit of a romantic sigh in her voice, though he was sure she’d never admit to it.

“What about the step-mother and step-sisters? Didn’t they have a fit when they saw her?” Ron asked.

“No,” Hermione said. “They didn’t recognize her.”

Ron squinted at her.

“You’re telling me that they couldn’t tell who she was just because of a dress?” Ron said.

“She was usually pretty dirty too from the cinders too, I’d guess,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but how dirty was she?” Ron said, raising his eyebrows. “I mean, come on, a pretty dress and washing a girl’s face can’t make that big a difference, can it?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, gauging Ron’s reaction carefully. “You seemed pretty unsure whether that was Hermione on Viktor Krum’s arm at the Yule Ball for a minute.”

Ron blushed brightly, clashing horribly with his hair, and muttered, “I knew it was you, just… didn’t want it to be was all.”

Hermione waited a moment, a blush staining her cheeks as well, before continuing as though nothing had happened.

“Finally, the castle clock began to strike midnight, and Cinderella, shocked that so much time had passed, ran down the front steps, the prince following close behind her because he hadn’t learned her name,” Hermione said.

“For Merlin’s sake, what were they doing all that time that they didn’t get a chance to exchange names,” Ron said, then the blush returned. “That didn’t come out quite right.”

“Ahem,” Hermione said delicately. “This is a children’s story, Ron. We can assume they were dancing.”

“From what I remember of that film, that’s pretty close to what I was thinking of anyway,” Ron mumbled, and Harry laughed again.

“As she was running down the steps, Cinderella tripped, and one of her glass slippers came off,” Hermione said.

“And it shattered, right?” Ron said.

“No. The prince picked it up, and by the time he looked up, the last stroke of midnight had tolled and his princess was nowhere to be seen, only a scullery maid who was in rags and running off into the night.”

“Who he of course didn’t recognize as his one true love,” Ron said, making the last three words into
the most melodramatic sigh he could muster. “Right?”

“Yes, right,” Hermione agreed. “Cinderella had only one tangible memory of that night.”

“A collection of hickeys?” Ron asked teasingly.

“No,” Hermione replied coldly. “The other slipper remained behind, and she kept it as a memento, sleeping with it under her pillow.”

“Weird,” Ron said, shaking his head. “Leaving aside the shoe breaking into a million razor sharp pieces in the middle of night, that’d have to be pretty lumpy.”

“The next day, the step-mother and step-daughters talked at breakfast about the mysterious, beautiful princess who had won the prince’s heart and wondered who she could be while Cinderella waited on them,” Hermione said.

“A bright lot, obviously,” Ron said.

“Meanwhile, the prince decided to search the land for the girl so he could marry her,” Hermione went on.

“That was pretty fast,” Ron said, grimacing. “Shouldn’t they find out a bit about each other before they get married, like, say, their first names?”

“I tend to agree with you,” Hermione said, “but it’s a fairy tale. Go with it. Since the only clue to the girl’s identity was her shoe, the prince sent his footman throughout the kingdom with it, and he decreed that any girl whose foot fit the slipper would be his bride.”

“You’re joking,” Ron said, staring at her slack-jawed. “He’s picking his wife from her shoe size?”

“Apparently she had really tiny feet,” Hermione said, shrugging again.

“I don’t care how tiny her feet are, there’s got to be a lot of people in the kingdom with the same size feet! And ever if they’re really, really tiny, couldn’t he end up marry a ten-year-old or something? And what’s he doing sending his footman out! Why isn’t he looking! I mean, doesn’t he think he’d recognize her?” Ron said indignantly. “I think I preferred it when I thought Cinderella was a disease. Still might be: some form of shoe-induced madness.”

“No one ever recognizes anyone in this story,” Hermione said, her voice rising slightly. “It’s just part of the narrative! Pretend they’re all really near-sighted or something!”

Harry burst out laughing again, and the other two joined in sheepishly.

“Eventually, the prince’s footman arrived at the home of the step-mother, but she got wise pretty fast and locked Cinderella in an upstairs room,” Hermione said.

“Now, there’s one person with a brain! She marries rich, knocks off her husband, and figures out what’s going on. Well done, evil step-mum!” Ron said, enjoying himself immensely.

“She wasn’t so wonderful next, though. You see, she knew both of her daughters had simply enormous feet, so she went to the first step-daughter and whacked off her toes with a knife,” Hermione said, her face screwing up in disgust. “That way, the shoe would fit.”

Ron blinked slowly.

“This is a kids’ story?” Ron said, grimacing.
“Yes,” Hermione said simply. “When the footman said the shoe fit, everyone was thrilled, but in the carriage on the way back to the castle, the step-daughter’s feet began bleeding, and everyone realized what had really happened, and they took her back to her step-mother.”

“And arrested the step-mother for mutilation and child abuse, I do hope,” Ron said.

“Well, no,” Hermione said. “They just had the next step-daughter try on the shoe.”

“Kingdom full of crazy people,” Ron said, shaking his head. “I suppose she hacked this one’s toes off as well?”

“No. She figured they’d catch on if she did it again.”

“Oh, well, bully for her,” Ron said sarcastically. “Obviously the brains in the family.”

“Instead she cut off the younger step-daughter’s heel,” Hermione said.

“How...?” Ron began, then made a despairing gesture with his hands. “Never mind. I was going to ask how she was going to walk without a heel, but at this point, I officially give up on trying to have this story make any sense at all.”

“You’ll probably be happier that way,” Hermione agreed. “So once again everyone said they’d found the Prince’s true love—“

“—because no one bothered to check for any other foot mutilations,” Ron provided.

“—and again her feet started bleeding in the carriage, and again they drove her straight back home,” Hermione continued as though he hadn’t spoken. “Meanwhile, Cinderella had broken out of the upstairs room.”

“And just how did she do that?” Ron asked.

“The mice let her out. She’d always been nice to them, so they unlocked the door,” Hermione explained.

“Mice,” Ron said. “Right. Oh, or were they horse-mice?”

“I think they were the same mice who’d been the carriage horses, yes” Hermione said.

“Lovely,” Ron said. “So she was freed by mice who sometimes whinnied. Then what, she raced downstairs, tried on the now very bloody glass slipper and squelched her way down the aisle, eh?”

“Actually no, and I’d never realized before just how disgusting an image that makes,” Hermione said with a shudder. “The step-mother tripped the footman and the shoe shattered.”

“Finally! That shoe could have withstood one of Neville’s Potions explosions, but the step-mum actually managed to break it. Good on old Toe Chopper,” Ron said.

“But Cinderella still had her glass slipper, and she showed it to the footman, who tried put it on her foot, and it fit,” Hermione said.

“Well, why wouldn’t it fit? It was her slipper, after all. She could’ve gone out and had it made to fit when she heard the prince’s stupid plan,” Ron said reasonably.

“Yes, I suppose she could have,” Hermione said through gritted teeth, “but she didn’t, and that’s the way the story goes!”
“If you ask me, the footman just didn’t want to get in trouble with the prince for breaking the poxy glass slipper and took an easy way out,” Ron said.

“Believe what you like. No sooner was the slipper back on her foot than Cinderella’s fairy godmother appeared again—“

“Because she couldn’t possibly have shown up any earlier to let Cinderella out without the aid of plague-infested mice or stop the step-mother and her foot alterations or maybe just give her a ten minute extension on her curfew—“

“—and Cinderella reappeared in her gown again.”

“And of course everybody was confused and confounded and wondered what had happened to Cinderella because it couldn’t possibly be the same girl with a different dress on, now could it,” Ron said.

“Then she rode off to the castle—“

“The footman checking for bleeding appendages along the way, no doubt,” Ron said in a loud aside to Harry.

“—and married the prince, and they lived happily ever after,” Hermione finished.

“So what happened to the step-mum and step-sisters?” Ron asked.

“Oh, um, a flock of birds swooped down and pecked their eyes out, I think,” Hermione said.

“One girl had no toes on one foot and no eyes, the other had no heel and no eyes, and the step-mother wanders around blind,” Ron said seriously. “Pretty. What about the mice?”

“They were mice, Ron,” Hermione said. “They just… ran about and squeaked, I suppose.”

Ron sat back on his chair and stared at the ceiling for a long several minutes, his mouth drawn up in frown.

“You know what I think?” Ron said.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “You think it’s silly.”

“No,” Ron said. “I think it’d make a brilliant horror story to frighten first-years with. Fred and George would love it. Got any more like that?”

Hermione chuckled quietly, and Harry began to gather up the dishes. The Horcrux still lay around a bedpost, glowing dimly in the evening light, but its pull seemed much diminished in the aftermath of the first normal conversation they’d had in weeks, if discussing the oddities of Cinderella could really be considered normal. Harry looked over his shoulder at his two friends, realizing not for the first time that they made a perfectly suited pair. He thought of Ginny for the thousandth time it seemed, wondering what she’d have to say about all this. Perhaps someday, months or years from now, he’d have the chance to tell her about it.
“I’m bored,” Ron said to no one in particular.

“Oh, what a horrible tragedy,” Hermione replied in a deadpan voice. “Muggle-borns are being rounded up, You-Know-Who has all of Britain under his thumb, none of us has seen our families in months, and, worst of all, Ronald Weasley is bored! The world must be coming to an end!”

In spite of himself, Harry snorted in laughter, and Ron, who a moment before had looked like he might be about to start a quarrel, seemed to see the humor in the situation and grinned apologetically.

“I know all that,” Ron said. “But admit it, Hermione, moving from one spot to another, setting up and taking down wards, scrounging for food, well… evading the Death Eaters isn’t quite as exciting as some might think.”

“Let’s hope it stays as dull as possible,” Hermione said, closing her book. “For us, excitement means torture, imprisonment, and probably death.”

“No need to be so optimistic,” Harry said, trying to sound like he was teasing, but he knew she was right, and so did Ron judging by his uncomfortable look.

The months on the run were taking a toll on all of them. News was a catch-as-you-can affair, and they were constantly concerned about their friends and loved ones, any of whom could conveniently “disappear” if the Ministry decided it was in its best interest. The Horcrux was no closer to being destroyed than it had been when they’d taken it from old toad face, and while Harry supposed the snake must be with Voldemort, he didn’t want to face him until the other Horcruxes were eliminated. None of them had the foggiest notion where the other ones might be, though.

“Anything helpful in there?” Harry asked Hermione, knowing the answer.

“No,” she said, stuffing the book back into her beaded purse where it joined the rest of Hermione’s provisions. “Granted, considering it’s the third time I’ve looked, I should have known better than to…”

“I want a story,” Ron interrupted abruptly.

Harry blinked in surprise.

“You’re joking,” Hermione said, raising an eyebrow.

“No,” Ron assured her. “I liked the one you told about the shoe-crazed prince and the foot lopping step-mother.”

“Cinderella,” Hermione corrected him automatically.

“Yeah, her,” Ron said. “You mentioned some other one about snow and gnomes, I think?”

“’Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’?” Harry asked.

“That’s the one,” Ron said, nodding.

“I thought you said ‘Cinderella’ was weird and violent?” Hermione said.

“Yeah, well, it is,” Ron said. “That’s why I like it.”
“That’s comforting,” Harry said with a grin. “Another couple months out here and you’ll start lopping off toes to keep yourself from boredom.”

“Ha,” Ron said archly. “Really, Hermione, what about it, eh? Give us a story?”

“Well…,” Hermione began hesitantly, “oh, I suppose so.”

Harry and Ron each turned their full attention to her. Frankly, Harry was rather curious about this one himself. The Dursleys had made quite a point of keeping fairy tales far away from Harry, going so far as to write his teachers when he was younger, demanding they not tell any stories about magic in class due to their “religious opposition to the occult in schools.” Granted, the only religion he was aware of the Dursleys practicing was Uncle Vernon worshipping the state of his lawn, but most of the teachers agreed to their demands so there wouldn’t be a fuss. Still, he’d passed a movie poster once for Snow White, and before Aunt Petunia had hurried him across the street and away from it, he’d just had time to wonder what the forbidden story might be about.

“Once upon a time,” Hermione began.

“Which means this happened a long time ago,” Ron said knowledgably.

“Yes,” Hermione said with a sigh, acknowledging he’d learned his lesson, “there lived a king who had a beautiful little daughter, but his wife died not long after the girl was born. The king decided that his child needed a mother, so…”

“Hang on there, Hermione,” Ron said. “You’re telling the wrong story!”

“No, I’m not,” Hermione said crossly. “You don’t even know ‘Snow White,’ so how could you know if I was starting out wrong!”

“Because you’re telling Cinder-what’s-her-face again!” Ron said. “There’s a little girl, and the mother dies, and the father remarries so she’ll have a mother.”

“‘Snow White’ starts the same way,” Hermione said, “though I admit I can see how it would confuse you.”

“They start the same way?” Ron asked. “Well, that’s unoriginal. Next thing you know, her dad’ll die and it’ll turn out the step-mother’s evil.”

“Well,” Hermione said, making a face, “you’re not wrong.”

“You’re kidding me?” Ron said, laughing. “Geez, Hermione, the bloke in the first story should have warned the one in the second story, shouldn’t he?”

“But the first one was already dead,” Harry pointed out reasonably.

“Yeah, but his ghost could’ve come back and given him a few pointers,” Ron insisted.

“Only wizards can become ghosts, though,” Harry said. “I asked Nick that once, and since these two were both Muggles…”

“Oh, I suppose we can let it go,” Ron said. “Hey, I just realized something! There is a difference! Cinderella’s father was just a nobleman, and this one’s a king! So they’re not complete twins, are they!”

“Well done, Ronald,” Hermione said icily. “Are you quite finished now?”
“Ehm, I suppose so,” Ron said, looking a little abashed.

“Good,” she said. “Now, you were right. The king did die, and it turned out that the new queen was a horrible person.”

“What about the two ugly step-daughters?” Ron asked.

“She didn’t have any,” Hermione said, sighing. “You see, it’s not entirely the same.”

“I guess not,” Ron said. “Okay, keep going.”

Hermione took a deep breath, and for a moment Harry thought her head might explode, but her voice was calm when she began again.

“The queen was very beautiful, and she had a magic mirror,” Hermione said. “Each day, she would go to the mirror and ask ‘Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest one of all?’”

“That’s asking for trouble, that is,” Ron said with a look at Harry. “Even Fleur wouldn’t have the knackers to do that.”

“And each day the mirror answered that the queen was the most beautiful woman in the world,” Hermione continued.

“Oh,” Ron said, a little disappointed. “Well, I suppose if she already knew what the answer was going to be, it wouldn’t be so risky. What if she’d had a bad hair day though?”

“What?” Hermione said.

“Even really gorgeous girls can have an off day,” he said knowledgably. “I mean, what if she’d got a great huge spot on the end of her nose? What if she was down with the flu and looked disgusting? What if she hadn’t slept the night before and had huge circles under her eyes and was a right mess?”

“I guess even then she was still the most beautiful,” Hermione said with a shrug.

“Veela,” Ron said to Harry, nodding. “Has to be. Only explanation. I like the talking mirror, though; at least that’s realistic.”

“Anyway,” Hermione said, throwing them both a look even though Harry really hadn’t interrupted, “the queen’s one worry was that the little princess would someday grow to be more beautiful than the queen herself. Because of that, she dressed her in rags and made her one of the scullery maids.”

“That sounds familiar,” Ron said with a sly grin. “Wonder if she and Cinderweeper ever hung about together.”

“Okay, so there are a few similarities,” Hermione said, “but most of them stop there. You see, one day, the queen looked in the mirror and asked her usual question, and she got back a different answer.”

“Ha!” Ron said triumphantly. “I knew that was a dumb thing to do!”

“The mirror said that the most beautiful woman in the world was now Snow White,” Hermione said.

“Wait, what’s a Snow White?” Ron asked.

“Not what, who,” Hermione said with what Harry had to admit was a super-human amount of patience.
“For pity’s sake, that’s the girl’s name?” Ron said, agog. “Poor kid. She must have got beat up in school regularly. That’s worse than the disease one.”

“I guess I sort of skipped that part,” Hermione said. “The little princess was called Snow White because her skin was as white as snow and her hair was as black as ebony and her lips were as red as blood.”

“Well, considering they could have named her Blood Red,” Ron said, “she didn’t fair so bad.”

“Be a good name for a pirate, though,” Harry said.

“Hey, yeah!” Ron said excitedly. “Blood Red, the scourge of the seas! Now there’s the makings of a story, Hermione.”

“What is it about boys and pirates?” she said with a shake of her head, though Harry noticed she did seem sort of intrigued.

“Anyway, that’s kind of a weird description,” Ron said. “White skin, black hair, and red lips… what about her eyes?”

“They don’t mention them. You see, the point is they’re all death colors,” Hermione explained.

“Death colors?” Ron said, frowning.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “Black, blood red, and abnormally white skin, they all have a connotation of death about them.”

“You sure you haven’t read that Beedle story about the Hallows one too many times?” Harry asked.

“No, really, that’s the whole point of it, the symbolism underlines the concepts of… oh, forget it,” she said. “It won’t make sense unless you know the whole story. The queen was furious that her step-daughter was more beautiful than herself, so she called her woodsman.”

“Her woodsman? What’s a woodsman?” Ron asked.

“Well… I suppose he’d be sort of like Hagrid,” Hermione said thoughtfully.

“Odd thing to do. I figured she’d go get her hair done and buy a smart new outfit or summat,” he said with a shrug. “How’s that going to fix the problem?”

“She told the woodsman to kill Snow White,” Hermione said.

“Blimey, Hermione!” Ron gasped. “Okay, in the bad step-mother category, the award goes to Snow White’s over Cinderella’s, hands down!”

“I’ve got to admit,” Harry said, “she does make Aunt Petunia look pretty good by comparison. At least she never specifically tried to murder me. Not that I think she’d have been all that sad to see it happen.”

“She’s awful,” Hermione agreed. “The queen could tell the woodsman didn’t want to kill her, so she gave him a box, and she said by the end of the day he had to return it to her with the princess’s heart inside it or else she’d have him killed.”

“That’s… that’s disgusting,” Ron said. “You’re sure they tell these stories to kids?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “They do seem a little… barbaric, don’t they?”
“Okay, so, what happened?” Ron said, and Harry realized that Ron was leaning in closer in interest, and with a small start, that he was as well.

“The woodsman took Snow White deep into the forest to pick wildflowers, but he couldn’t bring himself to kill her. Instead, he told her that the queen wanted her murdered and that she should run away into the forest and hide, never to return. Snow White, terrified, ran into the forest, and then the woodsman killed a wild boar and put its heart in the box to fool the queen.”

“I like him,” Ron said, nodding approvingly. “He seems like a decent fellow.”

“Yeah, that’s probably about what Hagrid would do, though he’d try to find some way out of killing the boar if he could,” Harry agreed.

“The woodsman is rather nice, isn’t he?” Hermione said, tipping her head to one side. “I wonder… that could be a sign of anti-monarchy rebellion buried in the text, making the common man the moral voice in the story over the vanity of the queen and her blasé, inhuman request to kill the scullery maid…”

“How?” Ron said.

“Um, Hermione?” Harry said.

“Of course, the scullery maid is actually royalty as well, so it may be less rebellious and merely be backing up the social order by saying that the right of power should have gone to the blood relation of the dead monarch rather than usurped by a married in-law,” Hermione continued to herself.

“Usurped?” Ron asked, completely confused.

“Yeah, that’s interesting, but what happened next?” Harry said impatiently.

“Oh, sorry, bit of a tangent,” Hermione said as though she had just remembered they were there. “Anyway, Snow White ran deep into the forest, much deeper than she’d ever been before…”

“And got eaten by a bear?” Ron asked.

“No, she stumbled upon a little cottage,” Hermione said.

“That was lucky,” Harry said.

“She knocked on the door, but no one answered, and since she was dying of hunger, she opened the door and went in. The house was in complete disarray: plates stacked in the sink, dirty clothes laying about in piles, cobwebs all over everything in sight, even mice and birds making nests in the rafters,” Hermione went on.

“Sounds a bit like my bedroom before Mum made me clean it for the wedding,” Ron said.

Both Harry and Hermione laughed, and for a moment Harry remembered the few days at the Burrow, and even with the incessant chores and Mrs. Weasley doing everything she could to thwart their plans to leave, it still seemed like a glimpse into paradise. As he thought back to those minutes in Ginny’s room (and wondered just what would have happened if Ron had only managed to stay away a while longer and not blunder in unannounced), it seemed like he was remembering someone else’s summer. Melancholy gripped him for a moment, but Hermione continued her story and he tried to pay attention to her and not the empty ache around his heart that happened whenever he thought of Ginny.
“Snow White assumed the house was abandoned, so she started to clean it,” Hermione said.

“I thought you said she was starving to death,” Ron said. “What, she’s about to pass out from lack of food, then thinks, ‘No, I’d rather do a bit of dusting first’?”

“Maybe she found some food in a cupboard or something first,” Hermione said. “Just… accept it, Ron.”

“What, she’s about to pass out from lack of food, then thinks, ‘No, I’d rather do a bit of dusting first’?”

“Whatever,” he said, shrugging. “The starving albino girl decided to clean the house.”

Hermione sighed yet again, then went on.

“She worked all the rest of the day until nightfall; then, after she had cleaned and straightened and washed and dusted until the whole cottage was in perfect order…”

“Fast worker, that Snow is,” Ron said to Harry.

“…she was tired…”

“I should say so!” Ron agreed.

“…so she went upstairs to lie down. She found seven little beds there, and cried out in surprise. ‘Oh!’ she said, “Why, there must have been seven children who lived here!’”

“I suppose it’s a pretty logical assumption,” Harry said.

“But she was so tired that she lay down across the seven beds and fell fast asleep,” Hermione said. “What she didn’t know was that the owners of the house were on their way home right at that moment. The house was home to seven dwarfs, brothers, who worked in a diamond mine.”

“Sounds pretty lucrative,” Ron said. “Why didn’t they just hire a maid with all that dosh?”

“It was the middle of the enchanted forest, Ron. Who were they going to hire, a squirrel?” Harry said teasingly.

“Actually, the forest animals supposedly did help Snow White clean up,” Hermione admitted.

“Hmm… sounds a bit too much like the Imperius curse for my taste,” Ron said. “Are you sure Snow White was a Muggle?”

“Yes, Ron, she was a Muggle,” Hermione said. “She was just so naturally good-natured and kind and gentle that the animals did whatever she wanted them to do.”

“Weird,” Ron said. “You reckon if I started paying a bit of attention to the gnomes back home, gave them a few breadcrumbs or whatnot, they’d clean my room for me?”

“It’s a story,” Hermione said, her voice rising in frustration and making her sound remarkably like Mrs. Weasley. “Clean your own room!”

“Right,” Ron said, then muttered something Harry could barely hear about Muggle stories and a complete lack of useful advice.

“The seven dwarfs were frightened when they saw the state of their house,” Hermione said.

“Horrors! Burglars who like to tidy up!” Ron said in a falsetto.
"Carefully, they crept upstairs and found the beautiful princess asleep in their beds,” Hermione said, then paused expectantly for a few seconds. “Alright, go on. Make the joke.”

“What joke?” Ron asked.

“Aren’t you going to say something like, ‘Gosh, wish I’d find a gorgeous princess asleep in my bed!’?” she said innocently.

“Well, it flashed across my mind, I admit, but I thought I’d hold my tongue,” Ron said with an air of great maturity. “Now that you’ve said it, though, I feel loads better. Thanks!”

“Snow White woke up to see the seven dwarfs standing there, peering at her, and she was shocked,” Hermione said quite clearly, though Harry could see a muscle in her jaw pulsing.

“Hey, how’d she know they were dwarfs?” Ron interrupted. “In fact, how’d the Muggle writer know there was any such thing?”

“Muggles have a few stories about dwarfs, but they get some of the details mixed up, like their working in a diamond mine. That’s really more a goblin-type thing to do,” Hermione said.

“So, sort of like the fairy godmother in the other one,” Ron said. “They almost get it, but not quite.”

“Pretty much,” Hermione said. “Anyway, Snow White told them her story and offered to do housework and cooking and sewing for the dwarfs in return for a home and a safe place far away from the queen, and they agreed.”

“Is that the end of the story?” Ron asked.

“No, Snow White’s troubles were only beginning,” Hermione said. “You see, when the woodsman presented the boar heart to her, telling her it was Snow White’s, the queen was very, very pleased, so pleased that she quite forgot about her mirror for several weeks, secure in the knowledge that she was the fairest in the whole world. But one day, just for the pleasure of hearing what the mirror would say, she asked the mirror again, “Who’s the fairest of them all?” and the mirror still said it was Snow White.”

“The mirror is a bit of a blab, isn’t it?” Ron said.

“The queen was furious, and she showed the mirror the heart in its box…”

“She still had that thing weeks later? Ew, that’s gross,” Harry said, grimacing.

“…and the mirror told her it was a boar’s heart,” Hermione finished.

“I’m guessing that didn’t go well for the woodsman,” Ron said.

“Actually, he never really gets mentioned again,” Hermione said. “I suppose he was okay.”

“Doesn’t seem likely,” Ron said, “but I hope you’re right.”

“The queen was so furious that she went to her secret lair and took down her spellbook,” Hermione continued.

“Wait, spellbook? The queen’s a witch?” Ron said, looking scandalized.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “It turns out she was, and like the witches in most Muggle fairy tales, she was evil.”
“That’s unfair, that is,” Ron said, looking insulted.

“I agree, for what it’s worth,” Hermione said, “but it’s still an important part of the story. You see, the queen wanted to get rid of Snow White, but she didn’t want to just kill her directly, though I’m not really sure why. So she disguised herself as an ugly old peasant woman…”

“That’s all for beauty above everything else,” Harry said.

“I don’t think she intended the change to be permanent,” Hermione primly.

“Probably Polyjuice potion then, or else she was a Metamorphmagus like Tonks,” Ron said.

“Maybe,” Hermione agreed with a nod.

Harry wondered to himself how Tonks was doing. She’d be pretty far along now. He hoped Lupin had come to his senses and returned to her. He sighed quietly but said nothing, not wanting to disrupt the evening’s fun.

“Then she decided to make a poisoned apple,” Hermione went on. “Just one bite would make the princess fall into a sleep so deep that everyone would think she was dead.”

“Doesn’t that sound like the Draught of Living Death?” Ron suggested.

“You know, it really does sound like it, doesn’t it? But there was one important difference: the antidote. The only way to wake the person would be love’s first kiss,” Hermione explained, “but since the queen assumed the dwarfs would bury Snow White alive and therefore kill her, she thought there was no chance of that.”

“I should hope not. Who’d go around kissing a dead girl?” Ron said squeamishly.

“The dwarfs left for work as usual the next day,” Hermione plowed on as though trying to avoid an unpleasant question, “and after they were gone, the old peddler woman who was really the queen in disguise showed up with a basket of apples. Snow White thought she’d never seen more beautiful apples than the ones in the peddler’s basket. The peddler woman said that since Snow White was so very beautiful, she’d give her an apple for free.”

“Never trust free samples,” Ron said, shaking his head. “I tried a free sample of the house mead at the Leaky Cauldron once. I thought my tongue was going to curl up and fall off.”

“Say, though,” Harry said, “when you think about it, the queen was telling the truth. She really was giving her a free apple because Snow White was beautiful. She just left off the bit about wanting her dead.”

“I suppose,” Hermione said. “Interesting… she won’t lie to her or directly kill her. It almost seems like she took an Unbreakable Vow not to lie to her, but she was trying to find ways around it.”

“Could be,” Ron said. “She’d technically be following the rules, and that’s what counts with those things.”

“So Snow White ate the apple?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said, “and she fell into a very deep sleep, so deep that no one could tell she was breathing or her heart was beating. When the dwarfs came home from the mine that night and found her, they thought she was dead and blamed themselves for not keeping her safe from the queen.”
“Wasn’t their fault,” Ron said defensively. “She had ought to know better than to go taking free samples of suspicious fruit off of old hags when someone’s trying to kill her.”

“Actually, in one version, she comes off really stupid,” Hermione said. “The same old lady came back three times, the first time with a cursed necklace and the second with a cursed comb. The dwarfs saved her those times, but they didn’t catch on with the apple.”

“She let her in three different times? Yeah, that’s a brain trust right there,” Harry said, but Ron looked thoughtful.

“Hermione,” he said slowly, “that necklace… it didn’t happen to be made of opals by any chance, did it?”

“Not that I know of,” Hermione said, then gasped. “Oh, Ron, you don’t think that it was the one that Malfoy used to try to kill Dumbledore?!”

“That thing had been around a long time,” Ron said carefully. “Sometimes there’s some truth in these old tales.”

“Maybe,” Hermione said, shuddering. “That’s… that’s just creepy.”

“What happened when the dwarfs thought Snow White was dead?” Harry asked, trying not to think of poor Katie Bell rising in the air amid the torrents of drifting white snow… which he had to admit was rather ironic, come to think of it.

“The dwarfs were deeply saddened by Snow White’s ‘death,’ but she was so beautiful that they couldn’t bear to put her in the ground,” Hermione said. “Instead, they made a coffin out of glass and kept it in front of the cottage.”

“They what?” Ron asked, his face screwed up into an expression of patent disbelief.

“Oh, come off it. You already know most of these stories are at least a little mental. Is it really the strangest thing you’ve heard so far?” Hermione said testily.

“They’re keeping a dead girl in a glass coffin in front of their house. Yes, Hermione, that is the strangest thing I’ve heard,” Ron said firmly.

“It is kind of weird,” Harry agreed. “I mean, really, after all, wouldn’t she start to rot?”

“Maybe they were planning on using her as a tourist attraction for as long as they could. You know, ‘Come see the hot dead girl in a box! Two sickles a peek!’” Ron said, and while Harry laughed, he shut up quickly at the look from Hermione.

“She wasn’t decaying because she wasn’t dead,” Hermione explained in a tone that would have done McGonagall proud.

“She was stuck in a glass box with no water, food, or air,” Ron countered. “She wouldn’t be alive for long.”

“I don’t know! Maybe the stupid apple kept her alive or something!” Hermione nearly screamed. “Just…”

“… go with it, yeah, I know,” Ron said. “So what happened to not-quite-dead albino box girl?”

“For a while, nothing, though the dwarfs put fresh flowers around her every day,” Hermione said.
“Because the flowers would die off, but the girl in the box with no oxygen was ginger peachy,” Ron mumbled very quietly to Harry, who was glad to see Hermione was pretending not to hear.

“Then, one day, a prince from a neighboring kingdom rode through the forest on his house and happened upon the cottage. He took one look at Snow White and fell madly in love with her,” Hermione said.

“No,” Ron said.

“Huh?” both Hermione and Harry chorused together.

“No, he didn’t,” Ron said like a man trying to hold on to the last vestiges of his sanity. “He did not fall in love with a girl he thought was dead. I mean, okay, falling in love with a ghost I could see, maybe, possibly, if a fellow was really desperate and stranded on a desert island, but a corpse? That’s sick. There has to be something else to it.”

“That’s the way the story goes,” Hermione said with a put-upon sigh. “He falls in love with the beautiful corpse.”

“You know, actually, that is pretty bizarre,” Harry admitted.

“Well, he did, and he had the dwarfs lift the top off the coffin because he wanted to kiss her,” Hermione said.

“I think I’m gonna throw up,” Ron said, turning green. “Crikey, that’s disgusting.”

“No sooner did he kiss her than she woke up and fell madly in love with him,” Hermione said, and though Harry didn’t quite understand and he knew she’d deny it firmly, she did look just a bit starry-eyed.

“Kind of an easy bird, isn’t she?” Ron said, still making a face. “And the prince, was he upset that his dream girl unfortunately turned out to have the massive drawback of a pulse?”

“Well, in a different version…,” Hermione started.

“How many versions of this demented story are there?” Ron asked, alarmed.

“I don’t know. In one version he just asks the dwarfs if he can take the coffin, and the lid slips and knocks the piece of poisoned apple out of her mouth, and that wakes her up,” she said.

“That’s only nominally better,” Ron groused. “What was he planning on doing with the coffin? Set it on his coffee table as an objet d’art?”

“That’s a less disturbing image than the one that came to my mind,” Harry said, feeling a bit ill himself.

“Don’t go there,” Ron said quickly. “I’d actually like to have sex one day, and I think that image might make me permanently unable to.”

Hermione was about as pink as she could get at this point, but she bravely finished up, “And they rode off to his castle where they were married and lived happily ever after. The end.”

“What about the evil, crazy queen witch?” Ron asked.

“Oh, right,” Hermione added as an afterthought. “They invited her to the wedding.”
“That was big of them,” Harry said.

“Not really. They made her dance in red hot iron shoes until she fell down dead,” Hermione explained.

“Yeah, charming kids’ stories your lot have got,” Ron said. “What about the dwarfs?”

“I don’t know. Nothing really mentions them again. I guess they went back to diamond mining,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, and collecting wandering princesses with an insatiable craving for apples and a penchant for falling down in mock-death,” Ron said. “Not too many openings in that field though.”

“Why do I bother?” Hermione complained aloud.

“She should have married the woodsman. That would have made so much more sense.”

Harry laughed again. As strange and dark as these Muggle stories might be, his own life was a lot stranger and darker by far just now, and it was these moments, the ones where he and his friends could be themselves, joking and bickering and acting like seventeen-year-olds instead of warriors against darkness, that made him remember what it was he was fighting for.
“Hermione, I…,” Ron began the following night, but she interrupted him before he could finish.

“You want a story, right?” she said without looking up from the book she was reading. Harry thought that it suspiciously resembled Hogwarts: A History, which meant she was probably in one of her more homesick moods. “And the answer is no.”

“Actually, I was going to say I was wondering if we had any of that trail mix left,” Ron said, trying to act very dignified.

“You ate the last of it at lunch,” she said.

“Oh,” he replied, and Harry saw him pause for a moment as though weighing his options. “Well then, if there’s nothing to eat, how about another Muggle story?”

“I just told you no,” Hermione said, an edge to her voice.

“Why not?” Harry joined in. “They pass the time well enough.”

“Because you lot always end up making them sound so ridiculous!” she said, closing the book with a snap.

“Well, yeah. That’s because they are,” Ron said with a shrug. “It doesn’t mean they aren’t entertaining.”

“But they’re treasured childhood memories for millions of people, and you should grant them the simple respect of…,” she began.

“They chop off feet and go dancing in glass shoes and kiss girls in glass coffins,” Ron said. “I mean, come on, Hermione. That’s just odd is what it is. Also, I only just noticed there was glass in both of them: the slipper and the coffin. Do all Muggle fairytales have glass in them.”

“No,” she said coldly.

“Be funny if they did,” Ron said to Harry. “Oh, come on, Hermione! It’s either this or I start imitating Celestina Warbeck again.”

“Please, no,” Harry jumped in at once. “Hermione, anything but that.”

“Oh, all right!” Hermione said in frustration, a temperament that Harry suspected was beginning to become the norm for all of them on the mostly fruitless Horcrux hunt. “I’ll tell you the story of ‘The Sleeping Beauty.’”

“You did that one,” Ron said at once.

“If you’re referring to ‘Snow White’ and her poison apple induced sleep, no, I did not,” Hermione said. “It’s just another one of those weird similarities.”

“Lot of those, aren’t there?” he said, nodding knowingly to Harry. “Does this one have an evil step-mother in it, too?”

“No, for once,” Hermione said, looking a little calmer. “The parents are both fairly nice in this one.”

Sleeping Bea(You-People-Are-Mad!)ty
“Well, bully for them!” Ron said. “It’s about time! So, get on with it. ‘Upon a once time…”’

“Once upon a time,” Hermione corrected him, but resigning herself to another story, “there lived a king and a queen who very much wanted a child.”

“You ever notice how often royalty are in these things?” Ron said to Harry. “Kind of like pureblood bias, isn’t it?”

“At last, the queen finally gave birth to a baby girl, and the whole kingdom rejoiced,” Hermione said.

“Why?” Ron asked.

“Why what?” Hermione asked, confused. Harry had to admit he couldn’t quite see the question Ron was asking either.

“Why was the kingdom so chuffed if it turned out to be only a girl? Don’t the kings usually want boys?” Ron asked.

Harry cautiously moved several inches farther away from Ron as Hermione’s glare was so intense her eyes actually appeared to crackle.

“Uh, Ron,” Harry muttered quietly, “if I were you and I ever wanted to eat again, I think I’d rephrase that.”

“I don’t even like her cooking,” he whispered back.

“Yeah, well, I don’t think you’ll be able to do all that much chewing of any food ever again if she jinxes all the teeth out of your mouth.”

“What I mean is, don’t the royal families usually get more celebratory over a male heir… not that it’s right or kind or-or-or anything other than the male-obsessed patriarchy indulging in misogynistic prejudice?” Ron said.

Harry stared at him, stunned he knew half of the words in the last bit and suspecting strongly that they’d either come out of the book Fred and George had given him or he’d memorized one of Hermione’s speeches, but he also noted that Hermione’s coloring wasn’t quite so beet red as before.

“I suppose that’s true,” she said. “It was very, very wrong of them, but yes, generally the kingdom would have celebrated more over a male heir than a daughter. Thankfully, the father in this story wasn’t Henry VIII and the mother didn’t wind up being poor Queen Catherine of Aragon.”

“Who?” Ron asked.

“He was a Muggle king of England,” Harry told him. “He divorced his first wife because she had a girl instead of a boy.”

“Well, that was rotten of him,” Ron said.

“And he killed the second for the same reason, and the third died, and the fourth he annulled, and the fifth he had beheaded, and the sixth, well, she managed to outlive him,” Hermione explained.

“Are you pulling my leg? How many wives did the nutter marry?” Ron said.

“Just the six,” Harry assured him.

“Oh, just six. Well, that’s all right then,” Ron said rolling his eyes. “Muggles are mad, I’m telling
“At any rate, the king and queen in the story were perfectly happy to have a little girl, and everyone in the kingdom was pleased, and a great party was thrown to celebrate her christening,” Hermione said.

“Sounds like a good idea,” Ron said amiably enough.

“They invited all the important people for miles around, and each person, when dinner began, was presented with a box of jewels and gold and silver and pearls, and in turn each person gave the little princess a gift,” Hermione went on.

“Blimey, that’s what I call a party,” Ron said. “I’m glad Fleur didn’t hear this one before the wedding or we might have been having more expensive favors at the tables than those color-coordinated picture frames.”

Hermione sighed, but continued.

“This is where the story changes a bit depending on who tells it. In one version, the king and queen invite three fairies to be the princess’s godmothers; and in another, seven; while another has twelve,” Hermione explained.

“Now that’s just stupid!” Ron said loudly. “I said before with that cinder girl that having one fairy godmother was asking for trouble, but three?! Or worse yet, a round dozen?! That’s just… that’s child abuse is what it is! Poor wee thing is going to wind up cursed six ways from Tuesday by the time she’s sixteen.”

“Actually, you’re half right and half wrong. You see, she actually should have had one more fairy godmother, but the queen knew that this particular fairy was evil, so she neglected to send her an invitation, hoping she just wouldn’t notice,” Hermione said.

“That’s bad,” Ron said. “Also, stupid, but I already knew that bit. Never get a fairy angry at you, and nothing gets them angrier than missing a party, let alone one with cases of free diamonds being handed out.”

“Well, the royal couple learned that the hard way. The fairies who were there each presented the little princess with gifts. In the version where there were three fairies, one gives her beauty and the other a wonderful singing voice.”

“Odd gifts,” Ron said with a shrug.

“Not really,” Harry chimed in. “I mean, if her parents could just give away truckloads of gems, she really didn’t need anything money could buy, did she?”

“I suppose,” Ron agreed. “What about the other versions, the ones with seven and twelve fairies? What’d they give her?”

Hermione scrunched up her features, trying to remember.

“I know one of them was wit, and another was good health,” she said firmly. “I think one was virtue. But I can’t remember the others.”

“Beauty, a singing voice, wit, health, virtue,” Ron counted off on his fingers. “That’s five, with seven more to go. Maybe luck?”
“Good weather whenever she wanted to go out?” Harry suggested.

“Freedom from spots?” Ron said.

“Robes that were always the height of fashion?”

“Excelling at sports, of course,” Ron agreed, nodding seriously.

“Not being smelly!”

“Never having static cling!”

“The ability to wear those shoes girls cram their feet into without getting blisters and bruises!”

“Her own holiday!”

“Her own direct line to Father Christmas!”

“Never getting stuck in a lift with a Malfoy!”

Hermione just glared at the two as they fell into hysterical laughter.

“Or maybe she just wouldn’t have to tell fairy tales to two adolescent boys while they got lost in their own little jokes,” she sniffed indignantly while they rolled on the floor in laughter.

“Oh, come on, Hermione,” Ron said when he had breath enough to speak again. “We’re just having a lark. Lighten up a bit.”

Hermione looked pointedly in the opposite direction.

“Seriously, Hermione, wouldn’t you want to be able to wear those torture devices girls call shoes without getting bunions?” Ron said, grinning.

“I think wit would be more useful,” she said, though Harry could almost swear he heard her mumble “damn right” very quietly.

“So, on with the story, then,” Ron said. “The twelve fairies gave their gifts, then what?”

“Actually, only the first eleven did—or two, or six, depending on the version—when the evil fairy broke into the hall, flames shooting from her magic staff and fury blazing in her eyes,” Hermione said.

“Okay, now that’s an accurate depiction of a fairy,” Ron said, nodding in satisfaction.

“The fairy said she too had a gift to give the princess, as was her right,” Hermione said, using what Harry recognized as her most eerie sounding voice. “She said that the little girl would indeed possess all the graces and favors the others had bestowed on her, but then, at sunset on her sixteenth birthday, she would prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and fall down dead.”

Harry looked at Ron. Ron looked at Harry.

“What’s a spindle?” Ron asked.

“Oh,” Hermione said, her assumed character of doom falling away. “Ehm, do you know what a spinning wheel is?”
“It’s a wheel that spins, obviously,” Ron said confidently before adding in a less secure voice, “right?”

“Well, not quite,” Hermione said as kindly as she could.

“I’ve seen them,” Harry said. “They look like a big wheel, and Muggles used to use them to turn wool or flax into yarn or thread by spinning it. Then they weave it into cloth.”

“Oh,” Ron said. “Weird. So a spindle’s part of that?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “It looks sort of like a big spike that Muggles wind the wool around, and on a spinning wheel it’s made of wood or metal.”

“Doesn’t that seem sort of a random way to kill somebody?” Ron said. “I mean, really. The evil fairy could have just had her fall downstairs or get run through with a sword or get some horrible disease or get thrown off a tower…”

Harry shot Ron a hurt look, and Ron realized at once his mistake.

“Sorry, mate. Didn’t mean to bring up bad memories,” Ron apologized, embarrassed.

“It’s alright,” Harry said, trying to ignore the serious moment in the midst of the fun, though there was a pulling around his heart and the image of Dumbledore falling was too clear before him. “You’re right, though.”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “It is odd, I agree. I suppose it’s just that—“

But she stopped mid-sentence and started blushing like mad, which made Ron give her a curious look.

“Just that what?” he urged her.

“Well, a spindle is rather… ehh, you know, ah, phallic, I suppose,” she mumbled, barely audible.

“It’s what?” Ron asked, confused.

“Oh for pity’s sake! Harry, you explain it to him!” Hermione said as she got up and hurriedly gathered the dishes from dinner and put them in the tent’s tiny sink.

Ron gave him a look, and Harry glanced meaningfully downward. Ron squinted for a moment, then a look of stunned comprehension dawned.

“Oh,” he gulped, turning a deep red. “I get it. I guess it is sort of shaped like that, innit?”

“Some sort of lunatic wrote these stories,” Harry said.

“Yeah, a big old perverted one,” Ron said. “I’m never going to be able to look at a spindle the same way again.”

“You didn’t even know what one was,” Harry countered, and he couldn’t help grinning.

“Yeah, but if I ever do,” Ron said with a shudder.

“Are you done yet?” called Hermione in a much higher voice than usual from the tiny kitchen.

“I think the story’s scarred Ron enough for at least a decade of continued celibacy,” Harry retorted,
and Ron hit him over the head with one of the musty throw pillows from the couch.

“So, when we left off, the evil fairy had said that her gift was the princess’s death, and then she disappeared in a puff of brimstone-scented smoke,” Hermione said.

“Rotten gift, that,” Ron said.

“Quite, but there was still one good fairy who hadn’t given her gift yet. She couldn’t completely undo the damage the evil fairy had caused, but she could modify the wish a little bit,” Hermione said.

“Well, that’s better,” Harry said.

“The fairy changed the wish, saying that the princess must indeed prick her finger on a spinning wheel’s spindle, but she wouldn’t die. Instead, she’d just fall asleep,” Hermione explained, though it’s possible she stuttered a bit over the word spindle.

“That’s not a bad change up, all things considered,” Ron said, nodding pleasantly.

“But there was a catch,” Hermione added.

“Isn’t there always with fairies. What was it?” Ron asked.

“She was going to sleep for one hundred years and wouldn’t awake until love’s first kiss woke her,” Hermione said.

“Hold it!” Ron said loudly. “Is she jabbing herself on a spinning wheel or eating another one of those poisoned apples! Hermione, these stories all copy one another!”

“I know it’s similar to what happened to Snow White—,” Hermione began.

“It’s the exact same antidote! They ought to just shove a bezoar down her throat and be done with it. Worked well enough for me,” Ron said indignantly.

“Maybe it would have worked at that,” Hermione said, and Harry could tell she was really mulling this over. “The apple was poisoned, after all, and a bezoar does work on most of them, and I suppose the spindle probably would have been a kind of poison as well, so judging by the theories Professor Slughorn mentioned in Potions, that’s actually a valid hypothesis.”

“Thank you,” Ron said, bowing slightly.

“Except, of course, that these are stories, not real spells, and the whole point is that the cure is supposed to be romantic,” Hermione finished.

“I still say they should have given her a bezoar and been done with it,” Ron said, obviously pouting.

“The king and queen, while they were pleased that the fairy had been able to lift the threat of death from their daughter, did not want her to sleep a hundred years,” Hermione continued, “so they passed a royal decree stating that every spinning wheel in the kingdom was to be burned.”

“Seems logical enough,” Ron said.

“Of course, the problem with this was that no one in the whole kingdom was able to have new cloth to make clothes since there was no thread or yarn to make it from,” Hermione said. “Everyone looked quite ragged after a few years, yet the king insisted they not import cloth or anything else from a foreign kingdom since, by chance, a spinning wheel might be sent as well.”
“Know who I can’t help thinking of?” Ron said, grimacing.

“Who?” Hermione asked.

“Pansy Parkinson. She’d go mad without a new robe every third day,” he said, shuddering, “and I’d bet she’d be worse than any evil fairy in a huff.”

“Really,” Hermione said smoothly. “And here I thought Lavender would have been the one most likely to throw a fit.”

Ron looked distinctly uncomfortable, but Harry had to give him credit for realizing the wisdom of holding his tongue. Maybe that book really had taught him something about how to handle girls.

“One day, nearly sixteen years later, the king and queen were besieged by the people to trade for new cloth. Fearing a riot, the royal couple agreed to do so on the condition that they themselves go to the nearest kingdom to trade for material, ensuring no new spinning wheel would enter the kingdom,” Hermione said.

“That sounds relatively reasonable,” Ron said.

“You didn’t catch one of the details,” Harry said. “It’s almost sixteen years later. The curse should take effect soon.”

“Good point,” Ron said. “Okay, maybe they should have waited a bit longer.”

“The king and queen set out for the other kingdom, intent upon returning home long before the princess’s birthday, but a series of accidents befell them: carriage wheels that broke, fog so dense the driver lost his way, a blizzard in mid-July, all sorts of things that they knew must be the work of the evil fairy,” Hermione said.

“And they wound up not getting back for her birthday?” Ron said knowingly.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “Near sunset on the day of her sixteenth birthday, the princess was playing in the castle and came upon a door she had never seen before. Behind it was a stairway that went up, up into a tall tower, and there, sitting in the room, was a strange thing she had never seen before, though it was in fact a spinning wheel that had been forgotten about long ago,” Hermione said.

“See, now if her parents had just used a Summoning Charm, there wouldn’t have been a problem,” Ron said.

“The point is they’re Muggles, Ron,” Hermione spoke slowly. “They can’t do things like that.”

“It must be a really inconvenient life, being a Muggle,” Ron said sympathetically. “I guess it’s better they don’t know what they’re missing.”

“Anyway, the princess picked up the spindle and pricked her finger on it, and immediately she fell fast asleep,” Hermione said. “The king and queen arrived home almost at the same time, and when the people realized the princess was missing, they searched high and low until they found her, but no one could wake her. The king and queen realized that she would sleep for a century, and were deeply saddened to know they would never see their daughter again.”

Harry noticed that Hermione’s eyes were suspiciously watery, and he soon realized why. It was the same position her own parents would have been in if she died and she hadn’t modified their memories so they would have no knowledge of her existence. She paused, looking down at her
hands for a moment, doing her best to collect herself and continue, but to Harry’s surprise Ron
seemed to have figured out what the trouble was and was sitting next to her.

“It’s okay,” he said, putting an arm around her. “When this is done, they’ll remember you, and it’ll
be fine. You did the right thing by them, Hermione.”

Harry watched her look up at him and give him a shaky smile, and he couldn’t help wondering
where Ginny was right now, if she might need Harry and he wasn’t there to put an arm around her in
support, letting her know she wasn’t alone. He sighed, and the noise seemed to break the silence in
the room.

“Yes, well, the good fairies intervened again, and they decided it was best to put everyone in the
castle to sleep again, even the horses and dogs. One version says that the king and queen didn’t
sleep, though, because they needed to continue ruling the kingdom, and they left the castle, never to
return,” Hermione said, then quickly added, “but other ones say they slept for a hundred years too,
just like their daughter.”

“That’s better, anyway,” Ron said, his tone rather kinder than usual, and Harry noted his arm was
still around her shoulders. “What happened next?”

“No sooner was everyone asleep than a forest of rose bushes as tall as the tallest trees in a deep forest
sprang up around the whole castle, walling it in on all sides to protect it from any unwanted visitors
who might have tried to harm the inhabitants,” Hermione said. “The thorn bushes had great,
enormous thorns, sharp as daggers and long as a man’s arm. Many men tried to enter the forest of
rose bushes, but none of them survived, and their impaled bodies were picked to pieces by ravens.”


“I suppose there is a resemblance,” Hermione said, getting the slightly glassy-eyed look that always
meant she’d hit upon a train of thought that intrigued her but that both Harry and Ron weren’t
equipped to understand. “There could be an underlying theory that if both the spindle and the thorns
draw blood, then there could be parallels in terms of the symbolic imagery of the… ehm…”

She stopped dead as though just remembering the other two were in the room, and she for some
reason decided to move her seat from where she was to the empty chair across the way, leaving Ron
with his arm across a vacant spot. She cleared her throat and went on.

“In any case, the bushes kept out all intruders, and the people and animals of the palace slept on,
undisturbed, for a whole century,” Hermione said, gamely going on.

“The place had to be a wreck by then,” Ron said. “Didn’t somebody at least come in once in a while
to dust off the princess?”

“No,” Hermione said. “Everything remained unchanged, so she wouldn’t have got dusty.”

“You can’t stop dust,” Ron said. “Mum would have kittens, a full century worth of dust through a
whole castle.”

“You can willingly suspend disbelief enough to have a whole castle full of people sleep for a
hundred years without a comment, but the lack of dust bothers you?” Hermione said, blinking.

“Well, yeah,” Ron said. “Give ‘em all a good cursing and sleeping a hundred years is possible, I
suppose, but if there’s a spell to keep off dust and dirt and grime and the lot, that’d be a multi-million
Galleon spell. That’s a lot harder to believe.”
“At the end of a century, a prince happened by and heard the story of the sleeping beauty in the castle,” Hermione said.

“Wait, you forgot something important!” Ron interrupted suddenly.

“What, may I ask, is that?” Hermione said with the air of martyr.

“What’s her name?” Ron asked. “The sleeping beauty, I mean.”

“Oh, well, some versions don’t give her a name at all, but a few call her Talia, and then there’s Briar Rose or Aurora,” Hermione said.

“As names in these things go, she was pretty lucky,” he said, looking surprised. “I was expecting something like Snorella or Naptaker or Pajamabelle.”

Hermione and Harry gave twin snorts of laughter.

“Pajamabelle?” Harry said, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed so hard his face had hurt.

“Yeah, well, it’d be par for the fairy tale course, wouldn’t it? Say, does the prince have a name, by any chance?” Ron asked.

“Usually, no, but a few call him Florimund,” Hermione admitted.

“See?” Ron said victoriously to Harry. “Florimund. How’d you like to be the bloke stuck with that name? I mean, it wouldn’t be so bad if it was hers, but really, that’s just cruel. So poor Prince Flora shows up and snogs her.”

“Roughly. The forest of rose thorns parted for him, and he went to the tallest tower and found her asleep—” Hermione said.

“—and completely covered in dust, cobwebs and assorted filth—” Ron put in.

“—and, in the more polite versions, he kisses her and she wakes up,” she said.

“More polite?” Ron said curiously.

“Let’s just say that in the other version it’s actually the birth of their twins that wakes her up,” Hermione said, grimacing in distaste.

“I’m starting to think the Dursleys didn’t really do me that much of a disservice not letting me read these. I had enough nightmares about that green light,” Harry said, shuddering.

“Let me guess, after the kiss, because I’m not even thinking about that other one or the way Muggles apparently have a thing for dead or unconscious girls, she wakes up, the rest of the castle comes back to life, and the princess and Flora get married and live happily ever after?” Ron said, sounding sure of himself.

“Well… yes and no,” Hermione said.

“Because this one’s just bloody insane,” Ron said, crestfallen.

“Some of the stories stop there and end just as you said, but there’s another one where they do get married, but the prince doesn’t tell anyone because his parents are awful and he’s afraid they’d hurt her. So they have a secret marriage, and the princess has two children: a girl and a boy. Once the
prince’s father died and the prince became king, he called for his wife and children to live at the palace, convinced she’d be safe under his protection,” Hermione said.

“I’m guessing that didn’t work out well,” Ron said.

“Not really. The new king went away to war, and while he was gone the old queen, who was part ogre, wanted to eat the children for dinner,” Hermione said, and Ron’s jaw dropped.

“Nice story,” he said. “Tell me, does your lot have any bedtime stories that don’t have cannibalism, maiming people, or other creepy things?”

“Ha ha,” she said flatly. “In any case, when the queen sent the cook to kidnap the children from their mother, he secretly hid them in his cottage with his wife, and instead he cooked a pair of lambs and tricked her into thinking they were her grandchildren. He ran into more of a problem when she wanted to eat the princess, though, but he got her safely to his cottage in the woods and replaced her with a deer instead.”

“Sounds like Snow White’s woodsman,” Ron said thoughtfully.

“He does rather, doesn’t he,” Hermione agreed. “If you ask me, I’d say he’s the real hero in this version. All the prince did was walk through a forest that opened up for him and kiss a girl.”

“I like him,” Ron said firmly. “He and the woodsman, maybe they were brothers or something.”

“Oh, I suppose,” Hermione said. “Anyway, everything went well until one day the queen unexpectedly visited the cook’s cottage and heard the children crying inside, and she discovered her daughter-in-law and grandchildren were still alive. She ordered a great cauldron brought to the spot and filled it with poisonous serpents and scorpions and was going to throw the man and his wife into it along with the princess and her children.”

“Coulda been worse,” Ron muttered. “At least it wasn’t spiders.”

“But at the last moment, the prince, returning home from the war, stopped at the cottage on his way back to the castle because he saw a commotion there. When the old queen saw him, she was standing beside the cauldron, just ready to throw the princess in, but she was so surprised that she slipped and fell in herself. That was the end of the old queen, and the rest of them lived happily ever after,” Hermione finished.

Ron and Harry stared at each other.

“Okay, so what happened to the evil fairy from the beginning?” Ron asked.

“Nothing,” Hermione said. “She just went on being evil.”

“Nothing,” Ron repeated, shaking his head. “That’s unsatisfying, that is.”

“Well, I’m sorry that it didn’t live up to your expectations,” Hermione said primly.

“Oh, it did,” Ron said quickly. “I figured it’d be mental, and it really was.”


All three of them laughed as rain began to fall on the roof of the tent and the wind howled. For this one night at least, the cold remained outside, and they were just teenagers, nothing more.
Harry was pretty sure the rain outside had turned to sleet. Few things could make a person feel colder than the sound of frozen, icy snow and rain mixed together, sliding down the canvas sides of a tent. At least, for once, they’d been able to have a decent dinner. Ron had found a few trout in the pond next to their campsite, and Hermione’s bluebell-colored flames had succeeded in cooking them well enough. The problem of the remaining Horcruxes weighed heavily on Harry’s mind, though, and an abnormal silence was sitting over the three of them. Suddenly, an idea came to him. Well, he thought, it was worth a try.

“Hermione?” Harry asked.

“Yes?” she said, her eyes focusing back from the distant point she’d been staring at vacantly.

“I don’t suppose you’d be up for…?”

“Another story?” Ron finished, sounding rather pleased. “That’s a good idea. You got any more, Hermione?”

She sighed a little, but she didn’t seem about to argue, and that more than anything else worried Harry. She’d been very quiet the last few days, and with a start he realized that they’d just passed her mother’s birthday. He winced. It probably hadn’t been a good idea to forget that, even if there was nothing he or Ron could say to make it better.

“There are a few,” she said. “I don’t suppose it matters which I choose since you’ll just point out what’s wrong with it anyway.”

“Aw, come on, Hermione,” Ron said, sitting next to her on the couch and giving her a slug in the arm. “Cheer up! It’s not your fault that Muggles don’t know the first thing about magic.”

“Wait,” Harry said, getting an idea. “Are there any Muggle fairy tales without magic in them?”

“Hmm,” Hermione said, and the frown on her face as she processed the idea made her look more like herself than she had a few moments ago. “I suppose technically there are.”

“Well then, give us one of those!” Ron said, clapping an arm around her shoulder in a show of jolly support, but Harry noticed that it just happened to remain there.

“I could tell ‘Little Red Riding Hood,’” Hermione said slowly. “I’m not saying it’s the most logical story, but there aren’t any spells or witches in it.”

“‘Little Red Riding Hood’?” Ron asked. “What’s that? A story about a bank robber on horseback?”

Hermione actually giggled at that, and Harry felt a sense of relief.
“No, that’s her name,” Hermione said.

“Muggles,” Ron said, shaking his head. “They obviously have no idea what to name their daughters. Still, she can be friends with Ashyweeper and Pajamabelle and Albino Girl easily enough.”

“Anyway, once upon a time,” Hermione began, then paused, waiting for Ron to make some sort of crack.

“Yeah, the usual mental beginning,” he said. “Go on.”

“There was a little girl who lived with her mother,” Hermione said.

“The mother isn’t dead this time?” Ron asked, surprised.

“No, she’s quite alive,” Hermione said, and Harry noticed a little catch in her voice.

“Is she going to die?” Ron continued, and Harry wished frantically that he could charm Ron’s mouth shut.

“No, she is not,” Hermione said primly.

“Well, that’s a pleasant novelty,” Ron said, beaming. “Most of the mums have a life expectancy of secon…”

“Yes, do go on, Hermione,” Harry said, cutting him off abruptly and earning a dirty look from Ron.

“The little girl had a cape with a hood that her grandmother had made for her out of bright red cloth. She loved to wear it so much that everyone called her Little Red Riding Hood,” Hermione continued.

“That’s not so terrible, then,” Ron said. “I mean, if she’d actually been christened Little Red Riding Hood, that would have been horrid, but if it’s just her nickname, that’s alright.”

“I’m glad it meets with your approval,” Hermione said disdainfully.

“So what was her real name?” Ron asked.

“I don’t know,” Hermione said with a resigned sigh, but Harry was glad to see that she really did seem to be thinking of the story and not the rest of their problems at the moment. “It’s not important to the story, Ron.”

“Cindy,” Ron said.

“What?” Hermione asked, confused.

“Cindy. I’ve decided to name the girl Cindy,” Ron said. “It’ll make me feel like it’s not so bizarre.”

“Who, pray tell, is Cindy?” Hermione asked, and Harry noticed that her expression was more than passingly curious.

“No one,” Ron said abruptly.

“You just pulled the name Cindy out of thin air, did you?” she said, a note of disbelief in her voice.

“Well…” Ron started to blush, and once again Harry was seized with an urge to tape Ron’s mouth shut, “it’s a Muggle name, isn’t it?”
“Yes, it is,” Hermione said icily. “So what Muggle do you know named Cindy?”

“No one, just… there’s this one bird with a mole,” he said.

“Cindy Crawford?” Hermione said, staring at him.

“Well, yeah,” he admitted. “She’s sort of… pretty.”

Harry held his breath a minute as Hermione appeared to be considering how to react.

“I suppose she is,” Hermione said, and Harry thought he heard her mumble, “I can deal with that.”

“So Red Hood is a fashion victim. Then what?” Ron asked, trying to deftly reroute the conversation.

“One day, Little Red Riding Hood’s mother said, ‘Dear, your grandmother is feeling very ill and is sick in bed,’” Hermione said.

“Aw, poor thing,” Ron said. “I know how she feels, what with me currently being stuck in bed with spattergroit.”

Hermione gave him a withering look and continued, saying, “‘So, dear daughter, take this basket of goodies to your grandmother, travelling through the forest until you get to her home, but mind you do not speak to strangers upon the way and that you always keep to the path.’”

“Or what? She’ll be attacked by giant spiders?” Harry said, laughing, then paused. It did sound a bit like the Forbidden Forest, didn’t it?

Ron, however, had a dreamy look, and his complete lack of a witty remark or a reaction to the word “spiders” made both Harry and Hermione look at him in surprise.

“What?” she said, taking in his expression with a raised eyebrow.

“A whole basket full to the brim with goodies,” Ron said, sighing blissfully. “Do you suppose the mum packed apple tart, maybe chocolate biscuits, or a big fudge cake with whipped cream and strawberries?”

They both looked at him, not sure whether to be amused or disturbed by the look of unparalleled lust in his eyes. Granted, yes, it had been a while since they’d last had a good dose of pudding, but the look currently on his face was usually reserved for… well, Harry thought, for that picture of Cindy Crawford he’d kept under his bed in Gryffindor Tower.

“I think one of the stories says there was a cake, some butter, and a jug of wine,” Hermione said, giving him an appraising look.

“Sounds ruddy lovely,” Ron replied, smacking his lips. “You should tell this story every night, Hermione.”

Hermione gave Harry a slightly confused look, but then shrugged and went on.

“Off Little Red Riding Hood went, taking with her a large straw basket full of food for her grandmother,” Hermione said.

“Pickles,” Ron murmured. “She should bring her pickles. Maybe there’s some oranges in there, too, and a great pile of Honeyduke’s chocolate. Chocolate Frogs. I could go for a nice pot of tea, too, and a good ham sandwich with mustard.”
Harry elbowed him in the side none too gently.

“We’re all hungry, Ronald,” Hermione said angrily, then relented a bit and added, “though the fish tonight was very good.”

“Hmm,” he said. “Right, sorry. Little Red’s off to the grandmother’s house with… things. Why didn’t the mother go instead of sending the little girl, by the way, especially if the woods were so dangerous?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Hermione said with a shrug. “I suppose it’s because the young girl is always the one put in jeopardy in these stories, and so many times it involves a journey through the woods. I wonder, if the woods represent a movement away from traditional society and back to a more primeval mode of existence, which it almost always does in these stories, then why does the grandmother, the symbol of family stability, live in the middle of the forest? It would seem to contradict the allegorical significance.”

Ron looked at Harry, shrugged, then snapped his fingers twice under Hermione’s nose.

“Right! Sorry, I drifted a bit. So Little Red Riding Hood went into the dark, frightening forest, but she was entirely unafraid,” Hermione said.

“Either she’s brave or stupid,” Ron said to Harry.

“Along the way, she saw butterflies flitting through the trees, and she had a good deal of fun chasing them, entirely forgetting her mother’s warning and making the dreadful mistake of wandering from the path,” Hermione continued.

“So stupid, then,” Ron said knowingly.

“Suddenly, just as she was picking some little flowers that grew in the shade, a wolf shambled into view and caught sight of the little girl,” Hermione said.

“That’s not going to end well,” Ron said. “Wait, it’s not a werewolf, is it?”

“No, just a wolf,” Hermione said.

“It’d be more exciting if it was a werewolf,” Ron said, “and the girl got chased through the forest by it at night.”

“No thanks,” Harry chimed in. “I think I’ve already lived that scene, and it’s not one I’d like to revisit.”

“Seconded,” Hermione said, nodding, “though technically we did revisit that scene, if you recall.”

Harry laughed at the memory of the two of them using the Time Turner to go back to free Sirius, though the memory of his godfather always brought a bittersweet smile with it.

“The wolf, who was unusually large and frightening, with a pitch black coat of shaggy fur and red eyes, walked up to Little Red Riding Hood,” Hermione continued.

“Who promptly turned tail and ran or screamed or pulled out a gun or did something else sensible,” Ron said with a grin, “except considering these stories are crazier than Gilderoy Lockhart, I’m guessing she didn’t.”

“You’re right,” Hermione admitted. “Instead, the wolf bowed to her and said, ‘Good day, little girl.
What, may I ask, are you doing in the wood on so fine a day in such a lovely red riding hood?"

"The wolf talked to her?" Ron said, his eyes bulging. "But wolves don’t talk!"

"In this story they do," Hermione explained.

"But they don’t!" Ron said firmly. "Even if he was an Animagus, which would have made some sense, a wizard in animal form can’t talk!"

"He’s right," Harry agreed. "I know Sirius didn’t, and McGonagall never does."

"And Scabbers never said anything either," Ron said.

"Yes, but this story isn’t about an Animagus," Hermione said with a despairing sigh. "It’s about a plain, ordinary, regular, everyday wolf who just happens to talk like a human being."

Ron shook his head sadly at what Harry could only presume was the strangeness of Muggles in general.

"Okay, if you say so, Hermione," he said. "But there aren’t any talking squirrels or bluebirds or bunnies or something in this, are there?"

"Not in this particular story, no," Hermione said.

"So what did good old Cindy do when the wolf started talking to her?" Harry asked.

"She proved how very unwise she was by forgetting her mother’s other rule, not to talk to strangers…" Hermione said.

"…and they don’t come much stranger than talking wolves," Ron added.

"…and saying, ‘Why, Mr. Wolf, your manners are lovely! I’m going to see my dear sick granny who lives in the cottage in the center of the wood, and I’m taking with me a basket of goodies so she will feel better,’” Hermione finished.

"This one was standing behind the door when brains were passed out, no question,” Ron said, shaking his head. “The only thing she didn’t do was give him the address. Even Crabbe and Goyle weren’t that thick.”

"No, I suppose they weren’t,” Hermione said. “Really, the girl is terribly stupid. In any case, the wolf tipped his hat…”

"Hat?" Ron asked. “The wolf was wearing a hat?”

"Just go with it Ron," Harry said, patting him on the arm.

"…and bid her a good day before walking back through the forest,” Hermione said.

"That’s it?" Ron said.

"Not quite," Hermione said, “for the wolf was only pretending to go away. Instead, he circled back around and went to the grandmother’s house long before Little Red Riding Hood was near. He knocked at the door, and the old woman called out, ‘Who’s there?’ The wolf answered in a false high voice, ‘It’s your grand-daughter. I’ve come with a basket of sweets for you.’”

"The wolf faked the kid’s voice?" Ron said in disbelief.
“That is what I just said,” Hermione said through gritted teeth.

“But wouldn’t he have a much deeper voice than a little girl?” he asked, pushing the point.

“Have you ever spoken with a wolf, Ron?” Hermione said snippily. “Maybe they all sound like little girls. Or maybe the grandmother was hard of hearing.”

“Now that I can believe,” Ron said, nodding happily. “That’s logical, that is. Makes her sound a bit like Auntie Muriel.”

“I’m glad you’ve provided yourself with a visual aid. The old grandmother, not knowing anything was wrong, told the wolf to lift the latch and let himself in,” Hermione said.

“I’m guessing that didn’t end well,” Ron said.

“No. He ate her,” Hermione said.

“How droll,” Ron said. “So now poor, sick gran, who looks just like Auntie Muriel in my head, is dead. I wonder if the wolf could catch whatever she had.”

“Serve him right,” Harry said, nodding.

“That really doesn’t come into the story,” Hermione said. “Instead, the wolf puts on the grandmother’s nightgown and cap and got into bed in her place.”

“He what?” Ron said, looking completely confused.

“You heard me,” Hermione said.

“So the wolf is a transvestite?” he asked, still sounding deeply perplexed.

“Well, I suppose there could be some latent criticism of questioning of gender roles in the story,” Hermione said, tipping her head to one side, thoughtfully.

“Say, where’d he get the nightgown from, anyway?” Ron said suspiciously.

“Wasn’t the grandmother sick in bed?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, trying to sound patient when she was anything but.

“So the grandmother should have been wearing the dress and cap when he ate her,” Ron pointed out. “Are you trying to tell me the wolf undressed the grandmother, stole her clothes, and then ate her?”

“Be a little hard to do that, what with wolves not having opposable thumbs and all,” Harry said.

“I don’t know,” Hermione said, shrugging. “Maybe the grandmother had a whole wardrobe full of nightgowns and caps. Is it really important?”

“I had a moment of thinking of naked Auntie Muriel,” Ron said, shuddering. “Okay, so the wolf has decided to take a nap.”

“Not really,” Hermione said. “You see, only a couple minutes later, the real Little Red Riding Hood knocked on the cottage door. The wolf called out ‘Who’s there?’ using the grandmother’s voice, and Little Red Riding Hood said, “It’s your grand-daughter. I’ve come with a basket of sweets for you.’”

“Pretty good guesswork there on the wolf’s part as to what she’d say,” Ron snorted. “Old Trelawney would be impressed with his power to foresee the future.”
“Anyway,” Hermione continued, “the wolf told the grand-daughter to lift the latch and let herself in.”

“Now I can understand the grandmother’s hearing going a bit and not catching that the voice isn’t Cindy’s,” Ron said, “but the kid can’t tell the difference between the wolf’s voice and her grandmother’s?”

“Apparently not,” Hermione said. “He must have been a very good mimic.”

“Or these people are all crazy,” Ron said. “Six of one, half a dozen of the other.”

“Little Red Riding Hood came in and put her basket on the table, then went to see her grandmother, who was curled up in bed under the blankets,” Hermione said. “When she came close enough to see her, Little Red Riding Hood said, ‘Why, Grandmother! What big eyes you have!’”

“Wait, the girl actually sees the wolf and still thinks it’s her grandmother?” Ron said, his tone rising in disbelief. “What, did the grandmother have a hormone condition that made her really hairy or something?”

“It’s just part of the story, Ron,” Hermione ground out with a clenched jaw.

“But that’s silly! She can’t hear and she’s blind as well? Who is this girl? Helen Keller?” Ron said, his voice getting louder. “There’s a wolf in the bed and she doesn’t notice because, gosh, it’s Granny’s nightcap and dress, so it must be her! This is like that idiot prince who didn’t recognize Cinderella because she changed her dress!”

“The wolf responded, ‘The better to see you with, my dear,’” Hermione continued as though Ron hadn’t spoken. “Then Little Red Riding Hood said, ‘Grandmother! What big ears you have!’”

“Which apparently stick directly out of the top of your head!” Ron said in a high falsetto. “I don’t find that suspicious in the least!”

“‘The better to hear you with, my dear,’ said the wolf, and Ron so help me if you make a single remark about neither one of them being able to hear well in the first place, you can darn your own socks!” Hermione said very quickly.

“Fine, fine, but I can think it really loudly,” Ron said with a grimace.

“At long last, the little girl had gone quite near the bed, and she said with a trembling voice, ‘Grandmother, what big teeth you have!’” Hermione said, giving the line its appropriate horrified gasp.

“Unless Grandma was a vampire, that really should have been a tip off,” Harry admitted.

“Actually, if you notice your Gran has enormous incisors, don’t stop to comment on it. Just run,” Ron said sagely.

“All the better to EAT YOU WITH MY DEAR!’” Hermione said, her voice rising into a scream of fiendish laughter that actually made both boys jump. She blinked. “What? Too much?”

“Just a bit,” Ron said, his voice quivering. “You people really tell this story to kids? The girl’s grandmother becoming a wolf and threatening to eat her alive? That doesn’t bother you?”

“Oh, we almost all wind up in therapy anyway,” Hermione said with an airy wave of her hand. “Really, what’s the difference if it’s from having to deal with Mum and Dad’s mid-life crisis or creepy children’s stories that involve cannibalistic undertones? In any case, the wolf leaped out of the
bed, chased Little Red Riding Hood around and around the cottage, and then ate her all up.”

Ron and Harry looked at her expectantly, but she didn’t seem to be going on.

“What, is that the end of the story?” Ron asked.

“Yes, well, in some of the versions,” Hermione said.

“That’s a bloody stupid ending!” Ron said. “The wolf eats Cindy and her grandmother and that’s that?! Where’s that whole happily ever after thing?”

“The whole point of the story is to emphasize the danger of talking to strangers and disobeying your parents,” Hermione said. “Little Red Riding Hood did both, and she wound up dying because of it, which is the real symbolism of the hood’s blood-red color.”

“That’s depressing,” Ron said. “You said there’s other versions though?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “In a different one, a woodsman hears Red Riding Hood’s calls for help, but by the time he arrives, the wolf has already eaten her and has fallen fast asleep from gluttony.”

“Sounds like Bill and Charlie after Christmas dinner,” Ron said. “Say, is this the same woodsman who left Snow White in the forest instead of killing her?”

“Not that I know of,” Hermione said.

“But there’s no reason he can’t be,” Ron pointed out. “I mean, he could be, right?”

“Oh, I suppose so if it makes you happier,” Hermione said with a martyr-like sigh. “In any case, the woodsman put two and two together when he saw the wolf dressed in the grandmother’s clothes and with a great swollen belly.”

“Not a dim fellow, this woodsman. Also, he seems to have a working pair of eyes,” Ron said, pleased. “Finally, some sanity.”

“So the woodsman took his ax and split open the wolf’s belly, and out popped the grandmother and Little Red Riding Hood, alive but very shaken,” Hermione said, though her tone suggested she was expecting the outcry that came a split second later.

“They just… popped out… alive… from the wolf’s belly?” Ron said, looking disgusted and puzzled all at once. “Didn’t he chew them at all?”

“Apparently he swallowed them whole,” Hermione said.

“But even if he had… no wolf could fit two live human beings in his gullet, and the digestive juices! No oxygen! They’d have to be dead! It’s just not possible!” Ron said, exasperated.

“I agree with you,” Hermione said, patting him sympathetically. “It’s not at all rational, but it’s only a story.”

“A story? Some kid’s going to think it’d be neat to see what the inside of a wolf looks like, and the next thing you know Junior’s head is stuck in Fido’s mouth,” Ron said. “This is ridiculous. Well, at least the wolf’s dead now.”

“Not really,” Hermione said.

“He used an ax to split open the thing’s stomach wide enough for two people to jump out of him!
He’s got to be dead,” Ron fairly screamed. “Hermione, this story makes no sense at all!”

“It really doesn’t,” she admitted. “Do you want me to finish it?”

“I suppose,” Ron said. “It can’t really get that much weirder.”

Hermione gave him an uncertain look but went on.

“The wolf was still asleep…,” Hermione said.

“…in spite of the mind-numbing pain of anesthesia-free abdominal surgery accomplished via ax,” Harry put in.

“Yes, and the woodsman took two great stones from the yard and put them inside the wolf’s stomach, then sewed the wound shut,” Hermione said.

“He what?” Ron said. “Why would he do that?”

“I’m about to explain,” Hermione said. “When the wolf finally awoke, the huntsman stood in the front yard, on the other side of a well. The wolf, still greedy for more, went tearing towards him by the most direct route, intent on killing and eating him all in one bite, so he tried to jump right over the well. He hadn’t planned on the great weight of the stones that were in his belly, though, and the heaviness of the rocks made him fall down the well, drowning him. Then the woodsman married Little Red Riding Hood, and they all lived happily ever after.”

Harry looked at Ron. Ron looked at Harry.

“Mind if I point out a few things?” Ron said.

“Go ahead,” Hermione said, leaning back in the old, worn chair. “The story’s finished.”

“First off, why didn’t the wolf just eat Red Riding Hood the first time he met her in the forest?” Ron asked.

“I suppose he wanted both her and the grandmother,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but he already had directions to the cottage. Why not eat Red Riding Hood in the woods, then go eat the grandmother without having to dress up like her or try to match voices and things?” he asked.

“Well… when you put it that way, I don’t really see a reason why,” Hermione admitted.

“The wolf had a flare for the dramatic,” Harry said. “He didn’t just want to kill them; he wanted to make them all look like idiots, too.”

“Doesn’t make any sense, but still, okay, for whatever reason, the wolf decides to do things this way, then sleeps off his binge. When the woodsman cuts open the wolf’s belly—and I’m hoping it really was a spare nightdress the wolf was wearing otherwise the grandmother is popping out naked and probably covered in wolf’s blood which is an image I really don’t need of Auntie Muriel, and the poor woodsman doesn’t need that for a thank you either—why doesn’t he just chop the wolf’s head off? Why stick stones in there and attempt drowning him in the well?” Ron said.

Hermione shrugged.

“Oh, come on! Is there some life-changing moral in that I’m not picking up on?” Ron asked.
“Not as far as I can see,” Hermione said, “but it’s still the way the story’s told. I suppose there could be notions of purification via water in the undertones of the drowning, but it’s a pretty big stretch.”

“Finally, the woodsman marries Little Red Riding Hood. Exactly how old is this girl?” Ron asked.

“I don’t really know,” Hermione said. “The ‘little’ in her name suggests she’s quite young, and very young marriages were common a long time ago, but it’s never mentioned.”

“Maybe ‘little’ just means she’s really short,” Harry suggested. “It would explain how she and her grandmother could both fit in a wolf’s belly without being crushed.”

“Particularly if it was a genetic condition she shared with the grandmother,” Hermione said, nodding slightly in agreement. “Yes, I suppose it could be a reference to her height instead of her age.”

“Hermione?” Ron said, drawing her attention back from the academic treatise Harry was sure she was outlining in her head. “Just so you know, even without magic, Muggle fairy tales are plain bizarre.”

“I suppose so,” Hermione said, stretching. “It’s getting late, though. I’m going to turn in.”

“Might as well do the same,” Harry agreed. “You coming, Ron?”

“Yeah. Night all,” he said, climbing into his lower bunk.

“Oh, and Ron,” Hermione called over her shoulder. “I moved your photo of Miss Crawford while I was tidying up today, but I think I put it back under your pillow correctly. I do hope you don’t mind.”

With a wicked smile of revenge as Ron blushed the color of his hair, Hermione turned out the light.
“Well, if you have any brilliant ideas, Ron, please, be sure to enlighten us!” Harry yelled, his patience completely shattered.

“I told you that orphanage wasn’t going to come to anything, not that you ever listen to what I have to say!” Ron yelled back, his face so red his freckles had disappeared into the coloring of his skin. “But no, oh great and mighty Chosen One! You had to check that out to be sure, and all the while I’ve said we ought to risk a visit home to see if we can pick up on any news!”

“We can’t!” Harry said, really angry. “If we show so much as a toe back at the Burrow, the Ministry will have our hides, and you know it.”

“Maybe I’d prefer a fight rather than skulking from place to place like we’ve done something wrong,” Ron said, throwing himself into one of the ratty chairs in the tent in a huff.

“And, might I ask, after we inevitably lose that fight and your pure-blood self is excused from any wrong doing, what do you think will happen to Undesirable Number One over there,” Hermione said quietly from the kitchen, nodding at Harry, “and a Mudblood who’s already on You-Know-Who’s bad side. Do you suppose they’ll give us chocolates and a free trip to Tahiti?”

Ron opened his mouth to retort, but the truth of her statement made him unable to come up with anything to say. Instead, he sighed deeply.

“Sorry, mate,” he said to Harry, then turned to Hermione, adding, “you, too. I’m just… fed up, I suppose.”

“Or not fed enough,” Harry said, the anger draining from him in an exhausted rush as his stomach growled loudly. “We’re all on edge.”

“Hungry and homesick,” Hermione said, a thoughtful look on her face. “It’s a bad combination, especially when there’s nothing to do but stare at the walls and peck at one another.”

Ron caught Harry’s eye, and he already knew what his friend was going to suggest.

“Shall we say it together?” Harry said, surprised to find himself feeling playful.

“Oh, let’s,” Ron said with a magnanimous wave of his hand.

“Hermione,” they said in chorus, “tell us a story!”

She rolled her eyes at their antics, but Harry couldn’t help feeling pleased that, at least this time, the increasingly volatile situation had been completely disarmed with no real harm done.

“Fine,” she said, settling into another chair. “I know whatever argument I give, you’ll still want one. What kind of story do you want?”

“Oh, you choose,” Ron said with a magnanimous wave of his hand. “I’m sure whatever you pick will be suitably mental.”

Harry laughed, and then a dusty pillow hit him in the face, thrown by a minorly annoyed Hermione.

“Then I’ll tell you the story of… well, I won’t give you the name just yet,” she said primly, folding her hands in her lap, “as it will give too much away.”
“The title gives too much away?” Ron asked, raising an eyebrow. “Ookay, so, once upon a time?”

“Very good,” Hermione said in the same tone one might expect from a teacher praising a six-year-old for holding a pencil correctly. “Once upon a time, in a kingdom far away, there lived a miller who had a beautiful daughter.”

“Did he have any ugly daughters?” Ron asked.

“No, just the one pretty daughter,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said, sounding a little disappointed. “Does he marry someone with ugly daughters?”

“No, he doesn’t marry anyone at all,” Hermione said, confused. “Why?”

“It’s just that usually the ones with the evil, ugly step-daughters or wicked second wives turn out particularly odd,” Ron said shrugging. “Okay, so we’ve got one pretty bird. What’s this one’s name?”

“Actually, she doesn’t have one,” Hermione said. “It doesn’t really come into the story.”

“At least Red Riding Hood had a nickname,” Ron said, looking shocked. “Nothing at all for the poor girl?”

“Apparently not,” Hermione said. “It’s rather sad, isn’t it? In any case, the girl’s father was drinking in the local tavern one day and became quite drunk. Each of the men in the tavern was boasting about the different things their daughters were skilled at doing. One called out, ‘My daughter can bake bread so quickly, we can’t finish buttering one loaf before another is done!’ Another said, ‘That’s nothing! My daughter can sew so well that she can clothe a family of ten in less than a day!’ But the miller blurted out, ‘I can best you all! My daughter can spin plain straw into pure gold!’”

“Straw into gold?” Harry said. “That’s incredibly random.”

“Yeah,” Ron agreed. “He might as well have said she could get Hippogriffs to fly upside down or make the Minister of Magic accomplish anything he promises.”

“He didn’t, though” Hermione said. “He said she could spin straw into gold.”

“No, she couldn’t,” Ron said firmly. “That’s not possible.”

“You’re quite right,” Hermione said with a nod. “The girl couldn’t spin straw into gold at all, and the father was lying.”

“Well, so far, this one makes a pretty good load of sense,” Ron said approvingly. “I’m sure it won’t last though.”

“Probably not,” Harry agreed. “I’m guessing the townsfolk believed the father?”

“Exactly,” Hermione said.

“Bright group, aren’t they?” Ron said.

“Word of the very talented daughter of the miller spread like wildfire through the town, and the news of her ability to spin straw into gold eventually reached the king’s ears,” Hermione went on.

“Who I’m guessing didn’t think there was even a remote chance that the father might have been embellishing a bit,” Ron said.
“No, he believed the tale as well,” Hermione said.

“Of course he did,” Ron said, rolling his eyes. “No offense, Hermione, but Muggles seem pretty dim in these things.”

“They’re only stories,” Hermione pointed out testily. “Obviously not all Muggles are idiotic enough to believe a miller’s daughter can spin straw into gold!”

“No,” Harry said seriously. “Now, a lawyer’s daughter, that’s possible. Maybe a grocer’s daughter. Could be an outside chance on a pawn broker’s daughter…”

“Tremendously funny,” Hermione said, grimacing. “The king called for the girl to be brought to his castle.”

“Why not the father?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know,” Hermione said. “We actually never hear of him again in the story.”

“Poor kid’s going to be in for a right lot of trouble,” Ron said.

“More than you might think,” Hermione said. “Once the girl was brought before him, the king said, ‘Girl, your father says you can spin straw into gold. This very night you are to be locked in a room with naught but straw and a spinning wheel. When dawn comes, if you have not spun all the straw into gold, you shall die.’”

“Well, that’s just rotten!” Ron said indignantly. “She’s not the one who went round telling giant lies, and he didn’t even ask her if it was true!”

“In one of the versions, he does,” Hermione said, “but he’s holding her father in jail, and if she says he lied, her father will be killed, and if the straw isn’t spun into gold, it’s only the girl who dies because she’s obstinate and disobeyed the king.”

“That’s still stupid,” Ron said. “What a poor excuse for a king, killing girls just because they can’t spin straw into gold.”

“I agree,” Hermione said, looking at him proudly. “The girl was indeed locked in a small room with many bales of straw and a spinning wheel.”

“I suppose if she got really desperate she could prick her finger on the spindle and hope to doze off for a hundred years or so,” Ron suggested.

“Not every spinning wheel does that,” Hermione sighed, wiping her face with her hand.

“Nah,” Ron agreed. “Just the ones cursed by evil fairies who didn’t get invited to the best parties, I guess. I don’t think Nameless Girl is lucky enough to randomly wind up with one of those.”

“No,” Hermione said. “She had no idea what to do, so after they bolted the door shut, she sat down and began to cry.”

“Might be second cousin to Ashyweeper,” Ron said.

“Cinderella,” Hermione corrected him automatically.

“Yeah, her,” Ron said. “I suppose we could call this one Strawweeper, but that’s not particularly catchy.”
Hermione gave him a withering look.

"'What shall I do?' said the girl to the empty room. 'I don’t know how to spin straw into gold, and when dawn comes, I shall be killed!'" Hermione said, wringing her hands in imitation of the miller’s daughter’s despair.

“She started talking to the straw?” Ron asked, then made a screw loose motion at the side of his head. “Not a good sign, that.”

“I can’t really blame her, though, given the circumstances,” Harry said. “I’d probably start talking to bales of hay too.”

“Actually, it turned out to be just what she needed to do,” Hermione said.

“The straw talked back?” Ron asked, his eyes bugging out.

“No, the straw did not talk back,” Hermione said, sighing dramatically. “Suddenly, a tiny little man appeared.”

“Okay,” Ron said. “Maybe he was living in the straw, then?”

“I don’t know, maybe,” Hermione said, and Harry thought she looked close to whapping both of them upside the head at any moment. “The little man said, ‘I have heard your problem, and I can fix it.’”

“He knows how to open the door?” Ron suggested hopefully.

“No,” Hermione said. “He knew how to spin straw into gold.”

“Nah, that goes against the basic rules of magic,” Ron said dismissively.

“No, really, he could spin the straw into gold,” Hermione said.

Ron stared at her.

“Pull the other one,” he finally said.

“At least in this story, there was some magical way that straw turned into gold,” Hermione repeated.

“It sounds a little like the Sorcerer’s Stone,” Harry said thoughtfully, “though that at least only turned metal into gold.”

“You know, I think you might be on to something there,” Hermione said, thinking carefully. “This story does come from a time when plenty of Muggles believed it was possible to transform base metals into gold if the correct chemicals were used, but the story does go further with its inclusion of straw as the transforming material, suggesting the daughter’s abilities, and thus the little man’s, would have to be far beyond even the commonplace levels of higher magic. However, the presence of organic material could also suggest a more benevolent aspect to the magic than metal might, since metal can be used in weaponry, but who ever heard of hurting someone with straw? On the other hand, it could also possibly suggest a society that predates the use of metalwork but does possess the ability to weave textiles, suggesting a more domestic yet predominantly technologically backward culture…”

“Hermione,” Ron said, interrupting her train of thought, “I lost you right after ‘you might be on to something.’”
“Sorry,” Hermione said, smiling sheepishly. “Habit. In any case, the girl was thrilled the little man could spin straw into gold…”

“No, he couldn’t,” Ron mumbled under his breath, and Harry lightly punched him in the arm.

“But the little man wouldn’t do this for free. ‘What will you give me if I do this for you?’ asked the little man, and the girl said, ‘I shall give you my necklace,’” Hermione said.

“Where’d she get a necklace?” Harry asked.

“I’m guessing the typical miller’s daughter didn’t have jewelry.”

“I don’t know. It probably wasn’t a very expensive necklace, but I suppose that wouldn’t be the point. If he could spin straw into gold, he’d be as rich as he wanted anyway and could have as many necklaces as he liked. But the little man did agree to spin the straw into gold for the fee of the necklace all the same,” Hermione said. “The girl watched through the whole night as he looped straw onto the wheel and then with a whir it would spin off, magically transformed into gold. She couldn’t quite see how he did it, though.”

“Because it’s not ruddy possible in the first place,” Ron groused quietly.

“When the first streaks of dawn became visible from the room’s window…” Hermione began, but Ron immediately interrupted.

“The room has a window? Why didn’t she just crawl out it and run away then instead of sitting around sobbing and swapping jewelry with short men who live in haystacks?”

“Dawn was visible through the very tiny window,” Hermione said, her head starting to vibrate with the effort of control, “which she couldn’t possibly have climbed through…”

“Okay, I can buy that,” Ron said, leaning back in his chair. “Go on.”

“Oh, may I?” Hermione said in mock ecstasy. “When dawn broke, the last of the straw was spun, the girl gave the little man her necklace, and he disappeared. No sooner had she done this than the door opened and the king saw the piles of gold all around the young girl. He was filled with both glee and greed.”

“Greed? He’s got a room filled with gold. What more did he want?” Harry asked.

“More gold,” Hermione said.

“Sounds like Dudley,” Harry said. “No matter what he had, he’d never be satisfied.”

“Then I hereby name this greedy git King Dudley,” Ron said, bowing. “Someone in this story needs a name.”

“Indeed they do,” Hermione said mysteriously. “The king, not content with the small room full of gold, decreed that the girl should be locked in a much larger room filled floor to rafter with straw, and that once again, if she had not finished spinning all the straw into gold by sunrise, she would die.”

“Nice fellow,” Ron said, grimacing. “If he’s going to up the amount of straw she needs to spin into gold, shouldn’t he at least give her more time?”

“You’d think so, but he was both greedy and impatient, I guess,” Hermione said.
“Lovely traits,” Ron said. “What does he do for fun besides locking up pretty girls and asking them to do impossible tasks? Pull chairs out from under little old ladies’ bums? Or maybe he really does have a whole castle full of girls trying to pull off freakishly bizarre tasks: one locked in a cupboard trying to knit dead leaves into Galleons, maybe, and another stuffed in the attic attempting to stomp on horse dung until it turns into diamonds.”

“As soon as the girl was locked in the new room full of straw, she began to cry once again,” Hermione said.

“Which somehow acted as a hailing spell for the little man to reappear, I’d wager,” Ron said.

“He did reappear, and he again offered to spin the straw into gold so long as she offered payment. The girl had only one treasure left, a ring, which she gave the little man, and he accepted it, spun the straw into gold, and left as the first light of dawn came through the window,” Hermione said.

“What’s the straw look like after it’s turned into gold, anyway?” Ron asked. “Is it still straw-shaped?”

Hermione looked a little amused, but said, “I don’t really know. I’d guess so. I mean, straw is strands, sort of thread-shaped, so probably the gold was too? Maybe it was wound up in a ball like knitting wool or something.”

“The king would have to look bloody odd carrying around balls of gold, maybe unrolling it and snapping it with pliers to pay for things,” Ron said, but though even Hermione laughed a little, Harry seemed oddly silent, not that his friends noticed.

“The king was so impressed by the girl’s work that he decided on a rash course of action. He declared there was but one test left. The girl was locked in a great room, the largest in the whole castle, and the king had it packed, every square foot, with piles and piles of straw, leaving only the smallest space possible for the spinning wheel. The king declared that the next morning, one of two things would happen. If all the straw had not been spun into gold, the girl would die.”

“Give me a break,” Ron said. “The poor kid hasn’t slept in two days! He really expects her to stay up again?”

“Apparently so. He’s really not a nice person,” Hermione said, shuddering.

“What’s the second thing that could happen? He covers the whole kingdom in straw and has her spin it into gold by the next morning on pain of death for a fourth night running?” Ron asked.

“No. If she managed to spin all the straw into gold, the king would marry her,” Hermione said.

Ron considered a moment, then said, “I think I’d prefer death myself.”

“Frankly, the thought occurred to me as well,” Hermione said. “Still, the girl was locked in the cathedral-sized room packed with more straw than she had known existed in all the world.”

“Say, where did the king get all that straw to begin with?” Ron asked.

“From farmers, I’d guess,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but that’s a lot of straw, isn’t it? I mean, did he wind up importing straw from neighboring kingdoms? There couldn’t be that much straw in one little kingdom. And how was he having it shipped in? Wouldn’t it cause terrible traffic jams all over the place? And what were the animals and such eating while he was going on his big three day gold-fest? Did he just let them all starve?” Ron
asked in a rush.

“It’s a story, Ron,” Hermione explained calmly in a voice that sounded just a bit murderous. “The imaginary people did not have an imaginary traffic jam full of imaginary wagons carrying imaginary straw to the imaginary castle where the imaginary king lived and the imaginary captive miller’s daughter was having the imaginary little man spin imaginary gold. It’s not real, Ron, so quit over-analyzing it!”

“Says the girl who was going on about prehistoric societies with no access to metalwork versus the military implications of turning metal into gold,” Ron said with a smirk.

“You got that?” she said, surprised.

“Yeah,” he said. “I do actually pay some attention, you know. But anyway, what’s up with the girl drowning in straw?”

“Well, when she was locked in the new room, she began to cry once more,” Hermione said, still rather impressed.

“She cries a lot,” Ron said sympathetically. “Did the little man come again?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, “he did, but when he appeared the girl cried all the harder, for she had nothing left with which to pay him. But the little man said, ‘Don’t cry. There is something you have that I want.’”

“I’m really hoping that a pretty girl and piles and piles of hay aren’t adding up to the equation I think they are,” Ron said.

“No, Ronald,” Hermione said. “The little man asked the girl to promise to give him her firstborn child.”

“Well, that’s a terrible deal!” Ron said. “She didn’t agree?”

“She did,” Hermione admitted. “The stories all say that she thought that no one knew the future and any number of things could happen, but really she was afraid of dying, and she agreed to give her first child to the little man.”

“I suppose if it’s that greedy bloke’s kid, it’s probably not that much of a loss anyway,” Ron snorted. “So the little man spun the straw into gold?”

“Yes, all of it, and the king, whose storehouses were full to bursting with gold now, rejoiced and married the girl on the spot the next morning,” Hermione said.

“Bet she was thrilled to marry King Dudley the Deplorable,” Ron said. “Wonder if her old dad showed up to give her away, louse that he was.”

“No idea,” Hermione said.

“Sounds like she traded one bad lot for another,” Harry said a little morosely.

“Perhaps so, but believe it or not the king never comes into the story again either,” Hermione said. “More than likely he left her pretty much alone. A year passed, and the new queen gave birth to a son.”

“Sounds like he didn’t leave her alone all that much,” Ron said.
“A few weeks after the child’s birth, as the queen was rocking the cradle and humming a lullaby, the little man suddenly appeared in the room,” Hermione said. “The queen had been so happy that she had completely forgotten about her bargain until she saw him.”

“Well, it’s pretty easy to forget a little thing like that. I mean, really, if someone trades their firstborn kid, is it going to weight heavily on their mind all the time? Of course not,” Ron said sarcastically.

“The little man said, ‘I am here for the child. Give him to me!’ But the queen wept and wept,” Hermione said.

“This girl’s going to wind up with trouble in her tear ducts,” Ron said, shaking his head. “Hey, you don’t suppose she’s allergic to straw, do you? That’d explain a lot!”

“The little man was moved to pity,” Hermione said, giving Ron a filthy look.

“At least someone in this story has some pity,” Ron said.

“He said, ‘Queen, if you can guess my name in three days, I shall let you keep the child, but if you cannot, then you must give him to me.’ With that, he disappeared once more,” she said.

“Kind of a vague quest, isn’t it?” Ron said. “Guessing a name? I mean, there’s thousands, millions of names. I’ve got an uncle named Jklnsgzkrtpbt.”

“Named what?” Harry said, looking at him like he was crazy.

“Jklnsgzkrtpbt,” Ron said, sounding like he was practically ripping his tongue in half to say it. “It’s a bit tricky to pronounce, what with not having any vowels. His mum was a bit daft, but he got off lucky compared to his twin.”

“What was his twin named?” Hermione asked.

“Gordon,” Ron said with a wince.

“What’s so horrid about that?” Harry said.

“The twin was a girl,” Ron explained. “Can you imagine how bad that was at school?”

“And yet you tease me about my name,” Hermione said.

“Well, yeah,” Ron said. “You’re not named Gordon. It’s not as tragic.”

Hermione appeared to consider this a moment before saying, “Actually, you’re right. That’s much worse.”

Ron smirked in satisfaction.

“The queen sat all the next day writing down every name she could ever remember hearing, and when the little man appeared that night, she listed them off, one by one. ‘Are you Matthew? Peter? Alphonsus? Charles? Stephen? Gregory? William? Anthony? Marcus?’ To each name, the little man answered with a resounding, ‘No, that’s not my name!’ At length, after many hours, the queen had tried every name she had ever heard of, and not one of them was the little man’s name. Laughing at her defeat, he disappeared until the next night,” Hermione went on.

“It’d have to be pretty hard to list every name ever,” Ron said, considering.

“Impossible,” Hermione agreed, “just like spinning straw into gold, which I think was the point. The
next day, the queen sent messengers to every part of the kingdom to create lists of strange, unusual, or unique names. That night, with all their lists before her, the queen asked the little man another set of names. ‘Are you called Grumbleburner? Murgondin? Crookshanks?’ But to each name, the little man answered, ‘No, that is not my name!’ until finally she reached the end of her list and he disappeared, vowing to return and take the child the next night unless she had completed her task of finding his name.”

“Crookshanks?” Ron asked. “Is that where your cat got his name?”

“Actually, it really is one of the names that’s used most often in the story, along with Skimbleshanks. I don’t know. I think the pet store named him that because, well, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but his legs are a little bit... not perfectly straight,” Hermione said delicately.

“He’s bowlegged,” Ron said bluntly. “Okay, I get the crooked bit, but shanks?”

“It’s another word for legs,” Hermione said, shooting him a nasty look, “and don’t call Crookshanks bowlegged. He’s just a bit different.”

“Bit ugly, you mean,” Ron whispered to Harry, but once again Ron was hit in the head with a pillow.

“That particular day,” Hermione said without skipping a beat from tossing it at him, “one of the messengers went deep into the forest, and there he saw something very strange. A tiny little man was dancing around a fire, singing at the top of his lungs, ‘Today I brew, tomorrow I bake, for tonight the queen’s firstborn I take, for no one knows, much to her shame, that Rumpelstiltskin is my name.’”

“Rumpelstiltskin?” Harry said, staring. “That’s his name?”

“That’s his name,” Hermione said. “It’s also the name of the story, which really rather spoils it.”

“I’ve heard weirder,” Ron said, shrugging.

“Yes, well, your Uncle Jklngszkrtpbt aside…” Hermione said.

“Jklngszkrtpbt,” he corrected her. “The accent’s on the p. In any case, what a coincidence that the messenger just happened upon the little man while he just happened to be singing a weird song that just happened to tell his name.”

“Isn’t it, though?” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but I don’t really get why he wants the kid to begin with,” Ron said. “What’s he going to do with it?”

“Well, some people think that ‘tomorrow I bake’ suggests he was going to eat the prince,” Hermione said with a shudder.

“Cannibalism,” Ron said, nodding. “Good. I was waiting for the required weirdly disgusting and deeply disturbing portion of the story to come up.”

“They’re not all disturbing and disgusting!” she said.

“Hermione, face it. Sliced off toes and heels, step-mothers who think they’re holding their step-daughter’s heart, mother-in-laws who try to throw their grandchildren in cauldrons of scorpions and spiders, cross-dressing wolves who eat grannies and girls whole only to have them erupt out of their stomachs intact? They’re entertaining, but yeah, disturbing and disgusting fits,” he said, shrugging.
She opened her mouth to protest, then seemed to reconsider.

“Conceded,” she said with a wry smile before going on. “The messenger ran back to the castle and told his tale to the queen, who laughed with joy when she heard the news. Not a few seconds later, the little man appeared before her once again. ‘Tell me my name, or give me the child,’ he cried gleefully. ‘Is your name Cazbanaza?’ she asked. ‘No, that’s not my name,’ he said, grinning and dancing. ‘Is it Robert?’ she asked. Again he said no. ‘Well, then, I am at a loss—unless your name is Rumpelstiltskin!’”

“Bit cruel, really, going through the other two first,” Ron said disapprovingly. “Besides, Robert? Not exactly exotic, is it.”

“The little man was furious that his name had been found out. In a rage, he stamped his foot into the floor so hard that he sank in up to his hip, then he grabbed his other leg and pulled it over his head, ripping himself in two,” Hermione said.

Both boys sucked in a quick intake of pained breath at the thought, and Hermione actually joined them.

“That’s disgusting,” Harry said.

“And disturbing,” Ron added.

“In another version he just stamps so hard a chasm opens up and he falls in, going all the way down to hell,” Hermione said.

“So the queen winds up with either a ripped apart dwarf permanently embedded in her floor or an open pit that leads directly to hell in her bedroom? Bet that’s not in one of Mum’s decorating magazines as style tip of the month,” Ron scoffed. “A throw rug is not going to fix that problem.”

“Either way, the little man was never heard or seen again, and the queen lived happily ever after,” Hermione finished.

“Except for being married to a complete prat and living in constant fear of whether he’d ask her to spin gold again or die,” Ron added.

“Well, yes, there is that,” Hermione admitted. “So, what did you think of this one?”

“Mad,” Ron said conversationally but with a grin. “What did you think, Harry?”

Harry was silent for almost a full minute before replying quietly, “I don’t think I like this story much.”

“Why?” Ron asked. “I mean, it’s nuts, yeah, but what’s wrong?”

“The girl… she’s treated rotten by her father who brags all the time, and she winds up being treated poorly by a rich man so that she has to barter away her necklace and her ring to stay alive,” Harry said slowly. “Doesn’t that sound a bit like someone we know?”

Ron and Hermione glanced at each other in shock.

“Merope,” Hermione said. “It really does sound rather like her, doesn’t it?”

Harry nodded.

“Well, at least this one’s kid winds up okay,” Ron said.
“Yeah,” Harry replied, his jaw set firmly, “because his mum was willing to fight for him rather than just hand him off to some stranger to be eaten… or worse.”

“I suppose that makes all the difference in the world,” Hermione said softly.

“Yeah, mate,” Ron said, looking down.

For a moment, the three of them felt the weight of their mission, as well as the terrible consequences of failure, pressing heavily upon them.

“Hermione?” Ron asked timidly.

“What, Ron?” she said, sounding like she was at the funeral of a friend.

“You wouldn’t happen to know how to spin straw into pasta by any chance, would you?” he said, grinning. “I could go for linguini right now, and I think I saw a whole barn worth of straw at that farm down the road.”

Hermione blinked.

“What?” he said innocently. “It’s not like I’m asking you to spin it into gold or anything impossible like that.”

Two pillows thrown from opposite sides of the room slammed into him with equal force, and the trio of friends laughed once more.
Ron and Harry stumbled through the door of the tent, drenched and empty-handed.

“Any luck, then?” Hermione asked, sounding uncertain.

“If by luck you mean Harry nearly getting his cloak pulled off while we were trying to pinch some potatoes at the market, yeah, things went great,” Ron replied bitterly.

“I salvaged some turnips,” Hermione said, then quickly added, “don’t ask from where. You’re happier not knowing.”

“Turnips,” Ron said, disgusted. “I don’t like them even at the best of times.”

“Well, better learn to love them, mate,” Harry said, taking off one of his shoes and emptying a puddle of water from it onto the floor.

Harry used his wand to dry himself off a bit, but the damp cold was still pressing in upon him as though it had gotten into his bones. Ron, meanwhile, had flopped down on one of the chairs without even bothering to try drying off. He looked despondently at the little pot on their cooktop that was sending sullen clouds of steam in the air and making the tent smell like boiled turnips.

Hermione looked around and sighed.

“How about a bit of entertainment before dinner?” she asked.

“Want me to do my imitation of Cornelius Fudge again?” Ron asked, brightening a little.

“Ehm, no,” Harry said, then quickly added, “you’d make us all laugh too much and it might… spoil our appetites?”

Ron looked mollified, but Harry and Hermione exchanged quick glances that showed how grateful they were to have avoided that catastrophe.

“We could have another story,” Ron suggested, looking at Hermione.

“Oh, well,” Hermione said, blushing and trying not to look too pleased, “I suppose I could try to come up with one, if you like.”

“Yeah, but I’ve got a request after that last little trip down Storyland Lane,” Ron said. “The king was a right ponce in it, and then Ashyweeper’s prince was a near-sighted moron, and Albino Girl’s had a thing for corpses, and the one who woke up the girl who took a nap was all kinds of rotten, and then the woodsman in the fashion victim’s story liked operating on animals and sticking rocks in them…”

Hermione looked on in mild amusement as Ron listed off his problems with Muggle fairy tales on his fingers.

“When you put it that way, I’m wondering why you want another,” she said curiously.

“Oh, they’re good fun,” Ron said firmly. “but I was wondering if there were any where the fellows don’t come off as weirdos or freaks or some such.”

“Hmm,” Hermione said, frowning as she considered. “Well, I suppose ‘The Frog Prince’ is only mildly bad for the male characters. It’s really the princess who’s rather awful in that one.”
“Then in the interest of fairness betwixt the genders, I want that one,” Ron said, kicking back in his chair and putting his dripping trainers up on the little end table.

“Your wish is my command,” Hermione said, sitting cross-legged on the couch, then adding in an undertone, “at least for the moment since it’ll keep the peace.”

Harry found himself wandering over to a chair himself and sitting down, wondering what fresh strangeness Hermione was going to tell them this time.

“Once upon a time,” Hermione and Ron said simultaneously.

“Would you prefer to tell the story?” she said icily in a very close imitation of Professor McGonagall.

“No, I just like saying that, and really, when else is it appropriate?” Ron said, grinning.

Hermione gave him a disbelieving look but went on.

“There was a good king who lived in a country far, far away, and he had several beautiful daughters, but the most beautiful was the youngest one,” Hermione said.

“Where’s their mum?” Ron asked.

“Dead again, I’m guessing,” Harry chimed in.

“This story doesn’t really say, but I suppose as we never hear from her in it, she might well be dead,” Hermione said, and Harry noticed that faraway, sad look come into Hermione’s eyes again that always seemed to be there when she thought of her parents.

“Or maybe she’s just having a nice vacation at a spa,” Ron said quickly. “There’s no reason to assume the worst or anything, right?”

Harry had to hand it Ron; he was getting a lot more perceptive where girls were concerned. In any case, Hermione gave him a grateful smile and went on.

“Perhaps she was at that,” Hermione said. “The youngest daughter…”

“What’s her name?” Ron interrupted.

“This is another story where she doesn’t have one,” Hermione explained with a good deal more patience than usual, Harry thought.

“It’s like they’re all in the Witness Protection Program or summat,” Ron said, shaking his head.

“Well, really, it’s that they’re not so much full characters as symbols,” Hermione said. “The female protagonists in many of the stories, as well as most of the males, really act as intensified personifications of idealized characteristics inherent to the gender concerned. For example, the females are generally defined by beauty, docility, and obedience, except when disobedience is required for the continuation of the plot, which echoes an Eve or Pandora archetype. On the other hand, the villains in the story are often perversions or mirror opposites of the accepted stereotypes. The queen in ‘Snow White,’ for example, is beautiful yet so vain that she’s guilty of attempted murder, while the prince’s mother in ‘Sleeping Beauty’ is seen as the opposite of a unifying matriarch by turning her into a monstrous, cannibalistic ogre who tries to literally destroy the family unit by murdering her progeny, and I’m relatively sure there’s some sort of reverse Oedipal complex going on as well.”
Harry looked at Ron. Ron looked at Harry.

Suddenly, a pillow thumped Hermione lightly on the side of the head, making her shake her head for a moment.

“I was doing it again, wasn’t I?” she said sheepishly. “Sorry.”

“No need to apologize,” Ron said. “I rather like those bits… even if I don’t get half of them. But if we didn’t stop you, you’d be writing a treatise on characterization in fairy tales and we’d never find out about the king’s pretty daughter.”

Hermione grinned, then continued.

“In any case, one day while the princess was playing outside, she wandered into the deep, dark forest that surrounded the castle,” Hermione said.

“Bad idea, that,” Ron broke in. “Princesses and forests usually don’t go well together. Really, all royal families in these things ought to try moving to a desert.”

Hermione gave him a look and went on.

“She came to a pond with great lily pads floating on its surface, and she found the spot so charming that she stopped there to play with her favorite toy, a ball made of purest gold,” Hermione said.

“Pretty expensive toy,” Ron said with a snort.

“I agree,” Hermione said, “and it turned out to be trouble for her. You see, her favorite game was to toss the ball up in the air and then catch it over and over.”

“Sounds dull,” Ron said, shrugging.

Harry, however, couldn’t help thinking of someone he had once seen tossing a Snitch into the air over and over again and catching it. The image of his father was a strange one to come to mind just then, but oddly, he didn’t find it morbid so much as strangely comforting.

“Maybe she was just practicing to be a Seeker,” Harry suggested.

“Hey, yeah!” Ron said. “That’d work, wouldn’t it? Little gold ball she’s catching?”

Hermione seemed to consider this.

“I suppose it’s possible that Quidditch is being inferred,” she said slowly. “It is quite a coincidence, isn’t it?”

“Sure is,” Ron agreed. “Crikey, I miss Quidditch. I wonder how the Cannons are doing this season. Anyway, so what happens next?”

“Well, she unfortunately dropped the ball,” Hermione said.

“So she was the Cannons’ Seeker, then?” Harry teased, and sure enough a pillow caught him rather more roughly on the head than it had Hermione.

“The ball ended up falling into the pond. The princess couldn’t swim, and the pond was so deep that she couldn’t even see the bottom of it. She sat down by the pond and began to cry,” Hermione said.

“Another weepy one,” Ron said, shaking his head. “Still, I don’t think I can blame her. I’d cry too if
I lost a solid gold ball.”

“However, it turned out the princess wasn’t as alone as she thought. She heard a voice that said, ‘Tell me, fair maiden, what troubles you?’” Hermione said. “The princess was so startled that she stopped crying and looked around for the source of the voice, but she couldn’t see anyone.”

“Invisibility cloak?” Harry asked.

“No. The voice said, ‘I am in the water. Lean close and you shall see me,’ and the princess came closer to the water’s edge,” Hermione said.

“And then a Grindylow grabbed her by the throat and drowned her, the end,” Ron said. “Idiot girl.”

“No, it was a large frog,” Hermione said.

“A frog?” Ron said. “Is this like that talking wolf?”

“Well, yes and no. There’s actually a reason this frog could talk, but it’s explained later. In any case, the girl was very surprised to hear a frog speaking to her…”

“Okay, so maybe she’s not such an idiot, then,” Ron said approvingly.

“She said, ‘Oh, frog, I have lost my golden ball in the pond, and I miss it so!’ and the frog replied, ‘I could retrieve it for you.’ ‘If you do so,’ the princess said, ‘I shall give you my golden crown and the jewels I am wearing, my silk gown and the slippers on my feet and all I own besides!’” Hermione continued.

“That’s mental. I’m betting the crown is worth more than the ball is without all the other stuff thrown in,” Harry said.

“Yeah, besides, what’s a frog going to do with a crown and jewels and a dress and…” Ron said, then his eyes glazed over.

“What?” Harry asked.

“Nothing, just… realized the princess would have to walk home pretty much starkers,” Ron said, coloring.

“Honestly!” Hermione said huffily. “She’s a fictional character in a children’s story! Is that all boys think about?”

“You really don’t want an answer to that,” Ron said. “Besides, you said she was pretty. That’s really all I need to know.”

Hermione muttered, “Boys…,” under her breath, but went on with the story.

“The frog, however, said, ‘I want none of these things,’” Hermione said.

“That’s big of him,” Ron said.

“Instead, I want you to let me live in the castle with you and be your companion, that you should love me and let me eat from your plate and sleep on your pillow at night,” Hermione said.

“Doesn’t ask for much, does he?” Harry said with a laugh. “All for a ball?”

“Golden ball, don’t forget,” Ron said quickly. “It does make a difference. If I’d lost a solid gold ball,
I’d be willing to share my dinner with a frog, but I might draw the line at letting him sleep on my pillow. Warts and all that.”

“That’s a myth, you know,” Hermione said. “You can’t get warts off a frog, or a toad either for that matter.”

“Yeah, Neville would be covered in them by now what with Trevor,” Harry said reasonably.

“I don’t know,” Ron said. “Neville does get a few spots now and again. Better safe than sorry. Anyway, what’d the princess do?”

“Well, she did something very dishonest,” Hermione said, sounding indignant. “She promised the frog that she would agree to all of his demands, but secretly she thought there was no possible way for the little frog to get all the way to the castle, and if she refused to carry him there, she’d never have to live up to her promise.”

“That’s rotten,” Ron said. “So she’s pretty but apparently completely stuck on herself and a liar in the deal too, huh? I think I’ve got a name for her now: Pansy!”

Harry couldn’t help raising an eyebrow at Ron’s use of the words “pretty” and “Pansy” so close together. Personally, he couldn’t get past the shape of her nose. He noticed Hermione giving him a rather sharp look as well.

“Yes, well, the frog croaked happily then dived deep into the pool. The princess waited anxiously on the bank, biting her knuckles in anticipation, until suddenly the frog reappeared and tossed the ball into the air. She caught it at once, laughing in delight, and ran away, leaving the frog sitting sadly in the pond,” Hermione said.

“That’s pathetic,” Ron said. “Not so much as a thank you or a nice pile of flies for a tip?”

“Not a thing,” Hermione said, shaking her head. “She ran all the way back to the castle. Many hours later, when she and her father the king were having dinner, there was an enormous, loud pounding on the castle door.”

“Let me guess. Kermit’s come calling?” Harry said.

“Who?” Ron asked, confused.

“Kermit the Frog. He’s a Muppet, well, a puppet, actually,” Harry explained. “I saw him a couple of times when Dudley was watching telly. He’s like a lime green felt lizard, really, with a pointy collar. He doesn’t look all that much like a frog, when you get to it. Oh, and he sings and dances, and his best friend is a bear with low self-esteem who’s a terrible comedian and wears a bowler hat and a white bowtie with pink spots.”

Ron stared at him for nearly a full minute.

“You people are deeply bizarre,” Ron said.

“Harry’s actually right,” Hermione said, “ehm, not about it being Kermit specifically, but about the frog being the one pounding on the door.”

“How exactly did a frog manage to pound on the castle door so hard that the king and his daughter could hear it all the way up in the dining room, or had they decided to eat in the foyer with the Wellies?” Ron asked.
“You know, I don’t really know how he managed that,” Hermione said, frowning. “I suppose he could have… no, that really wouldn’t have worked. Maybe he tried jumping up and down and then… but that really shouldn’t make that loud of a noise, should it? Could he have thrown something at the door? He shouldn’t be able to hold things properly without opposable thumbs, but then he did manage to carry the ball back to the surface of the pond, and if it was solid gold it must have been relatively weighty, so perhaps he could have been hurling fairly large rocks at the door…”

“Hermione,” Ron said, patting her arm, “don’t overthink it.”

“Doctor, heal thyself,” Hermione said with a snort. “A butler answered the door and brought a message to the king and princess, saying there was a frog at the front door who claimed the princess had promised he could eat with her.”

“That is one of the strangest sentences I’ve ever heard, and yet I completely understand it,” Ron said.

“The king asked the princess if it were true, and she said, ‘Oh father, I did promise the frog he could eat with us if he retrieved my golden ball from the pond, but I never dreamed he would really come!’ ‘Did he fetch thy ball for thee?’ the king asked. ‘Yes,’” she admitted. ‘Then thou must keep thy promise and let him eat beside thee,” the king said severely. ‘To do less is an offense against thy honor.’”

“Well, the king seems to be a pretty decent sort,” Ron said. “For once, a parent who isn’t dead or evil. Sort of a novelty in these stories. I think I rather like him, well, except for the thee and thou bit. Kind of pretentious, that.”

“It’s how people spoke back then,” Hermione said rather defensively. “It was used as the familiar case of the second person singular where today we would use the words you or your, though thee would be the objective case as opposed to thou, which is the nominative.”

“How do you stuff all that in your brain?” he said, looking mildly impressed.

Hermione blushed a lovely shade of pink and continued.

“The frog was carried into the dining room and was placed next to the princess’s plate. There he insisted upon eating from her golden dishes and drinking from her cup, and the king, stating the princess had made a promise, insisted that she permit the frog to do these things. Still, she made her displeasure and reluctance very obvious,” Hermione said.

“Okay, I can see not really wanting to eat the same food the frog is eating,” Ron said, “still, though, she’s all but throwing a tantrum.”

“I don’t think I’d particularly fancy drinking water a frog’s been sipping from either,” Harry said with a shudder. “Ron’s right, though; she’s Pansy Parkinson’s moral twin.”

“After dinner was over, the princess said she was very tired and wished to go to sleep, and the frog chimed in, ‘I too am tired, and as thou promised to let me sleep on thy pillow, thou must carry me to thy bedchamber also,’” Hermione went on.

“See, now right here, there’s a line and the frog’s crossing it,” Ron said.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “It’s a bit… unsavory, the frog demanding to sleep in the girl’s bed.”

“There do seem to be certain… connotations,” Hermione agreed, shuddering, “but the king agreed that if his daughter had promised to take the frog to bed, then she must keep her promise.”
“I hope she’s got a good wart remover potion,” Ron said grimly.

“The princess agreed but was barely able to tolerate carrying the frog up the stairs because it sickened and frightened her so. When she reached her bedroom, she put him down in a far corner of the room and thought that would satisfy him. ‘I want to be as comfortable as thou,’ the frog croaked testily. ‘Put me upon thy pillow or I shall tell thy father!’ And you see, this is where the story can go two different ways depending upon which version you read,” Hermione said.

“What’s way number one?” Ron asked.

“In one version of the story, the princess relents and puts the frog on her pillow, then kisses him good night,” Hermione said.

“Yuck,” Ron said. “That’s beyond disgusting and into downright disturbing.”

“When she woke up the next morning, instead of a frog there was a handsome prince standing in her room,” Hermione said.

“That had to be rather frightening,” Ron said, raising an eyebrow. “Handsome fellow or not, I’m betting no girl wants to wake up with a stranger hovering over her while she’s sleeping. What’s option number two?”

“Well, in that one, the princess picks up the frog from the corner, but she’s so angry at him because of all his demands that instead of putting him on her pillow, she throws him at the wall as hard as she can,” Hermione said.

“Ouch,” Ron said, shuddering. “Now that sounds more like Pansy. At least the brat princess had to live with frog guts splattered on her wall for the rest of her life. Those things are a pain to get out.”

“No,” Hermione said.

“She got the guts out? How? I tried everything I could think of when Snape made me clean up his dungeon after that little explosion when we were brewing that potion that had all the amphibian bits in it, and it just wouldn’t move,” Ron said.

“There weren’t any guts to remove. Instead, when the frog hit the wall, there was a great puff of smoke and a handsome prince appeared,” Hermione said.

“You’re kidding,” Ron said, his mouth hanging open. “In both stories, the same thing happens?”

“Yes. The prince explains that he’d been enchanted by a wicked fairy who was passing by his castle one day, and that only when a princess allowed him to eat from her plate and drink from her cup and sleep on her pillow would he be free of the curse,” Hermione said.

“Okay, so basically, the fairy took Mad-Eye Moody’s view on Transfiguration as punishment, although really being a frog is worse than a ferret. At least some girls think those are cute,” Ron said. “It doesn’t sound like the prince really did anything wrong, though, so why’d she do it?”

“The fairy was just wicked and didn’t need a reason, I suppose,” Hermione said.

“Fairly accurate, then,” Ron said. “It’s the sort of thing they’d do for fun, though he still shouldn’t have been able to talk after she transfigured him. But it doesn’t make sense. If she had to let him sleep on her pillow, it shouldn’t have broken the curse because all she did in the one story was smack him into the wall like a Bludger!”
“It doesn’t make sense,” Hermione agreed. “She was really trying to kill him, but somehow it broke the curse anyway.”

“Stupid,” Ron said, shaking his head. “Then what happened?”

“The prince asked her to marry him,” Hermione said.

“You’re joking?” Harry said, then laughed. “But… why?”

“Yeah,” Ron agreed. “I mean, she’s pretty and all, but she was a liar and a cheat and then tried to kill him on top of all that. Why would he want to marry her?”

“An excellent question,” Hermione said, and Harry noticed she had quite a large grin. “I guess what you’re saying is he really should have looked for a girl with more that just beauty to her credit, right?”

“I guess,” Ron said, though Harry just caught him whispering under his breath, “unless she was spectacularly hot.”

“The princess accepted,” Hermione said.

“Because, of course, she’d want to marry some fellow who just appeared from nowhere and proposed,” Ron said.

“Well, I do think he mentioned he was rich,” Hermione added.

“Now that explains it,” Ron agreed. “Just think, ol’ Pansy can have as many golden balls as she wants!”

“The next day they were married, and a great coach pulled up to the castle driven by a team of beautiful horses, and out of the carriage hopped the prince’s faithful servant, Heinrich,” Hermione said.

“Heinrich?” Ron asked. “He gets a name? Why’s he so special?”

“Or Henry, whichever you prefer,” Hermione said. “He’s sort of a personification of loyalty. He had been so sorry that his master the prince was turned into a frog that he had put three great bands of iron around his heart to keep it from shattering to pieces so that he could help the prince if he could. In fact, some of the versions of the story are called Iron Henry.”

“That’s disgusting,” Ron said. “He implanted iron bands in his body to keep his heart from breaking?”

“Yeah, and before anesthesia, too,” Harry chimed in.

“Anna who?” Ron asked.

“Anesthesia,” Harry corrected him. “It’s a Muggle medical thing that makes people sleep through operations and things, but it wasn’t around back when these stories took place.”

“The things Muggles think up. Hey, maybe Heinrich Henry or whatever his name is carried the frog to the door and did the pounding!” Ron suggested.

“You know, that would make a great deal of sense,” Hermione said, and the relief in her voice convinced Harry that the problem of the pounding frog really had been weighing heavily on her mind. “It’s the sort of thing a servant would do for a prince, too. I don’t suppose they usually knock
on doors for themselves. Well done, Ron!”

Ron blushed brightly and made a pleased noise in his throat. If that boy didn’t make a move on Hermione soon, Harry was going to slap him.

“As the princess and the prince…,” Hermione began.

“Neither of whom had proper names, which made them a perfect match,” Ron added.

“…drove back to the castle, the sound of metal breaking was heard. ‘Is the carriage going to bits?’ asked the prince, but Heinrich answered, ‘No, that was one of the bands around my heart breaking as my heart swells with joy that you are free!’” Hermione said.

“Rather house-elfish, isn’t he?” Ron said distastefully. “Besides, did the band break and then come rocketing out of the bloke’s chest? Because, really, getting hit in the face with an exploded, bloody iron band probably isn’t the best way to start off a honeymoon.”

“Twice more the sound of metal was heard, and each time the prince thought the carriage was falling to pieces, and each time Heinrich said one of the bands around his heart had snapped from happiness,” Hermione said.

“You’d think the prince would catch on after the first time, or at least the first two if he were a bit slow,” Ron said. “Still, I’m guessing the carriage really was falling apart because Heinrich hadn’t been oiling it or what have you, and he just didn’t want the prince to know.”

“And the prince and princess lived happily ever after,” Hermione ended.


“For once, the father really does seem to be the one intelligent one in the story,” Harry said.

“Yeah,” Ron agreed, “he got rid of the brat daughter by marrying her off to a dunderheaded dimwit and lived happily ever after with his other, hopefully more normal daughters,” Ron agreed.

“And the moral of the story is, if you’re a pretty princess, be as much of a brat as you like and smack frogs into walls because sooner or later one will turn into a prince,” Harry said, amused.

“Oh just kiss frogs and hope your lips don’t turn into giant, pus-filled warts,” Ron said. “It seems kissing solves just about everything in these stories: curses, over-sleeping, being dead…”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, thinking of Ginny hundreds of miles away and hoping she wasn’t kissing anyone else, as selfish as that might be.

No sooner did he start to look sad than a pillow whapped him on the side of the head.

“Hey!” Ron said sharply. “No deep thinking until at least morning, so quit it!”

Harry laughed and found himself more than happy to comply with the order. For some reason, that night’s steamed turnips tasted inexplicably delicious. It was almost like magic.
Darkness was starting to fall earlier and earlier, and it did nothing to lighten the sometimes dismal mood inside the tent the trio of friends had called home for months now. Harry did his best to think and rethink of any possible hiding place for the remaining Horcruxes, but a small, nagging corner of his brain was starting to believe their quest was futile. Ron was deeply homesick and starting to get on Harry’s nerves. At least, he thought, when this was all over Ron would have a home to go back to. Harry had lost the pathetic home he’d had with his aunt and uncle, and they’d be lucky if the Death Eaters hadn’t blown it to smithereens in retaliation anyway. He had absolutely no idea where he was going to live. Sirius’s house, he supposed with a shudder. Hermione said nothing about the possibility that her parents might never remember her, but he knew that, even if it was a distant chance that their memories would be permanently altered, it was still there. Consequently, cheerful thoughts were becoming hard to come by. When the mood got this bad, there was only one thing that could lift their spirits.

“Hermione,” Harry asked, “would you tell us another story?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Hermione said, tucking her hair behind her ears as she looked up from her little beaded purse. “I’ve been trying to find that book on fifteenth century wizards in Britain. It’s possible that one of the Horcruxes might be hidden in a place that has to do with a major event in wizarding history, but I can’t find the stupid thing. I think it’s lodged somewhere behind the extra jumpers.”

She gave the bag a vicious shake, and a racket of tumbling objects made Harry wince.

“Reparo,” Hermione said tiredly as the sound of tinkling glass being pulled back together again came from the bag.

“Come on, Hermione,” Ron said. “We need some diversion, and those stories are loads better than what we can get on the WWN. Who wants to listen to Celestina Warbeck caterwauling… well, besides Mum, bless her heart.”

Hermione regarded him carefully, and Harry too noted that Ron was once again lapsing into homesickness.

“All right then,” Hermione said, relenting. “I’ll come up with something.”

Ron smiled at her, and she flushed a little. Harry was starting to grow weary of the endless foreplay between the two of them. If they were still searching by the time Christmas came, he was going to lock them in the tiny pantry with a very large sprig of mistletoe, Nargle infestation or not.

“Once upon a time,” Ron began expectantly. “Then what?”

Hermione laughed, then began.

“Once upon a time, in a kingdom far away, there lived a married couple who very much wanted a child,” Hermione said.

“Were they a king and queen? Because that usually doesn’t go so well, as I recall,” Ron said.

“No, they were a poor couple,” Hermione said. “Finally, the wife was with child.”

“With child?” Ron said. “Odd way of putting it.”
“It just means she was pregnant,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but when I eat steak and kidney pie, I don’t say I’m ‘with pie,’” Ron said, drawing little quotation marks around the words. “Or that Heinrich fellow in that one with the frog, no one said he was ‘with iron bands’ when he stuck them around his heart.”

“I still don’t get how he did that,” Harry said, shaking his head.

“Well obviously, no, you wouldn’t say that, but then it’s not really the same thing, is it?” Hermione said huffily.

“I wish I really was with pie,” Ron said gloomily and looking at the empty kitchen. “Maybe with salad and with pudding as well.”

“Would that count as triplets?” Harry asked, feigning seriousness.

Hermione gave them both a withering look and continued.

“However, the woman’s health was not good, and she began to feel faint and sick,” Hermione said. “Her husband asked if there was anything he could do, and she said, ‘Oh, how I would love to eat some rampion!’”

“Rampion? What’s that?” Ron asked.

“It’s like a kind of lettuce,” Hermione said. “In some of the other versions of the stories it’s a radish she wants, or parsley.”

“Of all the things she could crave, she picks lettuce?” Ron said, then snorted. “How boring is that? Why not go for ice cream or sirloin or something? When Mum was pregnant with the twins, she told me she had this phase when she ate fish curry every day. She still blames how spicy it was for how rebellious Fred and George wound up.”

“Even if it was only a sort of lettuce, I suppose the rampion was very rare, though,” Hermione said, “because there was only one place to get it, and that was a garden surrounded by a high wall and owned by a very powerful witch named Mother Gothel.”

“Then how could she crave it if she’d never had it?” Ron asked.

Hermione seemed to consider this carefully.

“I don’t quite know,” Hermione said. “Maybe she’d had some once somehow, or maybe the witch performed a spell to make her want it very badly.”

“Yet another one of the infamous loose ends, eh?” Ron said.

“I suppose. In any case, the husband, fearing for his wife’s health, climbed over the wall and stole some of the rampion,” Hermione went on.

“Why didn’t he just ask the witch if he could have some?” Ron asked.

“I guess he was afraid of her,” Hermione said, shrugging.

“Yeah, he’s terrified of talking to her, but climbing over her wall and stealing stuff in the middle of the night? Oh, that’s bloody brilliant, that is. We have yet another dunderhead to add to the collection,” Ron said triumphantly. “Granted, he’s still not on a par with the one who couldn’t figure out who the girl was because she was wearing a different dress, but still, fairly dumb.”
“However, he wasn’t caught,” Hermione said.

“Pretty poor defensive spells she had set up along her perimeter, then,” Ron said, shaking his head. “She could have done with a lesson or two from us.”

“Perhaps,” Hermione said, and Harry noted that while she didn’t correct Ron by noting that “us” was really just her, she did look a little deflated. “The husband took the rampion back to his wife, and she made it into a salad and ate it. This made things both better and worse. While the rampion was delicious and exactly what she needed, it also created a burning desire in her for more.”

“She sounds like she’s a rampion addict,” Harry said, raising an eyebrow.

“Sad, that,” Ron said. “Pregnant woman strung out on lettuce.”

Hermione gave them a look that suggested she thought they were both insane, but continued on.

“The wife begged her husband to get her more rampion or else she would die, and reluctantly, he agreed to scale the wall again to steal more rampion,” Hermione said.

“Just think. This whole problem could have been avoided with a decent vegetable market,” Harry said.

“Or a lettuce addiction support group,” Ron agreed.

“Unfortunately, the witch had noticed her garden had been visited by a thief, and when the man climbed the wall that night and dropped to the other side, there the witch stood, waiting for him,” Hermione said.

“That’s not going to end well,” Harry said.

“Reminds me of McGonagall in a bad mood,” Ron agreed. “Hey, you know, ‘Mother Gothel’ and ‘McGonagall’ do sound something alike, don’t they?”

“Actually, it’s just a common nickname for a godmother in Germany, and that’s where this story comes from,” Hermione explained. “Still, it is sort of a funny coincidence, isn’t it? Anyway, the witch was furious at the man and was on the point of killing him, but he fell to his knees and begged her forgiveness, explaining that he had taken the rampion only because his pregnant wife was nearly on the point of death from desiring it.”

“I don’t know that I’ve ever heard that particular defense given for theft before,” Harry said. “Pretty sure there’s no precedent there.”

“The witch agreed not to kill him,” Hermione said.

“Oh, well, good for him then,” Ron said, smiling.

“Instead, she said that as payment for the rampion, she would accept the child,” Hermione said.

“Wait. You’re telling me the going price for a head of fancy lettuce was a kid?” Ron said, his eyes goggling.

“In this particular case, yes,” Hermione said.

“But he couldn’t possibly have agreed to trade his baby for a few poxy leaves of this stuff,” Ron said, his brow furrowed.
“I’m afraid that’s exactly what he did,” Hermione said.

“Okay, we’ve got a father who actually beats the one in that stupid story about the gold spinning elf for worst father award,” Ron said. “That’s beyond horrid.”

“Still, if you see it from his perspective, he thought if he let the witch kill him, the wife would die from not having the rampion, and so would the child,” Hermione said. “It’s a difficult moral situation.”

“He should have just gone to a ruddy salad bar,” Ron said, shaking his head. “So what happened?”

“The witch let the man go with the rampion, and when he told his wife what had happened, she was stricken with great grief,” Hermione said.

“Should be, greedy pig,” Ron said.

“Well, she’s not the one who bartered away her firstborn for a salad, you know!” Hermione said defensively.

“No, but the husband wouldn’t have been put in that position if it hadn’t been for his wife demanding the stupid rampion,” Ron said, and rather loudly Harry noticed. “Oh, poor me! If you don’t steal the vegetables out of the very dangerous witch’s garden, I’m going to up and die and it’ll be your fault!” Yeah, that’s likely.”

“You know, the story never even says that she knew he was breaking into the witch’s garden,” Hermione said coldly.

“What did she think, then? That he’d become a green grocer overnight and was dipping into his vast private stores of rampion?” Ron shot back.

“Time out!” Harry interrupted them. “Can we all agree that the witch is basically the one at fault here? I mean, she’s the one asking for payment in human beings.”

Ron looked at him, considering for a moment, then sighed. “Fine. Swapping babies for veggies is vile, I’ll agree on that.”

“So will I,” Hermione said, “though I do wish we’d see a decent witch in here occasionally. It’s all blatant prejudice.”

“Whatever,” Ron said with a wave of his hand. “What happened when the kid was born?”

“True to his word, the father delivered his newborn baby girl to the witch,” Hermione said, “and he never laid eyes on her again.”

“Not sure he’s that much of a waste, but what happened to the daughter? The witch didn’t eat her or anything,” Ron said, a note of concern in his voice.

“No, it turns out the witch really did want to have a daughter. She named her Rapunzel after the rampion plant,” Hermione said.

“But rampion and Rapunzel don’t really sound that much alike,” Ron said.

“Well, they sound a little alike,” Hermione said.

“I suppose it’s better than calling her Cabbage Leaf or Turnip Head or something,” Ron said, “but still, why not Rampiona? Rampionette? Rampionella?”
“This from the boy who thinks Hermione is a tragic name,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Hey, I’ve got it! Rampo!” Ron said. “The witch can raise her to hunt down bad guys with a semi-automatic machine gun in the jungle!”

“I take it that was another one of Fred and George’s illicit movie rentals?” Hermione said in a voice that was perhaps a trifle too dry as Harry laughed so hard he actually fell off his chair.

“Yeah,” Ron said, grinning. “Good times, there. They nicked some Muggle popcorn from a cinema, too, and we had a day of it while Mum and Dad were in Hogsmeade once.”

“Charming,” Hermione said. “Nothing like minors viewing violent material without parental knowledge while stealing snacks.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, sighing blissfully. “I miss that.”

“Going back to the story you’re currently listening to, the witch proved to be deeply jealous when it came to her daughter’s affections. This wasn’t helped by the fact Rapunzel was incredibly beautiful even as a little girl, so much so that the witch feared someone would fall in love with her and marry her,” Hermione said.

“Sounds a little like Mum’s opinion of Ginny,” Ron said.

Harry tried not to blush to the roots of his hair, but he knew he was failing miserably.

“I think most mothers worry about things like that, but this witch took it too far. When Rapunzel turned twelve years old, the witch spirited her away into the darkest part of the forest.”

“Uh oh. That never winds up going well for girls,” Ron said.

“Indeed it didn’t. She shut her up in a room at the top of a very tall, round tower with no doors and no staircase, and only one small window,” Hermione said.

“What the hell? It sounds like Azkaban minus the Dementors!” Ron said, incensed.

“Yeah, and given the circumstances I’m not sure she’d need Dementors to go crazy,” Harry said.

Hermione nodded in agreement and appeared to be about to go on, but Ron was frowning.

“How’d she go to the loo?” he asked suddenly.

Hermione blinked in silent disbelief.

“No, really. They all had outside ones back then, didn’t they? So if she’s stuck at the top of a tall tower with no way in or out, how’d she use the toilet?” Ron said earnestly as though this were of the utmost importance.

“Really, Ronald!” Hermione said, annoyed. “This isn’t part of the plot!”

“No, but it’s bothering me!” Ron insisted. “I’m not going to be able to concentrate until I figure it out.”

“Oh, fine,” Hermione said in defeat. “We’ll assume she had a chamber pot. Happy?”
“Eh, it’ll do,” Ron said, shrugging. “Still, there’d have to be a right mess under the one window.”

“That’s… actually, that’s a really disturbing image considering what happens later,” Hermione said, making a face. “Anyway, the witch used to visit Rapunzel each day to bring her food and water.”

“Well, at least she visited her,” Ron said. “That’s something, at any rate.”

“Yes, but the way she visited her was really rather odd. Rapunzel had very beautiful, very long golden hair that she wore in a braid, and the witch would walk through the forest and stand at the base of the tower and call up, ‘Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your golden hair!’ Then Rapunzel would loop her hair twice through a hook next to the window and lower the braid to the ground so the witch could climb up,” Hermione explained.

Ron stared. Hermione blithely returned his puzzled gaze, waiting patiently for the flood of questions that was about to occur.

“I’m trying to decide exactly which part of that ridiculous image I should attack first,” Ron said, “and it’s hard, because there’s so many.”

“Take your time,” Hermione said, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Fine, let’s start with the basic one. Why doesn’t the witch just fly a broomstick through the window rather than climbing up her poor kid’s hair?” Ron asked.

“An excellent question for which I have absolutely no answer,” Hermione said. “Apparently, witches don’t use brooms in this story.”

“Alright, we’ve got a broomphobic witch or some such,” Ron said. “Now, how tall is this tower supposed to be? Two, maybe three feet off the ground? Because I thought you said it was a very tall tower.”

“Different stories say different heights, but it’s at least a good thirty feet tall or so,” Hermione said. “In fact, the shape of the tower, when looked at from a symbolic perspective, could be seen as a representation of… ehm… you know, that thing the spindle in ‘Sleeping Beauty’ represented. Which really underlines the futility of the witch locking up Rapunzel so she won’t meet anyone of the opposite sex.”

“Putting aside that,” Ron said, “not that a thirty foot tall… one of those… isn’t making me feel a bit inferior, but how long was this girl’s hair then?”

“Okay, calculating the sideways motions of plaits on top of the thirty foot drop and the bit wound twice around the hook, and assuming she didn’t have her head pressed directly against the windowsill, mathematically speaking, it would have to be,” Hermione paused, and Harry saw her ticking things off on her fingers, “I’d say, give or take for texture, probably at least forty or so feet long.”

“Forty… feet… long,” Ron said slowly. “You do realize that’s impossible, right?”

“Well, obviously,” Hermione said, “but then so is sleeping for a hundred years or spinning straw into gold or surviving being eaten by a wolf. These stories aren’t meant to be taken literally, you know.”

“But she wouldn’t be able to move,” Ron said, punctuating the last word with a stab of his finger. “Her hair’d weigh a ton! And in that tiny little room, where is she going to stuff that mess? She’d be tripping over it every few seconds even if it didn’t take up every cubic foot of space! And how long would it take to dry after a wash? And what about shampoo? The witch would need to bring it by
Harry looked in some worry at his friend, who was currently so red in the face that his freckles were entirely camouflaged.

“Ron, breathe,” Harry said, patting him on the back. “It’s a story.”

“But it makes absolutely no bloody sense at all! Why doesn’t the witch use a ladder? Why does she climb up the girl’s braid, because I don’t care how many times she wraps it around a hook, that’s gotta hurt! And does she have constant, incessant migraines? Does her scalp have bulging muscles?” Ron let go in a burst, then sat panting.

“Done?” Hermione asked kindly after a moment.

“Yeah, I think so,” Ron said. “Okay, go on.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yeah, I want to know what happens to ol’ Rampo,” Ron said.

“Say, I just thought of something,” Harry said, sounding surprised. “What girl do we know who’s got the most hair?”

Ron looked around uncomfortably, avoiding Hermione’s eyes, before saying, “Ehm, you talking length or mass?”

Hermione sniffed at him in disdain, then said, “Luna, obviously.”

“Yeah, who lives in a big, tall, round tower,” Harry said. “I mean, that’s not exactly a common floor plan. Isn’t it kind of an odd coincidence?”

“Huh,” Ron said. “Yeah, it is, now you mention it. But her dad’s place has a door at least, and Luna’s hair isn’t anywhere near long enough to use as a makeshift ladder, but still, yeah, kind of weird.”

“It’s odd, I grant you, but still, it’s only a coincidence,” Hermione said, though she looked a little unnerved, but she pressed on. “Years passed, and Rapunzel grew in beauty and grace…”

“…and hair…,” Ron added.

“…and all continued just as the witch planned. Rapunzel had never seen a single other human being besides the witch in all her memory, and though she was often lonely, she never dreamed there were any other humans in the world but the witch and herself,” Hermione said.

“That has got to give you a warped view of the world,” Ron said, “with no company but that wacko around.”

“I suppose it would,” Hermione said, and something about her tone made Harry wonder if she was still thinking of the Lovegoods. “Rapunzel also had a very beautiful singing voice, and this proved to be the witch’s downfall. One day, a prince was riding through the forest, hunting a doe, when he heard the ethereally beautiful voice of an unknown girl floating on the breeze.”

“Yeah, and the song she sang went something like this,” Ron said, then, in an awful, out of tune falsetto he warbled, “Oh, I wiiiiish I weeeeeeem’t stuck up iiiin this tooooooooower! Does aaaannnyboooddy have the pooooooower to save me from this stinking booooweeeer? My haiiiir’s
reaaaally looooong, buuut not my sooooong!"

“Yes, well, I doubt Rapunzel had learned the finer points of Aerosmith’s power ballads so well as that,” Hermione said, rubbing her ears.

“Who’s Arrow Smith?” Ron asked.

“Nevermind. The prince followed the sound of her singing and came to the strange tower in the middle of the forest. He was just wondering why someone would build a tower in the middle of nowhere when he heard the sound of the witch approaching, and he hid himself in a cluster of bushes to watch what would happen,” Hermione said.


“Does it really count as peeping if the girl is in a tower so high that it’s impossible to see anything?” Ron asked reasonably.

“The witch called out, ‘Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your golden hair,’ and sure enough, a few seconds later the golden braid descended and the witch climbed up it and through the window,” Hermione said.

“And the prince got straight out of there because that was just too bizarre,” Ron provided helpfully, “except I’m sure he didn’t because that would require a brain, and no one in these stories has that particular commodity.”

“You’re catching on well,” Hermione said with an impish grin. “He was so intrigued he stayed and waited until the braid reappeared and the witch descended and went off through the forest once more. When he was quite sure she was gone, he decided to try his own luck. He walked to the base of the tower…”

“…mind the poo there, mate…” Ron chimed in.

“…and called up, ‘Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your golden hair,’ and a few moments later, the braid emerged and he used it as a rope to climb up the tower and through her window,” Hermione said.

“Uh, Hermione, did this fellow have some sort of hormonal problem?” Ron asked.

“No,” Hermione said carefully. “Why?”

“Then why did his voice sound exactly like an old woman’s?” he asked. “Or is Rapunzel just hard of hearing or deeply stupid?”

“Ron! She’s a very sheltered, naive girl who’s never heard a human voice before other than the witch’s and her own and doesn’t even know that other human beings exist! If she heard someone speaking, she was bound to be curious or assume it was the witch with a bad cold or something!” Hermione said.

“So, considering the witch just left three minutes ago without a cold, she falls into the ‘deeply stupid’ category, then,” Ron said.

Hermione sighed so loudly in suppressed fury that Harry wondered if it was audible outside the tent.

“In any case, when the prince climbed through the window, Rapunzel was absolutely terrified because she’d never seen a man before,” she said.
“Okay, now that I can buy,” Ron said. “Poor kid.”

“I thought you said she was stupid?” Hermione said disdainfully.

“Well, yeah, but still,” Ron said, blushing. “She didn’t do anyone any harm or anything.”

Hermione smiled a little and went on.

“The prince quickly tried to reassure her that he meant her no harm, and he soon came to realize that she had spent all her life in deep seclusion. He began to tell her stories of the world outside of the forest, of people and cities and ships and a thousand other wonders that she couldn’t properly understand but marveled over, and she said she very much wanted to see all these things,” Hermione said.

“You know,” Harry said slowly. “That’s kind of sad, really.”

“Yeah,” Ron said.

“Alright, I’m sorry I called her stupid. Not her fault she’s locked up by the world’s most over-protective mum.”

“The prince promised to return the next day and bring with him a skein of silk that she could use to begin making a ladder, then he climbed back down her hair and rode away on his horse,” Hermione said.

“Why doesn’t he just come back with a ladder?” Ron asked.

“Well, I don’t know. I expect it would have to be a really tall ladder,” Hermione said.

“How about a rope, then?” Ron suggested.

“See, now that would make sense, but there needs to be a passage of time in the story,” Hermione said.

“Why?” Ron asked.

“Well, Rapunzel has to fall in love with the prince… among other things,” she said.

“That sounds interesting,” Ron said. “The prince is a man with a plan, I take it.”

“Actually, maybe he really is,” Hermione said, and Harry could practically see the cogs turning behind her eyes. “He has to very gradually earn her trust, and he does so by bringing a single skein of silk with him each time he visits, insuring that she gets to know him so well that she’ll prefer him to anyone else she might meet in the outside world. It could be a form of subtle manipulation of her affections on his part.”

“Or not,” Ron said. “Maybe he just couldn’t find a rope.”

Hermione seemed to think this over for a minute, then shrugged and muttered, “Works for me.”

“So, Rapunzel starts knotting together skeins of silk, of all things, for a ladder, because it wouldn’t do at all for her to climb down a rope made of shredded bedsheets that were probably already in the room,” Ron said. “Then what?”

“Well, that’s where the story can go one of three different ways,” Hermione said. “In one version, after several months, the witch is visiting Rapunzel in her tower and finds the ladder she’s making under her bed.”
“Busted,” Ron said ruefully. “Mum sort of found out about Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes the way. Well, really the cat did. He was nosing about under the bed and ate a stray Canary Cream while Mum was dusting.”

“Do they work on cats?” Hermione asked.

“And how! Poor thing sprouted feathers and then tried to chase himself around the room. Nearly wound up eating himself,” Ron said, chuckling.

“Sort of like the cat that ate the canary, only in reverse… and forward,” Harry said, looking both repulsed and intrigued.

“Yeah. Mum nearly had a heart attack over that one, then nearly matched it with an aneurysm when the feathers all molted off in an explosion around the room. She claims she’s still picking up stray ones,” Ron said. “Anyway, you said there were three ways the story could go. What about the other ones?”

“Well, in one she does something that really you can only call silly. One day, after she’s pulled up the witch, she asks, ‘Why are you so much heavier than the prince?’” Hermione said.

“As slip-ups go,” Harry said, “that’s the equivalent of hitting thirty miles of pavement covered in jam.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty bad, but I can still kind of imagine somebody saying that off-hand if they didn’t have any experience at all with lying,” Ron said.

“Probably true,” Hermione said. “The last one is, well, rather less innocent. One day when the witch is visiting, Rapunzel asks her, ‘Why is my dress getting so much tighter around my middle?’”

“What, was the prince bringing her lots of chocolates or something?” Ron asked, confused. “I mean, really, she can’t get much exercise stuck in one room in a tower.”

“No, she was pregnant,” Hermione said, “though she didn’t know what was happening.”

“And once again these stories go to a disturbing place,” Ron said. “The prince gets her pregnant and she doesn’t even really know what she’s doing?”

“Pretty much,” Hermione admitted. “It’s sort of ironic that the innocence Mother Gothel insisted on left Rapunzel so ignorant about the world that the very thing she was afraid would happen to her did happen as a result of her ignorance.”

“Poor kid,” Ron said again, shaking his head again. “Well, in any case, the witch finds out. What’d she do?”

“She went into a crazed fury and screamed, ‘Oh, you wicked, wicked child! You have met a man in spite of all I have done for you!’” Hermione said, making her voice thin and croaky.

“Yeah, locking you up in solitary confinement, lying to you about the existence of other human beings, probably making her go crazy.” Ron counted off on her fingers. “I’m thinking the wicked one here isn’t the child.”

“I tend to agree,” Hermione said. “Then, the witch wrapped Rapunzel's braid three times around her right hand, and with a great pair of shears in her left, cut her hair off quite short.”

“That may have been an improvement,” Ron said with a shrug.
“Then the witch forced her to climb down her own braid and spirited her away to a lonely desert and abandoned her there to fend for herself,” Hermione went on.

“Whoa, she made the pregnant girl who’s never seen the world go die in a desert? That’s deeply wrong,” Ron said.

“I didn’t say she died, did I?” Hermione said.

“Oh, well, that’s a little better than,” Ron said, calming down.

“The witch climbed back up the braid, pulling it up behind her, and waited for the arrival of the prince. When he called out, ‘Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your golden hair,’ he climbed up the braid once more, only to find when he went through the window that Rapunzel was gone and the braid was hanging next to the witch. ‘She is gone, and you shall never set eyes upon her again!’ she screamed, her eyes blazing. In despair, the prince flung himself from the tower,” Hermione said.

“What a way to go,” Ron said, grimacing. “Take a header off a thirty foot tower into a several-years-high pile of poo.”

Harry laughed so hard that Hermione actually punched him in the ribs to get him to stop.

“The prince did not die, though, because a rose bush planted at the base of the tower caught his fall,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, I hear they thrive on manure,” Ron said, and Harry tried ineffectively to hide a guffaw.

“Unfortunately, the great thorns of the bush scratched his eyes so badly that he was left entirely blind,” Hermione said.

“Oh, come on! Now that’s not fair,” Ron said indignantly. “The witch punishes the prince with blindness and Rapunzel just gets off with a bad haircut!”

“Well, really, the witch didn’t touch the prince,” Hermione said. “He actually did the damage to himself. Also, I can’t help wondering if there isn’t something sort of Oedipal about the whole thing, what with the gouging out of eyes. I mean, several scholars suggest that eyes are the equivalent of… ehm, nevermind.”

Hermione blushed once more, and both Ron and Harry, who had taken the intellectual leap, gave sympathetic whimpers of shared pain.

“The prince began to wander blindly from place to place, desperate for some word of Rapunzel, but he could find no sign of her,” Hermione went on. “A few years passed, and at long last he came to the desert.”

“And stumbled over her bleached bones left out in the sun,” Ron said. “The end.”

“Not quite. Just as he was on the point of dying of thirst, he heard the sound of a far off voice singing a lullaby, and he recognized it as Rapunzel’s. He stumbled towards it, and Rapunzel saw him and cried out for joy. He collapsed into her arms, and when she saw his ruined eyes, she began to weep, but the moment her tears touched his eyes, they healed, and he could see perfectly well not only Rapunzel but the twin children she had borne him,” Hermione said.

“So, somehow, when she starts blubbering, that’s a cure for blindness? She really should bottle that. Make a fortune,” Ron said. “And on top of that, it wasn’t just one kid but twins?”
“That’s how the story goes,” Hermione said shrugging.

“Yes, because one wouldn’t be quite mad enough. She’s got to wander in the wilderness for years, in the desert, without any survival skills and probably mad as a March hare, and goes through a full term pregnancy that results in not one but two kids,” Ron said. “Don’t you think that’s a mite of an overkill?”

“Possibly, but it sets me wondering what her story was during those months,” Hermione said, tilting her head curiously. “That could be very interesting. I mean, really, how did she survive?”

“Tragically, the world may never know,” Ron said solemnly. “So, a second set of Fred and George show up, then what?”

“The usual,” Hermione said. “The prince takes her and the children back to his kingdom where he marries her properly and they…”

“Lived happily ever after,” Ron and Harry chorused together.

“Yeah, but what about the witch?” Ron asked.

“The story doesn’t mention her again, just like the parents,” Hermione said.

“Maybe the braid got knocked off when Prince Light-on-His-Feet took a header so she got stranded forever in Poo Tower,” Ron said. “It’d be a fitting end, that.”

“Ron, you have such a way with words,” Hermione said, giving him a fondly exasperated look.

“Yep,” he said, sprawling back on the couch. “That’s me. The Gryffindor bard.”

“You know what I’m trying to figure out? What exactly the moral of the story is,” Harry said.

“Whaddaya mean, mate?” Ron asked, sprawling across the couch.

“Actually, that’s really intriguing, Harry,” Hermione said. “Most of these stories do have a fairly clear moral to them: patience and hard work bring reward in ‘Cinderella’ or the importance of keeping promises in ‘The Frog Prince’…”

“Yeah, but what exactly are you supposed to take away from this one?” Harry said.

“Don’t steal rampion?” Ron suggested. “Extremely long hair is both a way to meet a possible love interest and perilous to your health? Towers without doors in them are fire hazards?”

“There wasn’t any fire in this,” Hermione said, confused.

“Yeah, but there could have been,” Ron said sagely. “Exactly how would she have gotten out if there had been? A tower with no doors? That’s a firetrap, that is.”

“You know, I think that’s pretty close to what the story’s actually trying to say,” Hermione said thoughtfully.

“Really? Mother Gothel needed to install a sprinkler system?” Ron said, surprised.

“No,” Hermione said. “That by over-protecting their children, parents put them in even greater dangers sometimes than the outside world might normally offer.”

“I suppose,” Harry said slowly, and he couldn’t help thinking about Mrs. Weasley and her adamant
attempts to “save” them, even if it meant condemning them all to a world with Voldemort in it and a
price on each of their heads… well, except perhaps for Ron. Her intentions were the best, he knew,
but her panic was short-sighted, not unlike the witch in the story.

“Maybe,” Ron said, “but I still think it’s got something to do with the dangers of leafy vegetables
myself. I never did much like lettuce. It always seems so pointless, just lying there on a sandwich, not
doing anything except being green.”

“Yes, Ronald,” Hermione said, pursing her lips. “I’m sure the perils of fresh produce have inspired
any number of creators of classic fairy tales.”

“Hey, don’t laugh,” Ron said. “Remember, that pumpkin Ashyweeper was riding in split to bits,
didn’t it?”

“Well, yes, but…” Hermione began.

“And Snow White almost got offed by an apple,” Harry added.

“That’s true, but still…,” Hermione said, frowning.

“Now this one’s father nearly gets killed over some sort of posh lettuce,” Ron said firmly. “Next
thing you know, there’ll be enchanted beans or something.”

“Actually, there really is a story about enchanted beans,” Hermione said, her face becoming more
and more disturbed. “Now I’m wondering what the connection is between all the fruit and vegetable
imagery.”

“And I’m wondering about enchanted beans,” Ron said. “Give us another, yeah?”

“We’ve got to be up in a few hours to move camp before dawn,” Hermione reminded him.

“Oh, I suppose my curiosity can wait a bit,” he said, yawning widely. “Night all.”

“Good night,” Hermione said, climbing into her bed.

Harry followed, so tired he could barely lift the blanket. However, he found himself restless that
night, plagued by dreams of Ginny, high in Gryffindor Tower, which somehow now had no door
and only one window, her long red hair gleaming in the sunlight as she waited for him to hear her
song.
“Nothing,” Harry said dejectedly as he closed the tent door behind him.

“Nothing?” Ron said, his tone edging towards anger. “Again?”

“Every shop is locked,” he said, wringing the rain out his soaking invisibility cloak before flopping down on the couch.

“What about a pub?” Ron asked.

“Those places are too packed to be sure I wouldn’t get trampled by someone,” Harry said, getting aggravated. “You know that!”

“But I’m hungry!” Ron whined.

“We’re all hungry,” Hermione said, not looking up from her book, though Harry could almost swear she was on the same page as when he’d left three hours before. “It’s not like Harry’s taking food out of your mouth for himself, Ron.”

“Whatever,” Ron said, curling up into a miserable ball on the couch.

Harry frowned, a sharp retort on the tip of his tongue, but he shook his head instead, keeping quiet. Nerves were frayed enough as it was, and there was no point in adding to the general bickering. Hermione, for her part, was glancing back and forth between the two boys, a thoughtful look on her face that bordered on embarrassment.

“Care for a story?” she ventured, turning a bit pink.

Ron shrugged non-committally, but Harry said, “Why not? It’s better than picking each other to pieces.”

“Well, with that glowing encouragement, who could resist?” Hermione said, making a sour face.

“What was that one you mentioned the other night?” Ron said, sitting up a little straighter. “The one about magic tomatoes?”

“Magic beans, you mean,” Hermione said, and her features smoothed into a smile.

“Yeah, I knew it was some sort of vegetable,” Ron said. “Let’s have that one, then.”

“Technically, tomatoes are fruits, but we’ll leave off on it,” Hermione said indulgently. “All right then. Once upon…”

“…a time,” Ron cut in, and Harry could tell he was already starting to become less petulant.

“Yes, Ron, in a country far away, there lived…,” Hermione began.

“A king whose wife dies?” Ron asked.

“No,” Hermione said.

“A fairly dunder-brained girl who was very pretty?” Ron suggested.
“No,” Hermione said, giving him a quizzical look.

Ron looked even more puzzled than Hermione did.

“See, I thought there was a pattern to these things,” he said, shaking his head. “I guess not. Go on, then.”

“There lived a very poor mother and her son,” Hermione said.

“Mark my words,” Ron said, turning to Harry. “He’s going to wind up being a right idiot.”

“Apparently some things do have a pattern,” Harry heard Hermione say quietly before going on. “They lived in a very small house with almost nothing to their names except a cow named Milky White.”

Ron blinked in surprise.

“Seriously?” he said, sounding stunned.

“Yes, what’s so odd about that?” Hermione asked, completely puzzled.

“What’s odd is that it isn’t odd at all,” Ron said. “That’s a perfectly understandable name for a cow. I mean, it makes perfect sense for the cow to be called Milky White. No, wait… was it a brown cow?”

“Not that I know of,” Hermione said.

“A sensible name? There’s hope for the Muggles yet,” Ron said to Harry, beaming in pleasure. “I was beginning to doubt it.”

“Well, be prepared for a double shock because the boy’s name is Jack,” Hermione said.

“You’ve been holding out on us,” Harry said, “giving us all the odd ones first. Is this story really going to be normal?”

“Because that might be boring,” Ron said, then immediately grinned sheepishly when Hermione shot him a disgruntled look.

“Anyway, one day Jack’s mother no longer had enough money to buy food or pay their rent, so she told her son, ‘You must go into the village and sell Milky White. Get the best price you can for her, for that money will be all we have to live upon for the rest of our lives,’” Hermione said, adopting a rather McGonagall-like tone for the mother’s voice.

“Well, it’s not much of a plan, but it does work out logically,” Ron said. “So far, so good.”

“Jack, who was rather an odd boy…,” Hermione said.

“I think this is the point when maybe things get less logical,” Harry chimed in.

“… took Milky White down the road to the village, unhappy at the thought of having to sell the cow at all and worried that he would make a mess of the whole business and ruin their lives,” Hermione said.

“I know how he feels,” Ron said, grimacing. “Scary, all that responsibility.”

“At least you’re not alone in it,” Hermione said, giving him an encouraging smile.
“Suppose so,” he said, still looking glum. “So what’d our boy Jack do?”

“Well, he fully intended to go into town, but on the road he met a tiny little man who seemed very interested in the cow,” Hermione said. “‘What are you going to do with her?’ the little man asked, and when Jack said he was going to sell it, the little man offered to buy it.”

“Bit of good luck there,” Ron said, brightening up.

“Yes, but the little man had no money,” Hermione said. “Instead, he said, ‘I have with me a great treasure: three magic beans! They will bring you fabulous wealth if you plant them. I will give you these beans in return for the cow.’”

Ron looked at Harry.

“The nitwit took the bait, didn’t he,” Ron said knowingly.

“If you mean did he trade the cow for the beans, then yes, he did,” Hermione said. “Jack went running back to his mother, overjoyed at the deal he had made, believing it to be a wonderful bargain to trade the cow for three magical beans.”

“If they were magic, the little man would have planted them himself and gotten rich rather than trading them for an under-fed cow,” Ron said.

“Maybe, but maybe not,” Hermione said mysteriously. “Jack’s mother was of your opinion though and yelled at him quite a long time, telling him that now they had no food and would starve to death.”

“Pity’s sake, Mum, lay off the kid a bit,” Ron said defensively. “He’s not the one bilking people out of cows by shoving worthless beans at naive farm boys. He’s just a bit… dim. Like every other fellow in these stories. You know, I think that’s the real moral of these things: all males are genetically stupid.”

“Perhaps Jack wasn’t quite so stupid as you think,” Hermione said. “Jack’s mother ended by throwing the beans out the window in a fit of temper and telling her son to go to bed.”

“Makes me a little homesick,” Ron said wistfully. “Replace the beans with Puking Pastilles and you’ve got a typical day at the Burrow.”

Harry gave his friend a sympathetic slug to the shoulder, hoping that Hermione’s story would cease to resemble Mrs. Weasley quite so closely.

“However, during the night, a very strange thing happened,” Hermione said, using her very best melodramatically secretive tone. “The beans grew.”

“Why’s that so weird?” Ron said. “All of ‘em grow.”

“But not all of them grow thousands of feet into the air overnight!” she said triumphantly.

“Thousands of feet?” Ron asked, perplexed.

“Yes, a great, giant beanstalk grew right up through the clouds,” Hermione said. “You see, they really were magic beans.”

Ron twisted his head one way and then the other as though trying to decide something.

“So… they ate beans the rest of their lives?” he finally asked. “They’d need rather a lot of anti-
“Boys.” Hermione grumbled. “No, Ronald, they didn’t eat the beans. Jack climbed the beanstalk!”

“What’d he want to do that for?” Ron said, honestly puzzled, and Harry had to admit that he was with Ron on this one. “I mean, it’s not anchored to anything on top, so wouldn’t it just fall over and send him toppling to a very messy and bean-covered death thousands of feet below?”

“Actually, the physics behind the beanstalk are rather interesting, now you mention it,” Hermione said. “I suppose it would have to be a fairly rigid stalk to permit climbing in the first place, and regardless of circumference, unless it was extremely wide in radius, the wind currents found at upper altitudes would tend to make it sway and, if it was overly rigid, snap. Of course there’s always the possibility that the top was anchored to something…”

“Like what? The pearly gates?” Harry said with a giggle.

“Be an interesting way to arrive in heaven, wouldn’t it? ‘Oy, St. Peter! I’m not dead, just visiting via beanstalk. Care to go out for a pint?’” Ron said, laughing.

“What he saw was even more bizarre, because Jack stepped off the beanstalk and onto a cloud…” Hermione began.

“And then fell to his death because clouds aren’t solid objects and won’t withstand the weight of a human,” Ron said firmly.

“Normally, I’d agree with you,” Hermione said sympathetically, “but you have to remember that long ago Muggles didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, I suppose not having flying broomsticks would tend to create some false impressions about clouds,” Ron said. “Okay, I’ll let the Muggles off the hook this once.”

“Thanks ever so,” Hermione said coldly. “Anyway, Jack looked around and saw that he had wound up in a green country filled with rolling hills and trees.”

“On the clouds?” Ron asked.

“On the clouds,” Hermione said.

“Okay, I take it back. The Muggles are idiots,” Ron said firmly. “Who in their right mind not only thinks that people can walk on clouds, but that there’s a forest up there? I mean, wouldn’t they expect to see roots coming down and waving about in the breeze like so much wooden spaghetti?”

“Odd image,” Harry said, frowning in consideration. “That’d make Quidditch a good deal harder. Might be interesting, actually.”

“Hey, yeah!” Ron said excitedly. “Especially if the roots were charmed to go after Beaters!”

Hermione stared at the two of them as though they were a pair of particularly dunder-headed trolls.

“Everything boils down to Quidditch, doesn’t it,” she said with a note of disgust.

“Yeah, if you try hard enough,” Ron said, utterly unaware of her rising aggravation. “Like this one time, Fred and George reckoned they could try replacing Bludgers with Dungbombs when we were playing Slytherin. They figured it might make Flint smell better, but Wood wouldn’t hear of it, even though he did seem rather intrigued.”
Harry laughed at the mental image (not to mention the accuracy of Ron’s assessment of Marcus Flint’s olfactory problems), but he quickly settled down when he noticed Hermione getting red in the face with anger at the interruption.

“Ehm, sorry,” Harry said apologetically. “Anyway, a land of green rolling hills up in the clouds actually sounds a bit more like what Ron suggested, sort of a heavenly image, doesn’t it?”

Hermione took a deep, calming breath, then appeared to regain her composure.

“Yes, it would suggest paradise-like connotations normally,” Hermione agreed in a surprisingly normal tone, “but that wasn’t quite the case for poor Jack. He began to follow a path that led straight over the hills, wondering where it would lead him, and eventually he saw a very large house in the distance.”

“A big, old palace up in the clouds, eh?” Ron said. “Are you absolutely sure Jack didn’t topple off the beanstalk and split his head open instead? Because being dead really would sort of explain all this.”

“No, it wasn’t a palace. It was a truly enormous cottage, dozen and dozens of feet tall with a gigantic doorway. Jack walked many miles until he stood on the stone step in front, gaping in shock and disbelief at the sheer size of the door, which seemed nearly as tall as a mountain,” Hermione explained.

“Big house equals big person in the house,” Ron said, shaking his head. “Pretty basic logic there, and once again Jack has lived up to my expectations and turned out to be boundlessly idiotic. Let’s all go stare at the huge house and not even consider what might be living inside it.”

“Actually, you’re quite right, Ron,” Hermione said, looking impressed. “It was the home of a giant and his wife, but the husband wasn’t home just then. The wife, who was somewhat smaller and perhaps part human, was in though, and she happened to look out the door and see Jack standing there, staring up at the house.”

“Part-giant wife, eh?” Ron said, and started smothering a laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Hermione asked.

“Just… I’m picturing Hagrid in one of Mum’s house-robies, maybe adding a flowery apron, bit of a lacy bonnet on top,” Ron giggled, then lost it completely. “His umbrella would look smashing with it!”

Harry had already joined in as well, adding, “Yeah, but I can’t get the beard off, even in my imagination. Do you suppose Hagrid actually has a chin?”

“The world may never know,” Ron said. “On the other hand, we’ve never met a full-blood female giant. Maybe a beard’s part of the deal whether you’re a bloke or a bird.”

Hermione stared from one laughing boy to the other with a look of patent disbelief, but as Harry looked closer, he could swear that he saw the corner of her mouth twisting as though she were fighting back a laugh too. It felt good to think about Hagrid, though he couldn’t help wondering how he was doing, if he was okay.

“Yes, well, the giantess came running through the front door, saying, ‘Good gracious, young man, what’re you doin’ here? Me ‘usband’ll surely eat you up if ‘e finds you,’” Hermione said, giving the giantess a voice that sounded oddly like something out of a movie he’d seen on TV once, something about a girl who couldn’t speak properly and a doctor who was trying to pass her off as a duchess.
Mashing together Hagrid with Audrey Hepburn in his brain made the fit of laughing threaten to return.

“Nice of her to give him some warning, at least,” Ron said approvingly.

“Yes, it was, wasn’t it?” Hermione said. “She’s really at least a bit decent. Anyway, Jack said, ‘Oh, I’m so hungry! Could you not give me something to eat?’”

“Dumb as a post,” Ron said, shaking his head. “She tells him to run and he wants a nice breakfast? Talk about priorities!”

“Yes, who would complain about being hungry all the time when his life is in constant danger,” Hermione said, giving Ron a rather significant look. “The giantess, though, felt sorry for Jack and told him he could come in and have a quick bite.”

“Very decent of her, but if she makes tea cakes like Hagrid, he’d better watch his teeth,” Ron said.

“As Jack ate, the giantess explained that each night her husband went out to see if he could catch some fresh meat—a cow or a pig, or a little boy or girl if he could manage it,” Hermione said.

“Ah, I knew we’d get a bit of good old-fashioned fairy tale cannibalism in here again,” Ron said. “Should have known you wouldn’t let me down, Hermione.”

“I’m glad the story has the appropriate level of violence for you,” Hermione said. “Now, as I was saying, the giantess was a bit fond of talking, and she rarely had visitors…”

“What with living on a cloud, I should say so, unless she liked conversing with the odd Hippogriff,” Ron said sagely.

“…and she started talking a bit too much. She showed Jack her husband’s three greatest treasures: his sack of gold, his harp, and his goose.”

“The sack of gold I can understand, obviously, but a harp and a goose?” Harry asked.

“Well, they weren’t just an ordinary harp and goose. They were both magic. The harp could play by itself and sing along in a lovely voice,” Hermione said, then paused, shuddering. “I just realized something.”

“What’s that?” Harry said.

“Quirrell,” Hermione said. “He used that same trick on Fluffy, remember? The harp that was enchanted to play by itself?”

“Haven’t thought about that git in a long while,” Ron said frowning, “but yeah, it could definitely be where he got the idea.”

“Little too much of a coincidence for my taste,” Harry said, then frowned. “Do you suppose he was Muggle-born, then? I mean, it’s a Muggle story. Ron, have you ever heard of any wizarding stories with harps that play on their own?”

“Nope,” he said. “It’d be weird that, if he really were Muggle-born and still consented to work with… You-Know-Who.”

“For pity’s sake, Ron, his name is Vol…!” Harry began rather angrily, but Hermione clapped a hand over his mouth before he could finish.
“Let it be, Harry,” she said, and Harry looked over at Ron to find him blushing in embarrassment.

“Fine,” Harry said. “Old Snake Face, then.”

“I suppose if you offer some people enough power, they’ll do anything, even sell out their own families,” Hermione said, grimacing. “Quirrell might really have been that greedy.”

“Yeah, and he had bad fashion sense, too,” Harry said, trying to lighten the mood a little. “That turban never matched anything.”

“What about the goose?” Ron asked. “What was so special about that?”

“Oh, the goose laid an egg of solid gold every day,” Hermione explained.

“Blimey, now that’s a pet that beats a Niffler any day!” Ron said, grinning broadly. “Of course, it wouldn’t work, though. I mean, the basic rules of magic state you can’t change things into gold unless… unless you’ve got the Philosopher’s Stone.”

Ron looked at Harry. Harry looked at Hermione. Hermione looked at Ron.

“I’m sure it’s just another coincidence,” Hermione said hurriedly. “Anyway, the giantess was talking entirely too freely and too long, and the next thing she knew, the earth was shaking.”

“Cloud,” Ron said at once.

“What?” she said, confused.

“The cloud was shaking, not the earth. There’s no earth on a cloud. At least, not normally, but then again, those trees do have to be growing in something, don’t they?” he said thoughtfully.

“Yes, well, the cloud started shaking,” Hermione said, “and the giantess cried, ‘That’s me ‘usband, fer sure, a-comin’ ‘ome! You’d best ‘ide in the copper pots ‘angin’ from the ceilin’!’ And with that she scooped him up and set him inside one of the enormous copper cooking pots dangling from a rack on the ceiling.”

“You know, if I were going to hide from a man-eating giant, I don’t think I’d choose to hide in a cooking utensil. Bad luck, that,” Ron said.

“Still, it was a good thing she did it, because only a few moments later the husband, who was much larger and uglier than his wife, came crashing through the door, a pair of dead oxen tucked into his belt. Jack was stunned by how huge he was, when suddenly the giant started to sniff the air suspiciously,” Hermione said.

“He’s got a pair of decaying oxen on him and he’s complaining how the kitchen smells?” Ron asked.

“No. The giant said, ‘Fee, fie, fo, fum! I smell the blood of an Englishman! Be he alive or be he dead, I’ll grind his bones to make my bread!’” Hermione said in her deepest voice, which actually wasn’t all that deep.

“So the giant was not only a man-eater but a rotten poet,” Ron said, nodding.

“You forgot to mention the great sense of smell,” Harry said.

“The giantess said, ‘Oh, dear, you’re only smellin’ the bones of that last toddler you brought ‘ome yesterday. They’re still in the oven,’” Hermione said.

“On the plus side, a good cover story. On the minus side, that’s disgusting,” Ron said, making a face. “It’s almost killing my appetite.”

“A feat magic has as yet been unable to perform,” Hermione said, giving him an arch smile. “The giant was, thankfully, not too bright and believed her. He watched as she roasted the oxen whole, then they each ate one for dinner. After the dishes were cleared away, the giant took out his bag of gold and counted each piece just for the joy of it. Then he put the goose on the table and yelled out, ‘Lay!’ and the goose immediately laid a solid gold egg that the giant tossed high in the air and put in his pocket.”

“That is one well-trained goose,” Ron said, impressed.

“Finally, he took out his magic harp and said, ‘Play!’ and straightaway the harp began to play and sing a lilting lullaby,” Hermione said.

“Can this giant only speak in rhyme? ‘Lay!’ ‘Play!’” Ron boomed in his take on a giant’s voice, which was several octaves deeper than anything Hermione could manage.

“Hmm… now that you mention it, I’m not sure,” Hermione said, and she seemed to be really considering the question before she shrugged and went on. “The lullaby put the giant to sleep at once, and Jack saw his chance and jumped out of the pot and onto the table. Then he grabbed the giant’s bag of gold, jumped to the floor, and ran out the front door, down the path, and climbed down the beanstalk.”

“Wait a second! He robbed them!” Ron said.

“Well, he’s murdering toddlers on a fairly daily basis, so I’m not that upset about it,” Harry said.

“True, but the giantess was pretty nice to him,” Ron said, still not quite sold. “Ah well, I don’t suppose it’s that important anyway since the story’s over.”

“But it’s not!” Hermione said. “Jack gave his mother the bag of gold, but there were so many debts on their farm that nearly all the money went for that, and they were left nearly penniless again.”

“Not exactly thrifty, are they?” Ron said.

“So Jack went back up the beanstalk, down the road, and up to the giant’s front doorstep,” Hermione said.

“Why doesn’t he just go get a job?” Ron said.

“Because then there wouldn’t be any story,” Harry said reasonably.

“The giantess was angry when she saw him and said that her husband had been furious ever since he realized the bag of gold was missing, and she told Jack he’d best run home right away, but then the grou… I mean, the cloud started to shake, and Jack hid once more in the copper pot,” Hermione said.

“I still say he needs a better hiding spot,” Ron said dismissively. “Did hubby bring home a couple chubby tots this time?”

“No, a pair of cows, and the wife cooked them up as quick as a wink. Everything happened just as before: the giant smelled something wrong, the wife covered for Jack, the giant ate, then made the
goose lay an egg, and finally brought out the harp to make it sing. As soon as the giant was asleep, Jack jumped out of the pot, grabbed the goose, and ran out the door, his hand clamped tightly over the goose’s bill to keep it from alerting its master,” Hermione said.

“Well, that should fix the money troubles,” Ron said brightly. “Back down the freakish beanstalk?”

“Yes, and Jack gave the goose to his mother, who was very pleased. But Jack was still thinking of the magical harp,” Hermione said.

“Don’t tell me. The genius decides to pay a visit to Mr. and Mrs. Giant again,” Ron said.

“Exactly, only this time things didn’t go quite so smoothly. The giantess was very, very angry that Jack had stolen from her husband again, and when the cloud began to shake, she went outside to tell her husband the thief was there,” Hermione said.

“Well, serves the idiot right, really,” Ron said.

“Jack quickly dashed into the oven to hide, and the giantess took her husband straight to the copper pots hanging from the ceiling. When they had gone through every one, they decided the boy had run away home,” Hermione said.

“And Jack was cooked to a cinder, the end,” Ron said.

“Not really, because Jack had a stroke of good luck and the giant hadn’t caught anything at all that day,” Hermione said.

“That’s just cheating!” Ron said indignantly.

“I suppose so, but it’s the way the story goes. Instead, the giant took out the harp and told it to play, and then he fell asleep,” Hermione said. “Then Jack ran out of the oven, grabbed the harp, and made for the door.”

“It’s a bad sign that I’m actually feeling rather sorry for the poor child-eating giant and his wife right now, isn’t it?” Ron said.

“Things didn’t go quite as Jack had hoped, though, for the harp started to cry out. ‘Help! Master! Thief! Help!’” Hermione said in her best imitation of a harp, which sounded oddly like Fleur.

“Didn’t see that one coming, did he?” Ron said, grinning. “So what happened?”

“The giant got up from the table and began to run after Jack, but Jack had a head start on him,” Hermione explained.

“Yeah, but the giant can cover, what, three or four times as much ground as Jack in one step, so he had to catch him before he went very far,” Ron said.

“Actually, he didn’t. Jack got all the way to the beanstalk and started to climb down,” Hermione said.

“But that doesn’t make any sense! Mathematically, the giant should have caught him unless he kept tripping over his own feet or something stupid,” Ron said.

“In one cartoon version Jack ties the giant’s shoelaces together, but then he has two friends with him to help: a duck and a… actually I’m not sure what Goofy is. Some kind of dog with a speech impediment, I suppose,” Hermione said.
Ron looked at Harry.

“That made no sense at all, Hermione,” Ron said.

“Oh, skip it,” Hermione said. “Jack gets to the beanstalk first…”

“Breaking every rule of science, math, and what all in the process,” Ron added in.

“…and calls to his mother to bring him an ax,” Hermione said.

“An ax?” Ron said, then realization dawned. “That’s not possible.”

“In the story, it is. Jack raced down the beanstalk with the harp, grabbed the ax, and chopped down the beanstalk,” Hermione said.

“All before the giant, who is, well, gigantic, can get close enough to the ground to jump down and squash him flat as a bug?” Ron said in disbelief.

“Apparently,” Hermione said.

“And how large is this beanstalk again?” Ron asked suspiciously.

“I would guess pretty large. At least a few meters across,” Hermione said.

“So unless the beanstalk was made out of papier mache or whipped cream or Chocolate Frog wrappers, that should take several hours to chop through!” Ron said.

“In the story Jack manages to do it while the giant is still pretty close to the top of the stalk,” Hermione said somewhat apologetically. “I know, I know, it makes no sense.”

“Jack needs to try out for the Olympics,” Harry said. “Sprinting and wood chopping, if there were such categories.”

“What’s an Olympics?” Ron asked.

“Oh, it’s a multi-national athletic competition Muggles have every four years where they give medals to the winners,” Hermione said. “They carry a torch around the globe from Greece to wherever they’re playing that year to start it off. It’s really quite interesting.”

“What happens if it runs out of batteries?” Ron asked seriously.

“It’s not that sort of torch. It’s the kind that’s on fire,” Harry explained.

“Muggles run around carrying fire for fun?” Ron said, giving Hermione a look of deep confusion. “You people are weird.”

“Yes, well, you should be able to tell that already from our stories. Anyway, Jack chopped through the beanstalk, the whole thing toppled over…”

“Totaling Jack’s mother’s house and wiping out farmland and sundry little old ladies, chubby-cheeked toddlers, and innocent bystanders for a hundred miles in every direction,” Ron supplied.

“… and the giant died. Jack gave his mother the harp, and they showed it at fairs. The little man brought back Milky White and explained that the giant had killed Jack’s father years before and stolen the gold and the goose and the harp from him, so they were all rightfully Jack’s to begin with,” Hermione said.
“Convenient bit of morality, that,” Ron said.

“And they all lived happily ever after, well, probably with the exception of the widowed giantess,” Hermione said, folding her hands primly in her lap. “Well, what did you think?”

Ron and Harry looked at each other, then Ron adopted a much more serious face and turned to Hermione.

“I think it sounds a bit like Death Eater propaganda,” Ron said.

“Huh?” Hermione and Harry said together.

“They stereotype giants as witless, violent, sub-human creatures who deserve to be stolen from and killed in order for the ‘more human’ classes to profit from them. The only thing missing was making the boy upper class,” Ron said, and Hermione stared at him.

“Actually, in some of the versions it turns out that Jack was the son of a king and the cottage in the clouds is actually a castle the giant stole from Jack’s father, so there really could be an issue of class as well,” Hermione said, nearly dumb-founded. “That’s really very, very astute, Ron.”

“I do listen sometimes,” Ron said, giving her a mock bow.

“Well, goodnight,” she said, smiling as she went to her part of the tent, and Harry noticed she smiled a little longer at Ron than was strictly necessary.

“Ron,” Harry mumbled quietly a little while later after they had gone to bed. “Where exactly did you get that from?”

“Occasionally, mate, I just stumble on the right thing. Honestly, though, I nearly said the whole point was stealing is fine if the person you’re stealing from is ugly enough, but I don’t think she would have gone for that,” he said, rolling over and plumping up his pillow more.

“Good instincts, Ron,” Harry whispered back, ignoring the rumbling in his stomach and hoping for pleasant dreams that most certainly did not involve Hagrid in a pink and white polka dot ensemble with matching pumps and handbag.
“I’m hungry.”

For one brief moment, Harry thought his head was going to split into a thousand pieces like one of Percy Weasley’s thin-bottomed cauldrons. Instead, he managed to keep his blood pressure under admirable control and only growled, “Shut it, Ron.”

“Have you thought about writing those two words on a piece of parchment and just waving it around repeatedly?” Hermione asked coldly. “It’d save your vocal cords loads of overuse.”

“Ha bloody ha,” Ron said from his position on the old couch at the center of their tent.

For a long moment everything was quiet, with Harry staring at Hermione’s copy of Beedle and Hermione knitting a new pair of mittens as the cold weather was starting to loom nearer. Unfortunately, just as the edgy mood was beginning to disappear, Ron’s stomach growled so loudly that there was no way for any of them to pretend they didn’t hear it.

“Sorry,” he muttered in embarrassment. “I can’t help it. Even when I keep my mouth closed, my rotten tum has to complain.”

Hermione put her knitting away in her workbag and gave a sad sigh, and Harry felt his own anger ebbing away into a morose sulkiness instead. They’d been eating very light for the last three days. The last time they’d had a real meal was Sunday when Ron had managed to nab a shepherd’s pie that someone had left to cool on an open windowsill. He vaguely remembered that Hermione had said something about feeling guilty over stealing someone else’s dinner, but Harry had been far too busy relishing hot potatoes and carrots to pay much attention. Still, all they’d managed since then were some apples from an orchard near one town and a few kitchen scraps taken from dustbins. Half the clothes Hermione had packed for them in her little evening bag hung ridiculously loose on them now.

“Hermione?” Ron asked tentatively. “You wouldn’t know any other of those mad stories Muggles tell their kids that happen to have food in it again, would you?”

“You really want to hear about food?” Hermione said, raising an eyebrow. “Won’t that just make it worse?”

“Not possible,” Ron said firmly. “At this point I just want to remember that food exists; otherwise, I’m going to start eating the tent.”

Hermione giggled a little at this, and Harry gave her a surprised look.

“What’s so funny?” Harry asked.

“Oh, it’s just that there really is sort of a story about that,” Hermione said, pulling her chair over to its
customary position for when she was being their storyteller.

“Someone eats a tent?” Ron asked, and his interest was mirrored by Harry who found that he felt much less hungry when he could think of all the weirdly wonderful stories that the Dursleys had carefully guarded him from throughout his childhood.

“Not quite, but close,” Hermione said, then paused. “Are you absolutely sure that hearing about food is really what you want?”

“I got through ‘Small Purple Beach Hat,’ didn’t I?” Ron said defensively.

“That’s ‘Little Red Riding Hood,’” Hermione said, and her expression said she didn’t believe for a moment that he’d really thought that was the name of the story. “All right, then. Once…”

 “…upon a time,” Ron said, sitting up a little straighter. “Right?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, and Harry could see her steeling herself for another rough one. “Deep in the woods there lived a woodcutter, his wife, and their two children.”

Ron looked skeptically at Harry.

“Come off it!” he said. “No way!”

Hermione looked at him in complete confusion.

“What’s so odd about that?” she asked.

“Well, for one thing, there’s never a brother and a sister in these things,” Ron said seriously. “They’re all either only children or they’ve got step-sisters, but never a regular old brother or sister.”

Hermione pursed her lips thoughtfully.

“You know, at least in the ones I’ve told you so far, you’re right,” Hermione said. “I suppose that the idea of keeping the main character isolated from an extended family unit tends to increase the ratio of possible danger from outside forces as there would be less of a support system to fall back on and use as a means of fending off the antagonist outside of extraordinary means.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Ron said sagely, but he shot Harry a look that suggested Hermione might as well be speaking Mermish. “And another thing: both parents are alive. No, wait; is one of them just about to die?”

“No,” Hermione said.

“See? This is weird for one of these stories. And on top of that the fellow’s a woodcutter and lives in a forest. That makes sense! Now if he’d been a woodcutter and lived on a boat in the middle of the ocean, that would have been more normal for these things,” Ron said, nodding firmly.

“Well, neither of Rapunzel’s parents died,” Hermione said tentatively.

“No, but they lit out pretty quick after dear old Dad swapped his kid for a head of lettuce,” Ron said indignantly. “Same thing. So, what are the kids’ names?”

“Hansel and Gretel. Actually, that’s also the name of the story,” Hermione said.

Ron tipped his head and considered these two.
“On a sliding scale, with Jack from the crazy story about the runner beans and the idiot giant on the normal end and Ashyweeper on the other, that only rates about a two for strange names,” he said.

“Maybe a 2.5,” Harry said, and Ron conceded the half point to him with a gracious bow of the head.

“Anyway, the woodcutter was very poor,” Hermione said.

“Why?” Ron asked.

“What do you mean ‘why’?” asked Hermione.

“Why was he poor? He’s a woodcutter. He lives in a forest. It’s not like he suddenly ran out of trees… or did he?” Ron asked.

“No, he didn’t run out of trees because then he wouldn’t be living in a forest anymore, would he,” Hermione said through gritted teeth. “Did I say the woodcutter lived in a barren, deforested wasteland?”

“No,” Ron said, taking her question at face value. “Hey, maybe the rest of the people he was selling wood to decided to get their wood from some other woodcutter who was undercutting this one’s prices! Or maybe the other people started to cut their own wood so they didn’t need his wood. I mean, they must live near the forest too. Rather lazy, buying wood from some bloke down the way rather than swinging an ax themselves, right?”

“Ron,” Harry said. “I think you’re over thinking this.”

“Actually, there are some serious economic overtones to the whole story, so it’s possible that it is, at least in part, a critique of the destruction of cottage industry and its effect on local small economies,” Hermione said, tipping her head sideways and squinting as though she were trying to see the connection. “That’s a very interesting question.”

Ron smoothed his hair back proudly and gave Harry a superior look.

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“Well, all that’s really beside the point because regardless of the socio-economic situation in the area, the main thing for the story is that the woodcutter is very, very poor,” Hermione said.

“Okay, fine, they’re poor,” Ron said. “So what happens then?”

“One night, as Hansel, who was the older of the two, and his sister Gretel were lying awake with hunger pains…,” Hermione started.

“I can sympathize,” Ron said miserably.

“…they overheard their parents talking,” Hermione said.

“Too bad they didn’t have Extendable Ears. Would have made it a lot easier,” Ron said. “So, what’d they hear?”

“The mother was telling the father that they simply didn’t have enough food left for all four of them or else they would starve,” Hermione said, then put on a high-pitched voice for the mother. “‘Why, husband, we shall be dead in only a few days if I must try to feed all of us! There is only one thing left to do. We must take the children far out into the woods and leave them there for the wild beasts so that we may survive.’”
“That’s hideous!” Ron said, really angry. “What kind of a mother would let her kids starve so she could have a bit more bacon!”

“A rotten one,” Harry said. “This is another one who makes Aunt Petunia look like Mum of the Year.”

“Are you sure this isn’t one of those stepmothers who turns out to be a witch?” Ron said suspiciously.

“No, this is their mother,” Hermione assured him. “Normally you’re right and the villains are stepmothers, which unfortunately has turned out to be a pretty persistent stereotype, but some folklore scholars think that originally the stories with stepmothers in them really were about mothers. The public just became so horrified by the idea that a mother could do some of those things to her own child that they were turned into stepmothers to soften the effect. I think there might be one or two versions of ‘Hansel and Gretel’ that have her as a stepmother, but usually she’s their birth mother.”

“So what did the father do when his wife casually mentioned she wanted to off her own kids by leaving them to die in the forest?” Ron said.

“He argued with her for a while, but eventually he gave in and agreed,” Hermione said.

“Now there’s moral fortitude for you,” Ron said. “What a louse. So what’d poor Hansel and Gretel the eavesdroppers do?”

“Hansel was, thankfully, a very clever boy, and after he comforted Gretel and got her to stop crying, he waited until his parents were sound asleep, and then crept out of bed, out the front door, and into the garden. There were lots of tiny white pebbles there, glowing in the moonlight, and he filled his pockets with as many of the little rocks as he could and then went back inside and slept until morning,” she said.

Ron frowned.

“I don’t get it,” he said. “He finds out his mum and dad want to kill him and his little sister, so he starts a rock collection? Oh, wait, is he going to use the pebbles to stone them?”

“No, Ronald, he is not going to stone them with the pebbles,” Hermione said with a long-suffering sigh. “I think patricide and matricide is where these stories draw the line.”

“It’s nice to know at least there is a line,” Harry said, wrinkling his nose.

“The next morning, the parents shook their children awake and told them they were all going into the forest that day to chop wood. The mother gave Hansel and Gretel each a small bit of bread, which Gretel put in her apron pocket, and then the four of them left to go deep into the woods,” Hermione said.

“Why’d she give them bread?” Ron asked, furrowing his brow in confusion.

“I suppose so they’d have something to eat and not cause a fuss,” Hermione said. “On the other hand, it could be an attempt to calm a guilty conscience. After all, the parents aren’t actually killing the children directly, so if she gives them something to eat, they aren’t responsible for them starving to death in the woods, while at the same time they aren’t specifically calling wild animals to come and kill them. It sort of protects her from directly spilling family blood, and there are loads of taboos on that in the old stories.”
“Yeah, she and her husband are just dumping them in the middle of nowhere and hoping they get eaten,” Ron said in a falsely nonchalant voice. “No harm, no foul on the kiddies getting gobbled up by rampaging cockatrices or summat.”

“I agree it’s a rotten thing to do,” Hermione said. “Anyway, they’d only gone a little way before Hansel stopped and was staring back at the house. ‘What are you doing, you lazy boy!’ asked the mother, and he said, ‘Oh, I am only stopping to wave goodbye to my little white kitten who is sitting on the chimney.’”

“He had a kitten?” Ron asked.

“No,” Hermione said, “and the mother was very angry at him, saying that the white spot on the chimney was only a bit of sunlight and to keep moving.”

“Poor kid’s barking mad,” Ron said, shaking his head. “I don’t blame him, really, what with the homicidal parents and the lack of food and all.”

“It is an odd little detail, but all the stories put it in. Perhaps the white kitten is a symbol of innocence and home, and its waving goodbye could suggest the end of that innocence,” Hermione said thoughtfully, pausing for a moment before going on. “Anyway, though, Hansel was just telling a story to cover what he was really doing.”

“Which was?” Harry asked.

“Dropping one of the little white pebbles on the ground to mark the way home,” Hermione said, smiling broadly. “See, I told you he was a smart boy!”

Ron gave Harry a significant look, and then cleared his throat.

“I still don’t get it,” he said simply.

“Oh, you’ll see. The mother and father took Hansel and Gretel far into the woods, not realizing that Hansel was dropping little white rocks at intervals the whole way. Then they built them a fire and said, ‘You stay here and have your bread, then rest. We will be chopping wood not far off and will come back for you when we are done.’”

“Dirty liars,” Ron growled. “Poor kids. So what’d they do?”

“Well, Hansel thought that as long as he could hear the sound of the father’s ax, he’d know their parents hadn’t abandoned them. He was hoping they might change their minds. After a while, he fell asleep along with his little sister, listening to the clattering noise of what he thought was the ax. But really, his father had tied a big branch to a nearby dead tree, and in the high wind the branch clattered against the tree, mimicking the sound of the ax,” Hermione explained.

“This is just deeply, deeply wrong,” Harry said. “Bad enough sticking your kids out there to die, but being all clever about it is even worse.”

“When Hansel woke up, it was dark outside, and Gretel had begun to cry once more. ‘Wait,’ he said. ‘When the moon comes up, we will find our way home.’ Sure enough, the bright full moon rose above the trees, and then…”

“…they were eaten by a werewolf,” Ron suggested.

“They were not!” Hermione said indignantly. “No, the little white pebbles glowed brightly in the moonlight, and Hansel and Gretel were able to follow them back to their little cottage.”
“You’re telling me that in the middle of a forest, at night, with all sorts of wild animals running about, these two little kids were able to pick out tiny white pebbles on the ground, which was probably littered with all kinds of stuff, using only moonlight, and find their way back home?” Ron said, his mouth gaping.

“Yes,” Hermione said, folding her arms defiantly as though daring him to find anything wrong with the story.

“Okay, so Hansel and Gretel turn out to be pint-sized tracking experts,” Harry said. “What happens when they get back home?”

“Well, their father was quite pleased to see them as his conscience had been bothering him, but the mother said, ‘Oh, you naughty, naughty children! Getting lost in the forest like that! We searched and searched but couldn’t find you!’” Hermione said.

“Bit over the top there, isn’t she?” Ron said, shaking his head. “I mean, how thick does she think her kids are?”

“Things went well for a little bit, but soon the woodcutter’s family had almost no food left at all once again. Hansel and Gretel could hear their parents arguing in bed again one night a month later, and sure enough, the mother once again convinced the husband that their best course of action was to strand their children in the forest even deeper this time,” Hermione said.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Ron said, interrupting her. “They actually ended up doing alright for a while? After she convinced him that they were all going to starve unless they ditched their children? What, the woodcutting business had a mini economic boom or something and crashed again inside of a month?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said, shrugging. “It’s just part of the story.”

“Nice to know the father learned so much from the first time this happened,” Harry said, snorting disdainfully.

“Yeah, his conscience must have really pinched him good,” Ron agreed. “Okay, so what do the kids do?”

“Little Gretel cried bitterly, but Hansel told her, ‘Don’t worry. God will protect us,’ and then he got up to get more little white stones from the garden,” she said.

“Well, if it worked once, why not again, mad as it is,” he said.

“But it didn’t work. The mother had locked the door and Hansel couldn’t reach it, so he climbed back into bed and tried to think of another idea until he fell asleep,” Hermione said.

“He couldn’t reach the lock on the door? How old is he, five?” Ron said, staring at her.

“Well, pretty small, I’d guess,” Hermione said, taking his question seriously. “Actually, given that it’s a forest cottage, most likely it was a sliding bolt instead of an actual lock, and those could be pretty heavy, so maybe he was just too weak to draw back the bolt.”

“Another possible fire catastrophe,” Ron said. “Just like Lettuceheadgirl. Her mum locks her in a tower she can’t get out of, and if there’d been a fire, she’d have burned up, and in this house the parents make it so the kids can’t get out if they have to. All these stories are massive fire traps, I’m telling you!”
“Considering they wanted the kids dead anyway, it’s not really such a puzzle,” Harry said. “Kind of like how the Dursleys made a point of not teaching me to swim so that maybe someday I might accidentally drown on my own.”

“Blimey, Harry,” Ron said, giving him a sympathetic look. “They really are a couple of right tossers, aren’t they?”

“ Took you this long to catch on?” Harry said with a laugh.

“Sometimes it takes Ron a very, very long time to catch on to things right in front of his nose,” Hermione grumbled under her breath so quietly that Harry was quite sure she hadn’t intended anyone else to hear. “In any case, Hansel couldn’t get the pebbles, and the next morning when the mother woke them and gave them each a much smaller piece of bread than before, Hansel took them and hid them in his pocket.”

“Bread?” Ron said, raising an eyebrow. “He’s not seriously thinking of what I think he’s thinking of, is he?”

“What do you think he’s thinking of?” Harry asked.

“I think he’s thinking of something so ridiculous that I think he can’t be thinking of what I’m thinking he’s thinking,” Ron said, without mussing a hair.

“You think so?” Harry said.

“I think so,” Ron said.

Hermione looked at both of them, then started staring off into space for a moment.

“What?” Harry asked.

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head as she snapped back to herself. “I was just trying to diagram that sentence mentally. Sorry. Habit.”

“And now I’m thinking she thinks too much,” Ron said quietly to Harry.

“In any case, as they left that morning, Hansel turned back towards the house again. ‘What are you doing, lazy boy?’ asked the mother. ‘I’m waving goodbye to my little white bird up on the chimney,’ he said. Of course, there was no white bird there, only a reflection from the sunlight, and the mother said that he mustn’t dawdle over silly things,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Ron said firmly. “No dawdling, Hansel. Hurry up so we can abandon you to your death. Step lively there!”

Harry laughed a bit, but really, this was one very dark fairy tale.

“Meanwhile, Hansel was secretly tearing the bread into bits and leaving pieces of it on the trail to mark their way home,” Hermione said.

“That’s what I was thinking he was thinking,” Ron said, shaking his head. “Hansel isn’t exactly a brain trust, is he?”

“Really, Ron! He’s only a little boy, and what else was he supposed to do,” Hermione said defensively. “He was doing the best he could with what he had!”

“By feeding their last remaining crusts of bread to the bloody birds? That’s a laugh, that is,” Ron
said, turning rather red with anger.

“I don’t really think there’s anything funny about it! And what would you have done, if you’re so clever?” Hermione challenged him.

“Hmm. Let’s think,” Ron said in pretended puzzlement. “How about throw a fit, whack the horrid mother over the head with the handy ax, grab Gretel and head for civilization and the police?”

“Yes, because a small child is so likely to overpower two grown adults carrying a sharp weapon,” Hermione said. “I don’t think so.”

“Fine, fine,” Harry interposed, sensing a real fight brewing. “We’ll give Hansel the benefit of the doubt. He’s a kid and was scared and trying to find his way home and he panicked. It’s at least understandable.”

A tense moment followed with his two friends glaring at one another rather too intensely, and for a second Harry wasn’t quite sure if they were about to keep yelling at one another or possibly start snogging passionately, but eventually Ron blinked.

“Okay. I’ll cut the kid a break,” Ron said. “Go on, Hermione.”

She still looked rather upset, and Harry wasn’t sure she’d actually continue.

“Really. Please?” Ron asked, throwing in a somewhat hopeful, lopsided smile.

Hermione sighed melodramatically, but Harry noticed she’d turned a bit pink.

“If you like,” she said, clearing her throat before continuing. “The parents brought the children very, very deep into the forest, turning around many times on their tracks, leading them in circles so that they were completely lost, then made the fire again, telling them to rest, and the father fixed another branch to a dead trunk, though Hansel was wise to the trick this time. Still, both children had walked so long and so far that they couldn’t help falling asleep.”

“That probably didn’t end well,” Ron said.

“When night fell, Hansel and Gretel both woke to find themselves alone and the fire gone cold. In vain Hansel looked for the fallen breadcrumbs, but the birds had eaten them all,” Hermione said.

“Duh,” Ron whispered to Harry, who swallowed an explosion of laughter with great difficulty.

“Hansel and Gretel did not know the way home, but they began to walk anyway. All through the night and the next day they walked, stopping only to rest when they became too weak, but they never saw anything that looked familiar,” Hermione said.

“How big is this forest anyway?” Ron asked.

“Well, in the old days forest covered a large part of northern Europe, so it could have been the size of a small country, I suppose,” Hermione said.

“Okay, they’re justifiably lost,” Ron said.

“I’m glad you approve,” Hermione said icily. “Another night passed and morning came, and in all that time they hadn’t had a bite to eat. Hansel and Gretel were both about to give up hope when they saw a little white bird sitting in front of them, quite unafraid.”

“It didn’t happen to be waving goodbye from the top of a chimney, did it?” Ron asked.
“No, but it did hop to another branch, then another, twittering happily as though it wanted the children to follow it, and they did,” Hermione said.

“Probably one of the birds that ate Hansel’s breadcrumbs feeling guilty about it,” Ron said, but Hermione tipped her head to one side.

“Actually, if you’re right, which you might be, this would be the first character to show not only remorse but a will to fix what it’s done wrong in the story. Interesting, actually, especially as the wild beasts haven’t eaten the children. In fact, it’s possible the story is leaning towards the idea of humans acting inhumanely and animals behaving with kindness, not unlike some of Aesop’s beast fables,” Hermione said thoughtfully.

“Huh?” Ron said.

“Yes, well, anyway, the children followed the bird into a clearing, and what they saw there amazed them,” Hermione said.

“What? Their own cottage and their dear kiddie-killing mum and dad?” Ron said.

“No, it wasn’t their own cottage at all. Instead, it was a house made entirely of food!” Hermione said.

Ron and Harry both blinked.

“Well done, little white bird!” Ron said approvingly. “We could do with one of those around here. Hey, Harry, if you ever happen to see a white animal moving through the forest that wants you to follow it, be sure to do it, right?”

“I’ll try to remember that if that unlikely event should ever occur, Ron,” Harry said, laughing at the idea, though quietly he started to wonder whether the bird in the story didn’t sound a bit like a Patronus.

“So, what was it like, Hermione?” Ron asked eagerly, leaning forward. “Don’t spare the details.”

“In the older versions of the story, the walls of the house are made of bread and the roof is made of cakes, and the windows are all transparent sugar-candy,” Hermione said. “Some of the newer versions have the house made of gingerbread instead, though, and covered in little sweets and biscuits and bars of chocolate with a fence of peppermint sticks and shrubbery of spun sugar candy and… well, Muggles like to make gingerbread houses like that around Christmastime.”

Harry was pretty sure he’d actually spotted a trace of drool in the corner of Hermione’s mouth, and his own was watering rather a lot, but Ron’s face was nearly frightening.

“That,” he said, stopping to take a deep breath, “that sounds deeply excellent. And this was a real house, so it was really big?”

“Exactly,” Hermione said.

“Whoever built that thing should be given a humanitarian award and made Prime Minister for life,” Ron said. “Absolutely bloody brilliant!”

“As you might expect, the children reacted… well, much like Ron did, and they immediately set about eating the house,” Hermione said. “Hansel began with one of the cakes on the roof, and Gretel sucked on a piece of candy broken from the windowpane.”

“Not sure that was the best way to go about it,” Harry said, frowning. “I mean, it might have been
better to knock first. More polite, anyway."

“Harry, if we happen upon a house made out of Honeyduke’s best stuff in the middle of a clearing the next time we set up camp? Be forewarned. I’m eating it and asking questions later,” Ron said.

“Actually, Harry was quite right, for suddenly the children heard someone inside say, ‘Nibble, nibble, like a mouse, who is eating up my house?’” Hermione said in a squeaky, old lady voice.

“Okay, I admit it, that doesn’t look good,” Ron said, “but at the same time, you don’t build your house out of food unless you expect someone to stop and eat it!”

“You’re more right than you know,” Hermione said in an ominous voice. “Hansel and Gretel were frightened at first, but they were so hungry they only said, ‘Tis the tempest wild, the storm’s own child!’ and kept breaking off bits of the house.”

“Nice that in the middle of nearly starving to death and then being interrupted in destroying someone’s house that they had the presence of mind to not only lie, but lie in a rhyming couplet,” Harry snickered.

“I’m guessing that didn’t fool the owner,” Ron said.

“You’re right. The front door opened and out hobbled a little old lady,” Hermione said. “She asked the children what they were doing there, and they explained everything that had happened. The old lady took them inside and gave them a proper dinner.”

“Which was?” Ron said, hanging on her every word.

“Oh, different stories say different things. Some say roast turkey, others pancakes with butter and apples and walnuts, and others say she just fed them more sweets from her house,” Hermione said.

“I love this story,” Ron said dreamily. “I’m having all of those when we finally get the last Horcrux.”

“I think I’ll settle for roast beef and treacle tart,” Harry said. “What about you, Hermione?”

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment, then said, in a nearly reverent whisper, “Baked ham with potatoes and strawberry trifle. And chocolate! Honeyduke’s, about five pounds of it.”

“See, I knew you were human,” Ron said, patting her arm for perhaps a moment too long.

“In any case, the old woman then made up two soft, white beds for the children, complete with feather pillows and warm quilts, and they went straight to sleep,” Hermione said.

“See, now that’s how a story is supposed to end,” Ron said enthusiastically. “The kids get taken in by a nice old lady in a house made of sweets and go to sleep and live happily ever after, right?”

“Wrong,” Hermione said, shaking her head. “In fact, things didn’t turn out like that at all.”

Hermione hesitated for a moment as though considering whether or not to continue.

“What’s the matter?” Harry asked.

“It’s just sort of unpleasant, really. You remember how frightened the Muggles were of the witch in Rapunzel, yes?” she said.

“Yeah,” Ron said, shrugging. “They’re a bit daft about magic. No offense,” he added quickly.
“None taken,” Hermione said. “You see, Muggles tend to think of witches as being old, ugly, evil women who are capable of the very worst sorts of things.”

“Well, that’s stupid,” Ron said. “I mean, Mum might get a bit cranky now and again, but evil is a bit much.”

“Think more of Bellatrix,” Hermione said bitterly, “only ancient and disgusting looking. That’s their image of a typical witch.”

Ron shuddered, but Harry had heard the Dursleys go on often enough about the horrors of magic and witches and wizards in general that it was no real surprise to him.

“Okay so… how does that relate to the story?” Ron asked.

“The old woman was a witch,” Hermione said. “As soon as the children were asleep, she picked up Hansel and locked him in a giant bird cage, and then roughly shook Gretel awake and made her start bringing in wood for the fire and cooking.”

“Why?” Ron asked.

“Gretel asked the same question, and the witch told her it was because she was planning to feed Hansel until he was fat, then eat him,” Hermione said.

Harry and Ron glanced at each other.

“She’s going to eat the kid?” Ron asked as though he was hoping he’d misunderstood.

Hermione nodded. “Yes, that’s why she’d built the house in the first place: to lure children so she could cook and eat them.”

“You know, just when I think these stories can’t get more twisted,” Ron said, shaking his head. “I like where I ended it better.”

“For weeks, Gretel cried, but the witch compelled her to do whatever she told her to do, cooking and cleaning and giving food to Hansel while Gretel got next to nothing,” Hermione said.

“Compelled her, eh?” Ron said, nodding thoughtfully. “Sounds like some Muggle got a taste of the Imperius Curse at some point, doesn’t it?”

“Possibly,” Hermione said as though she were weighing the idea. “If the writer of the story had run into a dark witch or wizard, it certainly explains the prejudice in it.”

“So Gretel keeps fattening up her own brother. Then what?” Ron asked.

“The children were brighter than you might think, for they realized the witch had a weakness. Her eyesight was very poor. You see, in these stories, witches always have red eyes, and because of that they can’t see very well,” Hermione explained.

“Red eyes?” Harry said, suddenly paying more attention. “Doesn’t that sound like Volde—”

“Don’t say the name!” Ron said quickly.

“It’s only a name, Ron,” Harry said, rather annoyed.

“Yeah, but it makes me nervous and just… please don’t, all right?” he said.
“Fine, but it does sound like him, doesn’t it?” Harry said, turning to Hermione.

Hermione looked uncomfortable, but nodded.

“These stories… they do get some bits right sometimes, don’t they,” Harry said, shuddering.

“Yeah, usually the most unpleasant ones,” Ron said. “Anyway, how’d the old bat being mostly blind play into it?”

“Well, each day the witch made Hansel poke his finger through the bars of his cage to feel whether he was getting fatter, but instead he would put out an old chicken bone so that she thought he was really as skinny as ever in spite of all the food disappearing,” Hermione explained.

“Now, see, that’s clever,” Ron said, smiling broadly.

“It really was,” Hermione agreed. “However, eventually the witch was so frustrated that Hansel wouldn’t gain any weight at all that she decided to cook him anyway, skinny or fat.”

“Oh, well, that’s a problem,” Ron said, his smile fading. “What happened?”

“The witch told Gretel to prepare the oven. Then she told Gretel to check whether it was hot enough by sticking her head inside, but Gretel realized that what she really wanted to do was kill two birds with one stone, so to speak, and throw Gretel in the oven too. Gretel proved to be just as clever as her brother, though, and said, ‘Please, I don’t know how to check the oven. Would you show me how?’” said Hermione.

“I think I know where this is going,” Ron said, turning a bit pale.

“Probably,” Hermione said. “The witch said, ‘You stupid little goose! It’s perfectly easy! Any fool could do it. Just watch me.’ With that, the old witch stuck her head in the oven, and Gretel gave her a shove, throwing her inside, then bolted the oven door behind her. The witch screamed terribly…”

“…no kidding,” Ron said to Harry.

“…and died in horrible agony,” Hermione finished.

“Tell me the kids didn’t eat her?” Ron said imploringly. “Really, because that would just be too much.”

“No, they didn’t eat her,” Hermione said, grimacing.

“Well, that’s something at least,” Ron said. “So what did they do now that the witch was a charcoal briquette?”

“Gretel ran to Hansel’s cage and broke the lock, and they were free. They searched the house and found all sorts of jewels and pearls and gold coins stuffed into every nook and cranny. Gretel filled her apron with treasure, and Hansel filled his pockets, and then they went back into the forest to find their way home,” Hermione said.

“Where they promptly died of hunger,” Ron said, rolling his eyes. “Why not either stay in the nice, edible house without their crazy parents and live out their days comfortably or else at least bring some food instead of only the treasure?”

Hermione looked rather taken aback.

“I… I don’t know,” she admitted. “I can understand not wanting to stay in the witch’s house
because, really, if you’d just nearly been eaten there, I’m sure the memories wouldn’t be pleasant, but you’re right, Ron. It certainly suggests the children are being greedy about the money rather than taking what would keep them safe. And the story never really talks about that, either.”

Ron looked extremely pleased with himself.

“Anyway, the white bird came back, and the children decided to follow it again,” Hermione said.

“Because that turned out so well last time, what with nearly being eaten by a cannibalistic crazy person,” Ron said.

“Good point,” Hermione said shrugging. “But this time things fared better, and the bird brought them to the edge of a lake where there was a very large duck. ‘Will you take us across the lake?’ asked Gretel, and the duck agreed. ‘Come, Gretel, sit on the duck’s back with me,’ Hansel said, but Gretel said, ‘No, together we should be too heavy a load. You go first, and then I shall follow.’”

“That was nice of her,” Ron said. “Good to see that killing and baking the witch hasn’t left her with big, gaping moral scars. So, let me guess, the duck takes Hansel across and in the meantime Gretel is eaten by wolves?”

“No,” Hermione said.

“Bears?”

“No.”

“Blast-Ended Skrewts?”

“No!” Hermione nearly screamed in frustration. “The duck set Hansel on the shore, came back for Gretel, and delivered her safely to the other side as well! Then the children thanked the duck and she swam away.”

“Kind of anticlimactic,” Ron said critically. “Really, though, you can’t top the oven scene, so why try?”

“The children realized that they now recognized this part of the forest, and they quickly found their way home again,” Hermione said.

“Back to their loving, homicidal parents,” Ron said, groaning.

“Not exactly,” Hermione said. “In the meantime, the mother had died, and the father was thrilled to see his children alive again.”

“Wait. The mother just happened to die at the same time as the witch?” Ron asked.

“Mm-hmm,” Hermione said.

“Is there any chance… could they have been the same person at all?” Ron suggested.

“Well, it’s not clearly stated, but sometimes in the opera based on the fairy tale, the same singer plays both the mother and the witch, so it’s possible,” Hermione said.

“Seriously?” Ron said.

“Seriously,” Hermione said, smiling proudly. “The mother’s not really evil in that version, though. In any case, the father was very happy, and even happier when Gretel and Hansel pulled out handfuls
of jewels and pearls and gold, meaning they would never be poor again.”

“And they all lived happily ever after, since the father never had a reason to dump his children in the middle of the woods again,” Ron said, then looked at her uncertainly. “Right?”

“Right,” she said, but she hesitated for a moment, then said, “Do you want to know something really, really odd?”

“What?” Ron and Harry asked together.

“In the original cast of the ‘Hansel and Gretel’ opera, the witch was played by a performer named, well… you aren’t going to believe this.”

“What?”

“Hermine Finck,” Hermione said, wincing. “Quite a coincidence, isn’t it?”

Harry and Ron exchanged glances.

“Not planning on cooking us in the middle of the night, are you?” Harry teased her.

“I think I can restrain myself,” she said wryly.

“Wouldn’t get much of a meal, anyway,” Ron said. “We’re pretty much skin and bones as it is. Still, I can’t help thinking of Mum and Dad. I never really thought about how, well, you know, with so many of us, and how they always never have quite enough money… It could be a lot worse.”

Harry punched his shoulder sympathetically. The Weasleys might be poor, but he was absolutely sure that Arthur and Molly would rather die than see anything happen to their children. Ron was more fortunate than he knew.

“Maybe we’ll have better luck tomorrow,” Hermione said. “There’s supposed to be a festival going on in the next town. We should be able to pick up something there if we’re careful.”

“No gingerbread, though,” Ron said. “I think I’ve lost my appetite for that for a good long while.”

They laughed and turned in for the night, at least hopeful that tomorrow things might be a little less lean. That night, though, Harry had dreams of Voldemort’s red eyes, staring at him in the darkness, waiting in the shadows of the forest.

Chapter End Notes

Hermione’s little revelation towards the end about the original casting of the *Hansel and Gretel* opera written by Englebert Humperdink is, in fact, true. Check Wikipedia if you don’t believe her!
Goldilocks and the Three B-(e-Serious-Now!)-ears

“I’m hungry.”

Ron and Harry both swiveled their heads in mute disbelief to Hermione, who was sitting on the old couch and looking glumly at the floor.

“Isn’t that usually my line?” Ron asked her. “Then you say, ‘Oh, shut it, Ron! We’re all hungry and talking about it won’t help!’”

Harry privately thought that Ron’s screechy impression of Hermione’s voice sounded a good deal more like Aunt Petunia than its intended target, but Hermione just stared at him bleakly. From nowhere, her stomach made an absolutely appalling squelching noise that clearly proved it was completely empty.

“Blimey,” Harry said, mildly impressed. “You weren’t kidding.”

“I’m tired of being the good little girl who puts up with everything and never complains and acts like an adult all the bloody time!” she yelled. “Let someone else do it for once!”

Ron actually looked scared.

“Hermione?” he asked tentatively. “Um… are you all right?”

“No!” she yelled at the top of her lungs. “My mum and dad don’t even remember I’m alive, the Ministry of Magic would rather kill me than You-Know-Who, and I haven’t had a decent meal in seven weeks! Even my socks are getting loose!”

She threw in a half-scream of total frustration, then punched one of the pillows so hard that feathers erupted all over the tent.

“Okay,” Ron said, still looking slightly terrified. “Now that you’ve killed the evil throw pillow, do you feel any better?”

Hermione glared at him through the blizzard of down.

“A little,” she admitted.

“Well, feel free to slaughter the cushions next if it’ll help at all,” he offered, his tone sounding rather like he was talking to someone on the Closed Ward at St. Mungo’s.

Hermione sighed once, then went limp against the back of the couch.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, embarrassment coloring her words. “That’s been building for a bit.”

“No kidding,” Harry said, poorly concealing his shock.

“Food’s been stretched worse than usual lately,” Ron said, patting her sympathetically on the back. “It’s only natural you’d snap eventually.”

“I suppose,” she said, her face red as a radish. “Can we just forget this happened?”

“Maybe,” Ron said slyly, “but only if you tell us another one of those stupid Muggle fairy tales.”
Harry noted that Ron’s hand somehow hadn’t quite moved from Hermione’s back, not that she seemed to mind all that much. He sighed and wondered just how much longer their little dance was going to go on before one or the other turned into a hormonal time bomb.

“Oh, I suppose I can,” Hermione said, grinning.

“Are there any other ones with food in them?” Ron asked. “I liked the gingerbread house one.”

Quietly Harry thought food might be exactly the wrong thing to bring up, but Hermione laughed, so he assumed that things weren’t going to approach critical mass again in the immediate future. He wasn’t sure he’d ever understand girls.

“Actually, there is another one I can think of,” Hermione said, sitting cross-legged and looking more relaxed. “It’s called ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears’.”

Ron raised an eyebrow.

“Is that the girl’s name? Goldilocks?” he asked.

“Well, yes,” Hermione said. “I mean, I suppose it’s really her nickname, but it’s the name she goes by in the story at any rate.”

“Yeah,” Ron said. “Okay, is she blonde?”

“Of course!” Hermione said, looking at him in confusion.

“It’s just that, what with the logic of these stories, it’d make perfect sense for her to be a brunette or a red-head or something,” Ron said. “I suppose I can accept that.”

“Actually, in some of the really old versions of the story, her name is Silverlocks, and she’s an old lady with grey hair, but most of the later versions have her as a little blonde girl,” Hermione said. “All right then, once upon a time…”

She paused, looking at Ron significantly, but he merely motioned her to continue. Harry thought there was a good chance he was doing his utmost not to set off Hermione again with his usual choral beginning, and he mentally applauded the effort.

“…there lived a little girl with her parents in a great big forest,” Hermione continued.

“Uh-oh,” Ron said. “That’s not going to end well.”

Well, Harry thought with a shrug, Ron had lasted all of ten seconds before interrupting. Technically, that was a personal best.

“You’re quite right,” Hermione said, giving him a terse nod. “As usual we have the forest standing in as a symbol of danger and isolation, complete with primeval associations with the borders of civilization and the chaos inherent in nature, which is of course outside of human control.”

“Say,” Ron said suddenly, “why do we keep camping in forests so often if they’re so bloody dangerous? I mean, if this were a story, it would suggest something bad was going to happen to us out here!”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione all exchanged looks.

“On the other hand, the forest provides excellent cover,” Hermione said, her voice straining a little as she tried to look on the bright side. “We couldn’t exactly set up camp in the middle of town, could
“Suppose not,” Ron said. “It’d be nice if we could, though. It gets lonely out here sometimes.”

“And what are we? Pickled herring?” Hermione said, gesturing to herself and Harry.

“No,” Ron said quickly. “You know, it’s just… we’re around each other so much that it’s almost like the Burrow. Even if Fred and George are running around exploding things, it’s still possible to get lonely because that’s just normal.”

“I suppose I see your meaning,” she said, giving him a smile that let Harry know there wasn’t going to be another explosion of a different kind. “Anyway, one day Goldilocks decided to take a walk through the woods all on her own, even though she wasn’t supposed to.”

“Stupid kid should have talked to the girl with the red hat, you know, if it was one of the versions where she survived,” Ron said. “Going into the woods alone is a bad, bad idea.”

“I quite agree,” Hermione said. “Meanwhile, in another part of the woods, three bears were just sitting down to their morning porridge.”

Ron looked at Harry, who shrugged.

“Go ahead, mate,” he said. “I don’t get it either.”

“What’s the problem?” Hermione asked.

“Now, I take it this is going to be one of those stories with talking animals again, right? Like the wolf in ‘Little Red Riding Hat’?” Ron asked.

“‘Hood,’ Ron, but yes, these are talking animals again,” Hermione said. “It’s just one of those things you have to get used to, kind of like Babbity-Rabbity being able to talk even though an Animagus can’t.”

“Yeah, fine, but at least the wolf was still acting like a wolf, you know? I mean he ate meat and ran around in the woods and bothered old ladies,” Ron said, counting off on his fingers.

“Generally speaking wolves usually don’t attack humans unless cornered, aside from werewolves of course,” Hermione said.

“Right, but bears do not usually eat porridge,” Ron said firmly. “I mean, I suppose maybe they might if they found some lying about in a ditch or something, and we should have such luck, but it doesn’t seem like that’s what’s happening at all.”

“No,” Hermione said, taking a deep breath as though she were steeling herself for an unpleasant task. “You may as well know right now that the bears live in a little cottage, the mother bear cooked breakfast, they eat off china, they sleep in beds, and they have a full set of dining room furniture.”

Ron wrinkled his nose skeptically, then turned to Harry.

“Why do I think Hagrid would probably love this story, but only if the bears were Manticores or something equally horrifying?” he said.

“Probably because the man once gave a dragon a teddy bear,” Harry said with a grin.

“Point taken. So, go on, Hermione. What did the freakishly humanoid bears do during their breakfast of porridge?” he asked with exaggerated politeness.
“Well, Mother Bear had set out all three bowls of porridge, but they were too hot to eat. ‘Come, let us take a walk through the woods until the porridge cools,’ said Father Bear, and Baby Bear squealed in delight as they left,” Hermione said.

“Father Bear, Mother Bear, and Baby Bear?” Ron asked, his face screwing up as though he’d just bit into a lemon. “A bit twee, isn’t that?”

“It’s a children’s story, Ronald,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, right, a kid’s story, so what happens next? The bears go for a pleasant stroll, run into Goldilocks, and eat her alive?” Ron said sarcastically, then paused. “Wait, is that really what happens?”

“No,” Hermione said. “They simply went for a walk in one direction, and Goldilocks happened upon their cottage while they were out.”

“I think mine might have been more interesting,” Ron said, slouching against one of the surviving couch pillows. “So Blondie-Ringlets finds the adorable, pwecious wittle cottage that belongs to three slavering, rabid, talking bears with a penchant for making porridge. Then what?”

“She went into the house,” Hermione said simply.

“Just like that?” Ron said, frowning.

“Yes, without so much as a knock on the front door, she just walked into someone else’s house,” she said. “It was terribly rude of her.”

“It was bloody well breaking and entering is what it was,” Ron said. “That’d be like Apparating into someone’s home without an invitation or summat. What’s this story trying to teaching the little tykes? How to become burglars?”

“Yeah, not sure even Dudley would have pulled that one,” Harry said. “I can picture Lucius Malfoy doing it, though, seeing an ‘intriguing little cottage’” he added, doing his best imitation of the overly-regal Death Eater’s disdainful sniff.

“Not bad, Harry,” Ron said approvingly, “but you forgot the hair flick. When he’s really being a prat, Malfoy’s father always swishes his hair around like the birds in the adverts for Madame Peony’s Enchanting Essences shampoo.”

Hermione giggled at this image, but Harry had to admit, Ron had a point there.

“Back to the story, though. If you think Goldilocks was being naughty before, you haven’t heard the half of it yet,” Hermione said.

“What, she makes off with their honey pot and all the dosh in the biscuit barrel?” Ron asked.

“Well, no, not exactly. The first thing she did was look at the three chairs ranged around the kitchen table. First she sat in Father Bear’s chair, but she said, ‘This chair is too hard,’” Hermione said, making her voice extremely squeaky.

Harry couldn’t help thinking that Hermione’s rendition of Goldilocks’s voice made her sound rather like a cartoon Dudley used to watch that had high-pitched blue people living in the middle of a mushroom patch. Granted, he’d never gotten more than a peep of it from the next room since it was on Dudley’s personal TV, and he was sure the Dursleys would have had a fit since there was a wizard on the show, but even so it had stuck with him. This had the unfortunate side effect of
making his mental image of Goldilocks turn to a bright Delft blue in his mind, and suddenly he remembered that the one and only girl in that mushroom village had been a blonde. Smurfette was forever after the only thing he could picture whenever anyone mentioned Goldilocks.

“What?” Hermione said, looking at him in a way that showed his face had betrayed his odd thoughts.

“Believe me,” Harry said, “it would take much too long to explain.”

“Yeah, go on, Hermione,” Ron urged. “The first chair was too hard on her bum. Then what?”

“Well, she moved on to the Mother Bear’s chair, but this wasn’t right either. ‘Oh! This chair is too soft!’ she cried,” Hermione said, and Harry forced himself not to start humming that ridiculous theme song in reaction to her faulty falsetto.

“Too soft?” Ron asked. “How can a chair be too soft? Is the kid worried about proper back support or something?”

“I don’t know, but the upshot is she didn’t like it,” Hermione said. “Finally, she came to Baby Bear’s chair and said ‘This chair is just right!’ It was a rocking chair, and she rocked back and forth happily, faster and faster, but much too wildly, and she broke the chair all to pieces.”

“Nice. Now she’s not only breaking and entering; she’s also a vandal,” Ron said. “Just how hard do you have to rock a chair to make it come apart at the seams, anyway?”

“Probably shoddy craftsmanship by Father Bear,” Harry said, and Ron whacked him on the back of the head.

“So, after breaking Baby Bear’s chair, she noticed the three bowls of porridge on the table,” Hermione said.

“Feeling peckish, is she?” Ron asked knowingly.

“Apparently, but she was still very picky,” Hermione said. “First she went to Father Bear’s bowl and took a bite. ‘Ooo, this is too hot!’ she said. Next she moved to Mother Bear’s bowl and tasted it. ‘Oh, this is too cold!’”

“Wait, the porridge is from the same pot, yet part of it is too hot and part’s too cold?” Ron asked. “That doesn’t seem right.”

“Actually, it’s quite possible,” Hermione said, squinting. “Depending upon whether the porridge was cooked over a fireplace or on a wood burning stove, there could be hot spots under the pot being used, which could create pockets of warmer or cooler temperatures due to uneven placement of the heating element. In addition, the bowls could be a mismatched set, meaning that the mother’s bowl might be shallow or have a wider mouth, both of which would speed cooling, or the father’s bowl might be better insulated in some way. You also can’t leave out the possibility of a draught blowing from an open window on one part of the table but not on the other. And of course there’s also the chance that Goldilock’s tongue was burned on the first bowl of porridge, making her perceptions of warm and cool less accurate immediately afterwards.”

Ron and Harry looked at one another.

“Did you just give an impromptu speech on the scientific explanation for uneven porridge temperature?” Ron asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Um, well, yes, I suppose so,” Hermione said.
“We really need to get out more,” Ron replied, shaking his head. “Okay, so one was too hot, which, really, why doesn’t she just blow on it, and one was too cold, meaning the bears have been out on their walk too long already.”

“Right. Goldilocks tried Baby Bear’s porridge and said ‘This is just right!’ and gobbled every bite,” Hermione said.

“Okay, breaking and entering, vandalism, and now theft of a baby bear’s breakfast,” Ron said, counting on his fingers. “Kid is piling up quite a record.”

“After glutting herself on ill-gotten porridge, Goldilocks found she felt quite sleepy,” Hermione said. “She decided to wander upstairs to see if there was anyplace she might take a nap.”

“Wait, what?” Ron said, his face an illustration in disbelief. “She just went upstairs to sleep in some strange person’s bed? Okay, now she’s not just naughty, she’s bonkers!”

“It really does sound awful, doesn’t it?” Hermione agreed. “When you consider that in the original ‘Silverlocks’ rendition it was actually an old lady, it suggests that she might have some form of dementia, which really makes the story much less funny and much sadder, but for a child, she does come off as being either very young or very stupid.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Ron said. “So the kid wants a nap.”

“Yes. First she tried Father Bear’s bed but said, ‘This bed is too big!’” Hermione said. “Then she tried Mother Bear’s bed and said, ‘This bed is too small!’”

“Must be some trouble in the bears’ marriage,” Ron said, looking at Harry. “Separate beds and all.”

Hermione flushed scarlet but gamely plodded on.

“Finally, Goldilocks tried Baby Bear’s bed and said…,” Hermione began.

“‘This bed is just right!’” Ron cut in, his squeaky falsetto much worse than hers, and he added an eye roll worthy of someone who’d drunk a good deal of Ogden’s.

“Correct,” Hermione said, sounding annoyed, “and she fell fast asleep.”

“Wait, though. How is Baby Bear’s bed just right when Mother Bear’s bed is too small? Just how big is Baby Bear?” Ron asked.

“I… hadn’t really thought of that,” Hermione said. “It’s still smaller than Father Bear’s bed, though.”

“Mum Bear must have a girlish figure,” Ron said. “Good on her, losing the weight after the apparently massive baby was born.”

“Just then, who should come home but the bear family, and they knew at once something had happened. ‘Someone’s been sitting in my chair!’ Father Bear cried. ‘Someone’s been sitting in my chair!’ Mother Bear cried. ‘Someone’s been sitting in my chair!’ Baby Bear said, “and they’ve broken it all to pieces!’”

“Okay, Baby Bear I get. His rocker is smashed into matchsticks. Really, the parents probably should have noticed that themselves first. But how on earth did Mother and Father know someone had sat in their chairs?” Ron asked.

“Maybe they were drawn away from the table?” Hermione ventured.
“Pretty lame excuse,” Ron said, sniffing.

“Well, they are bears,” Hermione huffed. “Maybe they could smell a human had been there.”

“Or maybe the cushions were crooked,” Harry suggested meekly, worried by how red her face was getting.

“Yeah, I suppose one of those could do it too,” Ron acquiesced, and Harry was glad to realize that he too could scent danger. “Then what?”

“Then they went into the kitchen and noticed the porridge,” Hermione said. “First, Father Bear went to his bowl and said, ‘Someone’s been eating my porridge!’ Then Mother Bear looked at hers and said, ‘Someone’s been eating my porridge!’”

“Well, not much of a loss, really, what with Mother Bear’s being stone cold,” Ron said. “Still, how could they tell someone had eaten their porridge when only one bite was gone?”

“Dirty spoons,” Hermione said through gritted teeth.

“Oh, okay then,” Ron said amiably enough and smiling. “That makes good sense.”

“Then Baby Bear said, ‘Someone’s been eating my porridge, and it’s all gone!’” Hermione said, making Baby Bear’s voice somehow even higher than before with a plaintive wail.

“Poor kid,” Ron said, shaking his head. “Nothing will make you grumpier than some rotten little kid stealing your breakfast.”

“Grumpy as a bear,” Harry put in with a sly grin.

“By this time, the bears were very upset, and they ran upstairs to their bedrooms,” Hermione said.

“Why didn’t they just call a policebear?” Ron said.

Harry saved Hermione the trouble and thumped him with one of the remaining ungutted pillows.

“Anyway,” she said, continuing, “Father Bear said, ‘Someone’s been sleeping in my bed!’”

“And it apparently isn’t Mother Bear,” Ron said, giving Harry a look.

“Someone’s been sleeping in my bed!” said Mother Bear, and so help me, Ronald, if you make another crack about that I’m going to spell your toenails to grow inwards,” Hermione said in a dangerously even voice.

Ron primly sat on his hands, his mouth clamped shut.

“Finally, Baby Bear cried, ‘Someone’s been sleeping in my bed, and there she is!’” Hermione added with a triumphant flourish.

“Uh-oh,” Harry said. “I’m guessing someone’s nap is about to be interrupted.”

“At once, all the bears sprang into the room, and Goldilocks woke with a start to realize the horrible mistake she had made,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, I’m guessing she didn’t realize she was burgling a bunch of bears,” Ron said, then stopped. “That doesn’t sound right. A pack of bears? A pride? No, that’s lions.”
“Actually, it’s a sloth of bears, or occasionally a sleuth,” Hermione said quickly.

Ron and Harry stared at her.

“For pity’s sake, girl, is there nothing you don’t know?” Ron said with a whistle.

“Plenty, and don’t use a double negative in your sentences or you’ll reverse the meaning,” Hermione said automatically. “In any case, Goldilocks woke up to three very angry bears, and that’s where the story goes one of two ways.”

“I’m guessing one of them involves Goldilocks being a replacement for the porridge,” Ron suggested.

“Yes, in one version the bears eat Goldilocks and that’s the end,” Hermione said. “In another version though, they chase her down the stairs and out the door, or occasionally out a window. She runs back home and never again goes into the woods by herself.”

“Probably wasn’t all too fond of porridge after that either,” Ron said. “It’s weird, but I hope someone fixed Baby Bear’s chair at some point. I feel sorry for the little, or perhaps not so little if we’re going by bed size, talking-bear-freak-child.”

Hermione looked at him quizzically.

“Well, if it’s any help, when my parents used to tell the story to me, they had Baby Bear and Goldilocks become friends and then Father Bear fixed the rocking chair and they all had a late breakfast of porridge,” she said. “That’s strictly a non-traditional rendering of the text, though, and would undermine the morals of not wandering off on one’s own and the importance of respecting other people’s property.”

“Yeah, but it’s a nicer ending,” Ron said with a shrug. “And it’s not like you grew up to wander around on your own in the woods or break into people’s houses to get food…”

The three of them looked at each other, realizing that was pretty much exactly what all of them were doing on a daily basis whenever possible.

“Oh, well, right then,” Ron said. “At any rate, you don’t break chairs.”

“No, you just eviscerate pillows,” Harry added with a laugh.

Hermione gave him a strange look, and then began making a choking sound that quickly become gales of laughter. Ron appeared to feel safe enough to join in, and it seemed things had righted themselves once more. They turned in early that night, each one silently hoping that somehow there really would be porridge for breakfast in the morning, or anything at all. Harry’s greatest hope, though, was that he wouldn’t have that ridiculous “la-la-lalala-la” song playing in the background of all his dreams that night.
The leaves had long since turned brown and red, and the stark wind of autumn was moaning through
the empty branches in the deserted stretch of woods where the Trio were camping tonight. It was the
sort of sound that made Harry shudder even when he was safely inside the warmth of the tent. He
wanted to get up and move, to do something, anything, but there just wasn’t anything he could think
of that would improve things. The Horcrux lay on a small table by the couch, concealed from view
by a pillow, but it felt like it was still tainting everything around them. Harry could almost see the
poison it was leaking into the room, increasing his anxiety until he was sure Ron and Hermione were
smothering under its influence as well.

“I’m bored,” Ron said suddenly.

Well, Harry thought, so much for that deep-seated, world-pivoting worry. Apparently Ron’s greatest
problem was creeping ennui.

“Have you tried opening your textbooks?” Hermione asked without looking up from yet another
perusal of Beedle. “I made a point of packing all the books we’d need if we were having a proper
seventh year.”

“What’s the point of running about the countryside in grave peril if we don’t at least get out of doing
schoolwork?” Ron said as he tried (and failed) to juggle an apple core from their lunch. “Seriously, if
being chased by You-Know-Who while trying to save existence as humanity knows it isn’t grounds
for a note of excuse, nothing is. I mean, really, what person in their right mind wants to spend all
their time reading huge, dull books filled with educational stuff no one will ever need to know?”

Hermione leveled a glare at Ron above the tattered book’s cover that Harry thought was probably the
closest he’d ever seen her come to looking like Bellatrix.

“No, no, I mean, if you didn’t know all that boring stuff we’d probably be rotting in Azkaban now or
worse!” Ron said, looking more than a little alarmed.

“Look, Hermione, we really do appreciate you,” Harry broke in, hoping that she might gloss over
Ron’s calling her boring while apologizing. “Seriously! I mean, without you we would have been nabbed at Bill and Fleur’s wedding, and you figured out how to pack everything, and guard the tent, and translate the runes, and well, you stopped me from sitting in that patch of Itching Imps last night.”

“Story!” Ron blurted out suddenly.

Hermione and Harry both turned their heads to stare at him.

“Ehm, just, maybe another story would, you know, get us talking about something else… and keep me from sounding like a prat again for five minutes,” he mumbled, scratching his head and looking apologetic. “Please?”

Hermione blinked a couple times, and Harry wondered if somehow Ron hadn’t managed to say precisely the wrong thing yet again, but then she let out a long sigh and nodded.

“Fine, a story. At least that’s something I know that’s not boring,” she said, still sounding rather bitter as she settled back into the chair. “What sort of story do you want?”

“I don’t know. What kind do you want?” Ron asked.

Harry was stunned to see that Hermione at once smiled, really smiled.

“Are you actually asking me what story I’d like to tell?” she said happily.

“Well, yeah,” Ron said, sounding puzzled.

“We sort of haven’t really asked you what your favorite is, I suppose,” Harry said, realizing that this might be exactly what it took to make her feel appreciated.

“Yeah,” Ron said, cottoning on. “You tell us whatever your favorite is… well, if you haven’t already.”

“Actually, no, I haven’t,” Hermione said, switching to a cross legged position. “I always loved it when my father would tell me the story of ‘Beauty and the Beast.’”

“So, tell us that one then,” Ron said magnanimously with a wave of his hand that Harry thought might be just a shade too lordly, but after a brief pause, Hermione nodded.

“All right then,” she said. “Once upon…”

 “…a time,” Ron finished, and Harry tried to give him another furtive look to watch himself a bit, but thankfully Hermione seemed to have realized this would be coming.

“Yes, Ronald,” she continued, managing to grimace only a little. “There lived three sisters and their father in a cottage deep in the woods.”

“Mum’s dead again?” Ron asked in a surprisingly pleasant voice.

“Yes, the mother is dead again,” Hermione said, rubbing her forehead in a sure sign of vexation. “It’s a common theme. Just go with it.”

“Okay, but at least this time we’ve got three sisters who are all actually related to one another,” Ron said. “Perhaps that will go better for them.”

“Perhaps, or perhaps not,” Hermione said mysteriously. “The family had once been very wealthy
and prosperous, but the father, who had owned many merchant ships, had suffered a serious blow to his fortunes. Every one of his ships was lost in a great hurricane, and he and his daughters were left destitute."

“Wait, he lost all of his ships in one big hurricane? What was he doing sending them into a hurricane in the first place?” Ron asked.

“Well, Muggles weren’t always very good at telling what the weather would be like until they invented radar and satellites and lots of other things that help them keep track of where hurricanes and storms and things are going to be,” Hermione said. “This was long before all that was invented.”

“What’s a satellite?” Ron asked.

“Oh, it’s sort of like, hmm…,” Hermione said, furrowing her brow in thought. “Can you picture a camera strapped onto an unmanned broomstick and flying higher than a Muggle airplane?”

Ron stared at her.

“Why the hell would anyone do that? It would go crashing into something sooner or later,” he said.

“Well, no, you see, from that high up, the camera sends a picture of the clouds and wind currents and precipitation and the like back down to the Muggles, and they’re able to figure out ahead of time whether storms are coming their way. Usually,” Hermione said.

“On a broomstick?” Ron said, still looking at her as though she’d gone off her nut.

“Not a real broomstick, of course,” Hermione said, starting to get flustered again. “It’s actually a big metal thing that’s launched into space and circles the globe in orbit, but I was just trying to compare it to something you might understand.”

“Right, because strapping cameras to broomsticks is common behavior in the wizarding world,” Ron said.

“Actually, it might be rather fun at that,” Harry said, really pondering it. “I mean, picture a camera on a seeker’s broom during a Quidditch match, and the picture is sent to a big screen so the crowd can see everything from the player’s viewpoint.”

“Hey, yeah!” Ron said, getting excited. “Quidditch cam! You know something, Harry? I think you’re onto something there! That’d be dead brilliant, that would!”

Hermione looked back and forth between the two of them and then shrugged.

“Actually, it probably would be, but we’ve gotten pretty far from the story. In any case, because Muggles didn’t have satellites back then, the father had indeed lost his whole fleet of ships…”

“Rotten luck, that,” Ron said, shaking his head.

“Indeed, and now they had been forced to sell all their fine things and live in a tiny house in the middle of the forest,” Hermione said. “The two oldest daughters complained loudly to their father about everything that they had to endure.”

“I can’t really blame them. If you don’t know when bad weather’s going to strike, he really should have kept at least one ship in port the whole time, so it pretty much is his fault they’re penniless now,” Ron said. “I’d grouse too.”
“But the youngest daughter never said a word in anger, knowing her father already felt horrible for what had happened and she didn’t want to make him feel any worse,” Hermione said, continuing as though Ron hadn’t spoken.

“Oh,” Ron said, blushing a bit. “Ehm, well, that was right decent. Good on her.”

“Very.” Harry added in, feeling rather bad for Ron and wondering if he was drawing a parallel between the two complaining sisters and the way he sometimes talked about the lack of money in the Weasley family. “Do any of these people have names?”

“Only the youngest daughter has a name in the story, and she’s called Beauty because she’s so lovely,” Hermione said, moving on quickly as though she too sensed that Ron was embarrassed by his misstep.

“They call her Beauty?” Ron said, raising an eyebrow.

“In the French version that translates to Belle, which isn’t really that odd of a name,” Hermione explained.

“Could be worse,” he said appreciatively. “I suppose they could have named her Spectacular or Fetching or Dazzling or Hottie McHotterson or something.”

Harry snorted loudly, and Hermione gave Ron a look of utter disbelief.

“Hottie McHotterson?” she said slowly.

“You can’t argue that wouldn’t be worse than Beauty,” Ron said simply.

“No, I absolutely cannot argue that,” Hermione said with a shake of her head. “In any case, Beauty did nearly all of the work around the house while her sisters sat and mourned for the days when they had servants to do everything for them or gossiped about the country boys and whether any of them would choose to marry a girl with no dowry.”

“What’s a dowry?” Ron asked.

Harry shuddered and quietly asked Anyone who might be listening to please keep Hermione’s explanation of the commoditization of females through bride price to a maximum of thirty minutes at most. Glancing at his watch after Hermione used the phrase “equating the institution of marriage to a banking operation with the bride’s father acting as broker of his daughter’s personhood,” he realized that not only had Anyone apparently been away from his desk at the time of his plea, but also Ron had actually started to doze. Harry scented danger in the offing.

“Okay!” he said entirely too loudly and noticed that Ron shuddered awake in his seat, though fortunately Hermione apparently didn’t. “Yes, well, thankfully those days are long past in the wizarding world, and it was a rotten thing to do.”

“Yeah,” Ron said a touch too emphatically. “Dowries are bad!”

Hermione gave him a searching look for a moment.

“Uh… they are bad, right?” Ron mumbled out of the side of his mouth to Harry, who almost imperceptibly nodded.

“Well, at least that’s settled,” Hermione said, seeming to be pacified.
“Thank Merlin,” Ron said sotto voce.

“One day, as the two older sisters were lounging about and Beauty was cleaning, a messenger arrived for their father. He told them that one of their ships had only been blown far off course and was finally coming back into port in a few days time,” Hermione said.

“That’s great!” Ron said. “So they’re rich again?”

“That’s precisely what they all thought,” Hermione said. “The father made plans to leave at once to meet the ship when it arrived in the port of the great city, and his two oldest daughters immediately came up with lists of things they wanted him to buy for them with their newly restored wealth.”

“Yeah, just think of all the stuff you could get if you suddenly went from being poor to filthy rich,” Ron said, a dreamy look on his face, then he glanced over at Harry. “Blimey, when you first found out you had all that money in your vault when you were eleven, how did you manage not to go bonkers and buy up half of Diagon Alley?”

“I dunno,” Harry said, frowning. “I thought about it, but I suppose Hagrid kept me rather on track. Besides, after years spent sleeping with spiders under a cupboard, just getting clothes that fit and an ice cream cone seemed like I was being posh.”

“I suppose,” Ron said. “Still, I think I would have at least bought a solid gold Snitch or something.”

“He didn’t even know what a Snitch was then, Ron,” Hermione said with an edge to her voice.

“Well, I guess that explains it then,” Ron said with a shrug. “So daughters one and two wanted, what, fancy dresses and jewelry and the like?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, “but when the father asked Beauty what she wanted, she said only, ‘I’d like a rose, please, if it isn’t too much trouble.’”

“A rose?” Ron asked. “Seriously, the girl just wanted a rose?”

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“I can’t decide whether that’s one of the saddest things I’ve ever heard or if this girl is just really good at trying to get a lot of presents by being extra humble,” Ron said.

Hermione sighed and waved her hand as if to tell Ron to think whatever he liked, then continued on.

“The father set off to the city, which was a journey of several days through the woods,” she said when Ron politely raised his hand exactly as if he were in class. “Yes?”

“Did he meet a talking cannibalistic wolf?” he asked seriously.

“No, no wolves in this story,” Hermione said.

“What how about an evil witch who keeps maidens in giant towers?” Harry chimed in.

“No, no witch,” Hermione said.

“A castle surrounded by big thorns with people impaled on them?”

“A cottage with seven dwarfs?

“A cottage with anthropomorphic bears?”
“A cottage made of gingerbread?”

“Hey, you ever notice how many cottages are in these things?” Ron said, breaking the litany.

Hermione seemed to be biting her lip not to laugh, but she finally said in a voice that was cracking a little, “No, he didn’t run into any of those on his way to the city. In fact, his journey was quite uneventful.”

“Oh,” Ron said, looking disappointed. “I was rather hoping something would happen. Seems anticlimactic otherwise.”

“Unfortunately, when he got to the city, it turned out that the ship wasn’t his, and he had to return to his little home as poor as he had left it,” Hermione told them.

“Well, that bloody well stinks!” Ron complained. “Bad enough he winds up poor without basically losing everything all over again!”

“Yeah, that’s pretty harsh,” Harry agreed.

“Even worse, on his way back through the woods, he became lost in a terrible thunderstorm,” Hermione said. “He stumbled on through the rain, the wind whipping through the branches of the trees and tearing at him with every step, when suddenly, in the flash from one of the lightning bolts he saw a set of high gates in front of him, and on the other side of them was an enormous castle.”

“Ah-ha!” Ron cried. “I knew it! Nothing happened going through the woods the first time, but when he goes back through them, then we get the weird stuff!”

“Yes, Ronald, your powers of prognostication rival those of Professor Trelawney,” Hermione sighed. “He ran to the gates and begged for entry or else he would perish in the storm, and slowly the gates opened, though no one was there.”

“The father walked all the way to the castle, and the main door swung open just as before. He called out to thank his benefactor, but once again, no one answered. Torches lit themselves down a corridor one by one, and he followed them into a great dining room where a meal appeared on the table for him. He ate hungrily, and once he was done, another set of torches lit his way to a comfortable bedroom where he slept until dawn.”

“Huh,” Ron said. “Okay, so the self-lighting torches are a bit of magic any First Year could do, but the food appearing on the table sounds like the place might have some House-elves.”

Hermione stopped and tilted her head to one side, thinking, before she said slowly, “Actually, that is remarkably similar to what happens at Hogwarts for dinner, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Harry said, “and Hogwarts has a big gate in front of it as well, and it’s a castle of course, and it’s set off in the woods…”

The three of them looked at one another, all a bit startled.

“Yes, so,” Hermione continued, obviously feeling unnerved, “the father slept well and called out his thanks to whoever had helped him, then walked down to the door and through a lovely garden back towards the gate he’d entered. He noticed that the garden was full of the most beautiful red roses he
had ever seen, hundreds and thousands of them. ‘Well,’ he said to himself, ‘I may not be able to bring home anything my two oldest daughters wanted, but perhaps I can at least give Beauty her rose.’"

“That’ll go over well. ‘Hey, everybody, we’re still poor, but at least I got Beauty her posy!’ I’m sure they’ll perk right up over that,” Ron said.

“But no sooner had the man plucked a single rose than a horrible, enormous beast appeared before him, snarling ferociously,” Hermione said, doing her best to sound snarly, but in fact sounding more like she had a bad cold.


“No, it was daylight, remember?” Harry said, warding off Hermione’s response.

“Yes,” she said to Harry. “Well spotted. No, he was simply a very large, very hairy animal.”

“Like that talking wolf with Red Hat?” Ron asked.

“I suppose a little like that, but he wasn’t a wolf,” Hermione said.

“Was he wearing a grandmother’s nightgown?” Ron asked with deceptive sincerity, but his eyes were dancing gleefully.

“No, he was not!” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said. “Would have been interesting if he was.”

“Anyway,” Hermione said, plowing forward, “the beast grabbed the man and shook him, saying ‘I have given you shelter, hospitality, safety, and you reward my kindness with theft!’”

“Geez, mate, calm down, it’s only a flower,” Ron said, looking sympathetic. “He’s got a whole garden of them!”

“Ah, but the beast was very selfish,” Hermione explained. “He then said that the penalty for stealing a rose from his garden was death.”

Ron looked at her, then at Harry, then back at Hermione again.

“For one rose?” Ron asked as though he needed to clarify this point.

“Yes,” Hermione said, folding her arms.

“Okay, I know some of Sprout’s plants are pretty expensive and all, but that’s way too steep a price for pilfering one rose,” Ron said.

“It’s very extreme, yes, but the beast insisted he was going to kill the man as punishment for his treachery. The man begged for his life, saying he had three daughters with no one else in the world to care for them, and this gave the beast pause,” Hermione said.

“Well, maybe he’s got a heart after all,” Harry said.

“Perhaps you need not die,’ the beast said, and he led the man to his stables where there was a magnificent white charger,” Hermione said. “This horse will take you home in the blink of an eye. Once you are there, you have until sundown. If one of your daughters agrees to come back and take your place here, I shall let you live, but if none of them do, you must swear to return and face your
death. If you break your promise, I will come for you myself.”

“Oh, for pity’s sake, this is another one of those stories where the parents swap the kids’ lives for their own, isn’t it!” Ron said indignantly.

“Not quite,” Hermione soothed him. “You’ll see. The beast sat the man on the horse’s back, and at once he found himself back outside his little cottage again.”

“Portkey,” Ron commented at once.

Hermione looked at him quizzically.

“Not the horse, obviously, since a living thing can’t be one, but maybe the saddle,” Ron said. “Strap a portkey on a horse, sit someone on top of it and tell them to hang on tight, and they’ll think the horse brought them there. Plus there’s the preplanned return at sunset, which you can do with a portkey too.”

“Hey, yeah,” Harry said. “That’d work perfectly, wouldn’t it!”

“It really would,” Hermione said, raising her eyebrows. “This seems to be another story that wizards had a hand in somewhere.”

“Okay, so what’s dear old Dad do when he gets home to his daughters,” Ron said, hunkering down on the small sofa and appearing to get more comfortable.

“Well, he told them about the ship, and while Beauty was disappointed, the two older daughters berated their father and wailed with misery, thinking only of themselves,” Hermione said.

“Poor father. I don’t think he’s got much chance of those two taking his place,” Ron said. “Pretty sure he might like to be shod of them, too.”

“Then the father gave Beauty her rose, and when she asked where he got it, he told them the story of his strange stay in the castle and the penalty the beast had laid on him for taking the rose. At once, the two older sisters turned on Beauty, saying that her selfishness in wanting a rose had caused the whole problem,” Hermione said.

“Wait, wait, the girl just asked for a rose. She didn’t say, ‘Hey, Dad, go steal a rose out of a crazy psychopathic beast’s garden for me, will you?’” Ron said.

“No, she’d asked for the least of them all, and yet the sisters blamed her for everything. The father, however, said that this was foolishness and that he had only until sunset to arrange affairs for them because he had to return to the beast to take his punishment,” Hermione continued.

“So he’s not going to sell out one of his kids?” Ron asked, sounding extremely pleased.

“No, it never even crossed his mind to let one of his daughters take his place,” Hermione said.

“Wow,” Ron said, smiling, “an actual, decent, moral, nice parent. I think I like this story.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “If that were Uncle Vernon, he’d already have duct taped me to the saddle and whacked the horse to get it started.”

“Beauty, however, felt deeply guilty that her rose had caused all the trouble, and her sisters’ unkind words made her feel even worse,” Hermione said.

“Aw, poor kid,” Ron said. “She must take after her dad.”
‘I wonder,’ she said, ‘if I sit upon the horse, would it take me back to the beast in my father’s place?’ And so that’s just what she did. She slipped out the door, mounted the horse, and at once it took off at top speed moments before the sun set. She could see her father and her sisters staring in horror out the window for a single second, and the next she was outside the gates of the beast’s castle,’ Hermione said. ‘The horse wandered towards the house, and the moment they had passed into the beast’s domain, the gates clanged shut behind them, locking them inside.’

‘Whoa,’ Ron said, letting out a half chuckle. ‘Okay, there’s being a good daughter, but that’s rather over the top!’

‘I don’t know,’ Harry said, shaking his head. ‘I think I can picture Ginny doing something like that if it meant saving your dad.’

‘Maybe,’ Ron admitted. ‘On the other hand, would you do that for your Uncle Vernon?’

‘Not half likely,’ Harry said at once.

Ron was about to make a smart remark when he seemed to stop short.

‘Hey, wait,’ Ron said, pointing at Hermione. ‘You did do that, didn’t you, trade yourself so your parents would be all right while you go off to face the beast?’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ Hermione said, blushing, then continued on as though she didn’t want to think about it. ‘As soon as Beauty stepped off the horse, the beast appeared in front of her, but he behaved quite differently with her than with her father. ‘You are welcome here,’ he said, ‘and all that I have is yours.’”

‘Well, that’s rather nice of him, isn’t it,’ Harry said, hoping Hermione wouldn’t be too put off by the memory of having to leave her parents behind to fight Voldemort.

‘But you must never leave this place again so long as you live,’” Hermione finished.

‘Oh. Always a catch, isn’t there. That’s not so nice then,’” Ron said, grimacing.

‘No, it really wasn’t,’ Hermione agreed. ‘The beast told her she could go anywhere in the castle, though, and that his only request was that she would eat dinner with him in the evenings.’

‘That’s not too bad… well, unless she’s on the menu,’ Ron said.

‘Beauty followed the trail of lit torches to her room, then threw herself down on her bed and cried as though her heart would break,” Hermione said. “She missed her family terribly, and the knowledge that she would never see them again was almost too much to bear.”

‘Nah, she’ll see them again,” Ron said, putting an arm around her. “You wait and see. Usually these things turn out okay for the girl, especially if she’s pretty.”

Hermione, who a moment ago had looked close to tears, gave Ron a smile.

‘Yes, well, let’s hope that’s the case for significantly less pretty heroines as well,” Hermione said.

‘You’re pretty,” Ron blurted, then immediately reddened.

Harry abruptly wished he were anywhere else.

“So, ehm, how’d the first dinner go?” he asked lamely.
“Oh!” Hermione said, sounding as though she’d almost forgotten he was there. “Um, right, yes, not well. The beast had terrifying table manners, ripping the food before him to shreds and making a horrible mess everywhere.”

“Sounds like Fred and George,” Ron said.

“Or someone else I could mention,” Hermione said slyly, moving her gaze to the pile of dirty dishes and then pointedly back to Ron.

“Right, right, it’s my turn to do the washing up tonight, point taken,” he said, looking sheepish.

“Beauty suffered through the dinner as well as she could, eating little and trying not to stare at the beast. At the end of the meal, the dishes disappeared…”

“House-elves, I’m telling you,” Ron said firmly.

“…and then the beast asked Beauty if she would marry him,” Hermione finished.

“Okay, now that came out of nowhere,” Ron said, looking shocked. “The big monster asked the girl to marry him?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, folding her hands.

“Is that legal with your lot? Marrying outside the species?” Ron asked, looking rather sick.

“No!” Hermione yelped in disgust. “Remember, Muggles think only humans can talk.”

“And parrots,” Harry chimed in.

“But they just mimic sounds!” Hermione said desperately. “What I mean is, since the beast is speaking, Muggles would regard him as being more human-like than animal in that regard.”

“Just the same, that’s not the done thing,” Ron said, still frowning. “You don’t just whip a girl away on a Portkeyed horse, incarcerate her, eat like a pig in front of her, and they pipe up with ‘Oy! Want to be me missus?’”

Harry snorted very loudly.

“Unsurprisingly, Beauty said no,” Hermione said.

“I should jolly well think so,” Ron said. “I mean, the bloke’s filthy rich and all, but there’s a point where even Pansy would turn down a proposal, and marrying a great big talking wolf-bear-buffalo-whatever-it-is has got to be that point.”

“Things went on like this for several months. Each day, Beauty would find a lovely new dress in her room, and then she would wander through the gardens or the rooms of the castle. Each day, some new amusement presented itself. One day a room had a little puppet theatre with marionettes that made her laugh, and another time a group of musical instruments began to play on their own with no musicians visible,” Hermione said.

“Well, at least she isn’t bored,” Ron said.

“Still other times a great library appeared, filled to the rafters with books, while at other times there were rooms filled with mirrors and jewelry and dresses and things,” Hermione said.

“Bet I can guess which one you’d like best,” Harry said with a grin.
“I’ll admit, the description of the library did make my mouth water even when I was little. But the strangest thing of all was that Beauty started to have the oddest dreams. Every night, after she ate with the beast, and after he had proposed to her and she had said no, she would go up to her room and fall into a sound sleep, and each night she dreamed of a handsome prince,” Hermione said.

“Can’t say I blame her,” Ron said. “I mean, if you look at the descriptions of all the things in the castle, you notice that aside from the beast she never sees another living soul, or even a dead one. Even when there’s food or music or summat, it’s brought in by invisible people. Makes sense she’d make up a fantasy fellow in her subconscious.”

“True,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “It really is very isolating. Plus she never sees even the beast during the day since he’s out killing people.”

“He’s what?!” Ron shouted, his jaw dropping open.

“What? Oh, yes, I forgot to mention that bit. The beast roamed through the forest by day, killing unsuspecting travelers and eating them,” Hermione said off-handedly.

“When it gets to the point when eating people is so normal that you just gloss over it, you know you’ve been camping out too long,” Ron said, staring at her. “Anything else you forget to mention, like, say, the father murdered his two other daughters or Beauty enjoyed maiming cute little woodland creatures or something?”

“No, of course not!” Hermione said indignantly. “It just doesn’t come into the story all that much, so it slipped my mind.”

“Okay,” Ron said, inching a little away from her.

“Anyway, about the dream prince,” Harry said, trying to steer the story back on track before Ron fled the tent out of paranoia.

“Yes, the prince, right. Well, each night, Beauty saw him standing behind metal bars, and he would say, ‘Dear Beauty, do not let your eyes deceive you. Set me free,” Hermione said, trying to lower her voice into an appropriately seductive tone.

“So the beast is keeping him locked up somewhere?” Ron asked.

“That’s what Beauty thought, and she spent her days looking for him, but the rooms seemed to move about in the castle, and they were always changing so that it was impossible for her to find the same place twice,” Hermione explained. “She did sometimes find traces of him, though. Once she found a locket with his picture inside it, and remembering that the beast had said anything he had was hers as well, she put it around her neck. Another time she came across a huge portrait of him…”

“Sounds like an ego-maniac,” Ron said. “You sure this fellow isn’t Malfoy?”

“…but it had been slashed to ribbons by what looked like the beast’s claws,” Hermione said.

“That’s actually pretty disturbing,” Ron said. “Was the painting still moving?”

“No, Ron, it was a Muggle painting,” Hermione said. “They don’t move, remember?”

“Well, what with the self-lighting torches, the Portkey, the Apparating dinner, and the apparent House-elves, I figured moving pictures weren’t much of a stretch,” Ron said, shrugging.

“Not to mention the Room of Requirement,” Harry added.
“What?” both Ron and Hermione chorused.

“The rooms keep changing every time she goes into them, and it gives her something that she likes to
distract her,” Harry said. “Sounds quite a bit like the Room of Requirement, doesn’t it?”

“Actually, it sort of does,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “I wonder just how rare that spell is, then.”

“I don’t know, but it’d come in handy for this place,” Harry said. “Just think what would happen if
we could treat the tent that way?”

“Yeah,” Ron said, a dreamy smile on his face. “A whole room full of nothing but food.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, looking equally enthralled.

“Yeah,” Hermione agreed, her eyes lost in a dream.

The boys turned to stare at her.

“What?” she said. “I’m as hungry as you lot are.”

“Just thought you’d still be on about a big library,” Ron said.

“I love books, but you can’t eat them,” Hermione said, “and right now I want kippers, some piping
hot mash, and a roast, followed by a chocolate sundae the size of one of Hagrid’s Halloween
pumpkins.”

“Girl after my own heart,” Harry said with a laugh, only to see Ron giving him a disapproving look.

“Each night Beauty dreamed of her prince, and he would sigh softly and say that he feared he would
remain a prisoner forever unless she would release him,” Hermione said.

“Poor prince,” Ron said. “Sounds like he’s on detention with Snape forever.”

“Could you just not mention his name?” Harry said irritably.

“Sorry,” Ron said, ducking his head in embarrassment. “Just with all the Hogwarts imagery and the
like, if anyone would be locking people up, especially someone really unattractive, well, it’s pretty
easy to picture the beast as… the Other You Know Who.”

“We don’t have to take it quite that far,” Harry said. “It’s not like saying Vol…”

“Just don’t!” Ron stopped him, making the others jump with his sudden shouting. “Sorry, just… I
still don’t like the name. I won’t mention old hook-nose, and you won’t mention old no-nose,
agreed?”

“Agreed,” Harry said, though personally he still thought not using Voldemort’s name was ridiculous.

“This went on for many months,” Hermione continued, “each day following the same pattern.
Slowly, Beauty realized the beast didn’t intend to harm her, and she even became rather fond of him,
but still she was unhappy. Finally, one night, when she was at the dinner table with the beast, Beauty
began to cry.”

“Well, yeah, what with him spattering food all over the place,” Ron said, “it can’t really make for an
uplifting dining experience.”

“The beast stopped tearing his food and looked at her, then said in a kind tone, ‘What is wrong,
dearest Beauty?’” Hermione said.

“‘Well, let’s see,’” Ron said in a falsetto. “‘You’re keeping me prisoner, I haven’t seen another human being in months, a big hairy monster keeps trying to marry me, I’m having dreams about a fit bit of a prince that I can’t find, and by the way, your table manners are simply appalling! Aside from all that, I’m ginger peachy!’”

Ron threw in batting his eyelashes wildly, and Harry and Hermione both giggled.

“Not quite,” Hermione said. “Instead, Beauty said that she missed her father and sisters so much that she might die of homesickness.”

“Poor kid,” Ron said. “I get how she feels. Still, rotten as it is being stuck out here in the middle of nowhere with just the three of us, it’d be a lot worse if I were all alone like her.”

“Yeah, it could definitely be worse,” Harry said, looking at his two friends and actually feeling a moment of gratitude.

“The beast looked at her with pity and said, ‘Then I shall let you go home to visit your family, but you must return in two months. If you do not, I shall surely die,’” the beast said.

“Hey, that’s pretty decent of him,” Ron said, smiling.

“While it does border on Stockholm Syndrome, yes, the point is he doesn’t really want to harm her,” Hermione said. “The beast told her to pack whatever she liked from the castle to give to her family and put it in trunks, so she filled them with dresses and jewels, gold coins and all sorts of marvelous treasures, and no matter how much she put into the trunks, they never overflowed.”

“Like your beaded bag,” Ron said. “Is that where you got the idea?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said, looking startled. “I suppose it might have been lying about in my subconscious. In any case, when the morning came, the beast gave her a ring and a mirror. He told her that to return to the castle, all she had to do was put on the ring and twist it around her finger, and she would be there. Then he told her to go to sleep, and in the morning she would be home.”

“That’s convenient,” Ron said. “And obviously the ring’s another portkey. But what about the mirror?”

“Oh, the mirror was for her to look into to see the beast if ever she had need of him,” she said.

“So… like Sirius’s two way mirror with Harry,’” Ron said, sounding more than a little perturbed, then immediately flushing scarlet. “Sorry, Harry. I probably shouldn’t have mentioned that one either.”

“It’s alright,” Harry said, quite honestly. “I don’t mind thinking of Sirius. Of course I was a stupid prat for not checking that mirror before I ran off into the night to try to save him…”

By now Harry’s mood had started to darken, and Hermione pushed on with the story as though to try to bury the thought in the past.

“That night, when Beauty laid down to sleep, she dreamed of her prince once more, but she was shocked to see that he was laying on the ground looking ill and sad,” Hermione said. “She asked him, ‘Dear prince, what ails thee so?’ and he replied, ‘Oh, you mean to abandon me, and you shall never return, and I shall die of grief for you, my love!’”
“Her subconscious is really feeling guilty,” Ron said. “Also, why do fairy tale people always say thee? It’s right annoying, that is.”

“Beauty assured him that she would keep her promise to the beast, and that she really didn’t want any harm to come to him, but the prince still looked mournful. All at once, Beauty opened her eyes and found herself sleeping on her little bed in her father’s cottage in the forest,” Hermione said, completely ignoring Ron’s interruption with practiced skill.

“I wish I were in my own bed, too,” Ron said. “Be nice to just wake up there tomorrow.”

“The father was overjoyed to see Beauty again, and her sisters seemed delighted as well, especially when they saw all the presents Beauty had for them. There was so much gold they were able to move back into town to a fine house, and Beauty and her sisters went to balls and on picnics and to wealthy people’s homes again, but the sisters often seemed to treat Beauty as though she were in the way since they had gotten quite used to life without her in her absence,” Hermione said.

“Well, that’s gratitude for you,” Ron said, frowning indignantly. “She makes them all rich again, and they don’t even say thank you, just push her to the side. What a couple of right old hags.”

“They obviously aren’t very nice,” Hermione agreed. “However, Beauty loved being with her father, and she told him all about the Beast, who had been kind and generous to her, and about her dreams of the prince, which had stopped since she left the castle. She asked her father what he thought the prince meant about freeing him, and the father said he wondered if the prince wouldn’t be freed if Beauty agreed to marry the beast.”

“That’s a pretty wide leap of logic,” Harry said.

“Yeah, all you’ve got to do to get the love of your life is marry somebody else, specifically this wooly mammoth over here,” Ron said. “The father may have gone a bit round the bend from all the forest-based poverty.”

“Beauty said over and over that she must return to the beast the next day, but always her sisters and father would beg her to spend one more day with them, and she would, forgetting about the time,” Hermione said.

“Uh-oh,” Ron said. “If this story’s like that Ashyweeper one, forgetting about the time has serious consequences.”

“Indeed,” Hermione said, beaming at Ron like he’d said something especially clever. “One day, she came across the magic mirror, and it immediately showed her the beast, but he was lying still on the grass in the garden, just where the prince had been in her dream, and he wasn’t moving.”

“That’s what you get for not keeping up with the calendar,” Ron said sagely.

“She let two whole months go by without once checking on him?” Harry said, raising an eyebrow. “That seems pretty cold.”

“Well, she was excited to be with her family, and I never said she was very bright,” Hermione said. “At once, she twisted the ring around her finger, and she was immediately standing next to the beast in his garden, but all the roses were withering. She knelt beside him, terrified that he might be dead because of her long absence, and she found that he wasn’t moving, nor breathing, nor showing any sign of life.”

“Blimey, now that’s just plain sad,” Ron said. “Not only that, but how’s that little slip of a thing going to bury that hulking monster?”

“Oh yeah,” Ron said. “I suppose they’d do it well enough, if she even knows they’re there.”

Through this exchange, Hermione half-closed her eyes as though she was pondering a difficult Arithmancy problem.

“Supposing there are House-elves in the beast’s home, and supposing he did die, what would happen to them?” Hermione asked.

“Dunno,” Ron said with a shrug. “I suppose they’d go to whoever inherits the house.”

“Yeah, like Kreacher,” Harry said.

“But supposing there wasn’t any next of kin,” Hermione said, still squinting into the middle distance. “What would happen then?”

“Hermione,” Ron said, patting her hand, “as much as it might be really tempting to kill all the Malfoys and anyone tangentially related to them, I’m pretty sure there has to be a better way to free them that.”

“I wasn’t contemplating murder!” she said, slapping his hand away. “It’s just an interesting psychological and legal question.”

“Whatever lets you sleep well at night,” he said, sitting back against the old chair. “So, the beast is dead. Now what?”

“I didn’t say the beast was dead,” Hermione said crossly. “I said he wasn’t breathing or moving or showing any sign of life.”

“That would mean he’s dead,” Ron pointed out.

“Did you forget about Sleeping Beauty and Snow White already?” Hermione asked.

“Oh yeah,” he said, smiling a little. “So maybe he’s not totally dead but just down with a mild case of nearly dead.”

Hermione rubbed her hand over her face, apparently mentally exhausted, but nodded.

“That’s the general idea, Ronald,” she said. “Beauty ran to a nearby fountain, filled her hands with water, and sprinkled on the beast’s face, and he began to stir.”

“So he was faking it,” Ron said, nodding in satisfaction.

“No, he wasn’t faking it!” Hermione said, and Harry noted that she was pretty close to snapping again. “He was honestly distraught by her absence and had fainted from missing her so!”

“Right,” Ron said, winking at Harry and mouthing the words “faking it” again.

“You realize I’m right here and can see everything you’re doing,” Hermione said, folding her arms and giving him a freezing glare.

“Oh, right,” Ron said. “So, what happened when the not-dead beast was suddenly much more obviously not dead?”

“Beauty said, ‘Oh, dear beast, I didn’t know how much I loved you until I thought you were dead!’”
and he replied that she should go back in the castle and he would join her for dinner as he usually did,” Hermione said.

“Fast recovery there,” Ron said. “Looks like his little ruse worked pretty well.”

Hermione gave him a sour look but continued, “That night, after dinner, the beast again asked Beauty if she would marry him, but this time she answered, ‘Yes, dear beast.’”

Ron looked like he had something to say again, but for once he just rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“What?” Hermione asked.

“I reckon I’d best just hold my tongue,” Ron said, and Harry inwardly applauded. “Seriously, what can you say to that one? So Beauty married the beast and they had a bunch of furry sprogs?”

“No,” Hermione said. “Beauty agreeing to marry the beast broke the enchantment over him, and suddenly he turned into the prince from her dreams.”

“So… he’s the prince?” Ron said.

“That’s what I just said,” Hermione answered. “The whole time, the prince was trying to get her to say yes to the beast’s proposal of marriage. You see, as a human the beast had been very vain and arrogant, and as punishment a fairy had turned him into a beast until someone would love him in spite of his appearance rather than because of it, and of course he had been forbidden to speak of the spell or else he would stay a beast forever.”

Harry looked at Ron, who seemed to be mulling the whole thing over.

“Okay,” Ron said. “That’s plausible. Your average fairy would think that was a good bit of fun.”

“So the prince and Beauty were married, with her father and sisters in attendance, and a great cloud of fireflies spelled out in the sky ‘Long live the prince and his bride!’” Hermione said, looking a bit starry eyed.

“Nice bit of Charms work there,” Ron said. “So what happened to the evil sisters, since something always does seem to happen to them in these things?”

“In some versions, nothing,” Hermione said. “They all simply live happily ever after, but in others the fairy returns and changes the sisters into two statues who guard the entrance to the castle garden until they finally realize their own faults, but the fairy says she doesn’t think that’s ever likely to happen.”

“Those statues,” Ron said slowly, “they wouldn’t have happened to be of two great big gargoyles on either side of the gate, now would they?”

“Well, since the fairy did turn the beast into something hideous, it wouldn’t be out of character for her to do the same thing again,” Hermione reasoned. “Why?”

“Because when we get back to Hogwarts someday, I’m going to have a little conversation with the statues at the gate,” Ron said. “A thousand years is a bit long to be turned into stone, even for someone who crossed a fairy.”

“I…,” Hermione said as though to dismiss the idea, then shrugged. “Why not? It certainly wouldn’t be the strangest thing ever to happen at Hogwarts.”
“No, that’d be if Snape turned out to be a… prince… in… disguise,” Harry said, slowly stopping as he realized that’s exactly what he had turned out to be.

“Yeah, but I doubt he’s going to be transformed by love in the end,” Ron said. “There’s only just so far these parallels go.”

Harry grunted his agreement, and quiet reigned in the tent for the moment. He had to admit, Hermione’s story had been far from boring, but on a cold night, as the wind raged in the trees above, it had made him more than a little homesick for Hogwarts and the people there. When all this was over, the Horcruxes destroyed and the inevitable battle won, he hoped he’d be able to see its towers again.
It was raining for the fifth day in a row, and the tent was starting to get soggy. It didn’t even help that they kept switching locations from day to day. All of England, Wales, and Scotland seemed to be drowning in rain. This night, their temporary home was perched precariously on a cliff above the sea, and the sound of the waves was mixing with the lightning and thunder. No matter how many times a day Hermione muttered “Impervious,” at the leaking ceiling, a new drip was bound to pop up as soon as the old one was plugged. Her mood wasn’t helped much by the fact the humidity was slowly turning her hair into a rather sizable afro, something Ron had made a habit of pointing out at least three times already that day. Harry was staring at the locket again, wondering exactly what was inside it and whether Norbert might be able to melt it if he could manage to track him down in Romania.

“Is there any fish left?” Ron asked, looking up from Hermione’s Arithmancy textbook, a sure sign he was now as bored as humanly possible.

“No,” Hermione said. “We were lucky to be able to summon that one, and I don’t think it’s a good idea to try again in the middle of this storm.”

Ron grimaced, then threw the book on the pillow beside him.

“Story,” he said without further preamble.

Hermione looked at him with disbelief.


Ron looked at her as though she’d gone mad.

“What? If you want to try using a single word command as a request for me to tell you another fairy tale, I should have the right to reply in an equally disjointed and rude way,” Hermione said, rummaging through her little beaded bag, “particularly when you just came dangerously close to abusing one of my books.”

“She’s got you there, mate,” Harry said, shrugging. “She still hasn’t forgiven me for almost getting jam on her copy of Traveling with Trolls.”

“You’ve still got that thing?” Ron said, mouth agape.

“My reading matter is my own business, I think,” Hermione said, finally retrieving a hair tie from the bottom of her apparently cavernous bag. “So shall we try this again?”

“Hermione,” Ron said, batting his eyelashes, “would you please do us the honor of telling us another one of your fabulously bizarre and completely mental fairy tales that should put all Muggle children in therapy for the rest of their lives?”
Hermione sighed, but Harry was glad to see she looked amused.

“Fine,” Hermione said, then closed her eyes for a moment, looking as though she were trying to decide on the next tale. “Considering our location, let’s have the story of ‘The Little Seamaid.’”

“What’s a seamaid?” Ron asked.

“A mermaid,” Hermione said, and Harry could tell she was already starting to regret agreeing to yet another round of this. Frankly, that was usually what he enjoyed best about the evening’s entertainment.

“So why don’t they just call her a mermaid then?” Ron asked.

“I don’t know. Some versions do call her the little mermaid instead, but the closest translation from the original Danish is actually seamaid,” Hermione said.

“It’s about a breakfast roll?” Ron said, looking completely confused.

“The Danish language,” Hermione said, and Harry suspected she was already biting her tongue to keep from screaming. “The story was written by a man named Hans Christian Andersen in Denmark.”

“Oh,” Ron said, his features downcast. “I was rather hoping this one was about food again. So she’s a seamaid. Hey, what do they call the men, then?” he asked, suddenly looking sly.

“I suppose they’d be called…” but Hermione stopped cold in her tracks and gave him a withering glare. “Mermen. Mermaids and mermen. Alright then?”

“Fine,” Ron said, looking innocent but throwing a wicked look at Harry the moment Hermione’s gaze was elsewhere.

“Muggles know about mermaids?” Harry asked, desperate to get the conversation back on a level keel.

“A bit, but not much of what they know is right, and it’s changed over the years,” Hermione said. “They think mermaids are beautiful women that have a fishtail from the waist down. In the older stories they sang sailors to their deaths during storms like this one.”

“So kind of like the mermaid in the prefects’ bathroom,” Harry said, remembering the rather flirty painting.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “Annoying, isn’t she?”

“Completely,” Ron said, but Harry had heard Ron go on about her charms often enough in the year he’d been a prefect that he was completely sure that ‘annoying’ wasn’t in the list of the top fifty adjectives he would have used to describe her. “Do go on.”

“Well, once upon…”

“…a time,” Ron said, motioning for her to continue.

“Yes, Ronald,” she said, and Harry began to worry that the lines in her forehead might become permanent. “In the sea there lived a great sea-king and his seven daughters, the princesses of the sea, along with their grandmother. Each was as lovely as could be, but the youngest one was the most beautiful of all.”
“Seven kids,” Ron said, looking at Harry. “Nice not to be the only one to know what it feels like to fight for the loo in the morning.”

“They lived in a gigantic palace, Ron,” Hermione said. “I doubt that was much of an issue.”

“Maybe,” Ron said, “but then again, with seven daughters and a grandmother, I’m betting the poor dad still has to make a reservation even in his own palace.”

Hermione rolled her eyes but continued on.

“The seven daughters were raised by their grandmother to be elegant and beautiful, and she told them stories of the world above, the strange animals that lived there and the tall buildings, and flowers and trees and birds. The princesses were not allowed to go above the water until their fifteenth birthday, and because they were kept in suspense, they thought and dreamed a good deal about the strange world above,” Hermione said.

“Wait, there’s seven daughters, and none of them are fifteen yet,” Ron said, working a sum on his hands. “Were any of them twins?”

“No,” Hermione said. “Why?”

“Just, okay, if each one of them is under fifteen, and there’s seven of them, then the youngest one would have to be what, eight or so years old?” Ron said.

Hermione squinted at the tent roof, obviously doing the math in her head.

“While highly unlikely, yes, the maximum age would be about eight years old,” Hermione said.

“So, at eight the kid is already the most beautiful of them all?” Ron asked. “There’s just something deeply wrong with that.”

“It’s a fairy tale thing, Ron,” Hermione said, sighing. “Remember, Snow White was almost as lovely as the queen when she was just a child too.”

“None of these girls ever goes through an awkward stage with spots and gangly legs?” Ron asked. “Doesn’t really seem fair.”

“A mermaid wouldn’t exactly be likely to have gangly legs. Besides, they’re magical princesses, Ronald,” Hermione said. “Please, just go with it, alright?”

“Fine, but it’s still weird,” Ron said, turning to Harry. “I’m betting even Madam Rosmerta was a little homely at some point, though.”

“Most likely,” Hermione said, seeming almost to smile for a moment, then continuing on. “When the eldest sister had her chance to go to the world above, she came down again and told her little sisters all about the land and the strange places there, and each sister pined in turn to see all the amazing things above the sea.”

“Pined?” Ron said.

“It means really wanted to,” Hermione said.

“I know what it means, but still, ‘pined’? You’re laying the old timey talk on a little thick there, aren’t you?” Ron said.

“It’s a perfectly acceptable English word,” Hermione said, looking rather prim.
“Okay, but the moment you start using lemman or mickle or something, I’m out of here, rain or no,” Ron said, nodding in determination.

“Since when do you know the fifteenth century term for sweetheart?” Hermione said, looking genuinely surprised.

“Since I caught Nick writing the Fat Lady a sonnet last Valentine’s Day,” Ron said, shuddering. “Some things just shouldn’t be imagined.”

“Fine. Each of the sisters waited in turn for their birthdays, and each of them saw something different: a great thunderstorm or icebergs floating among ships or children bathing at the beach or what have you, but the littlest mermaid, who had the longest to wait, was the one who wanted most of all to go above,” Hermione said.

“Not much fun being the youngest,” Ron said. “Everything winds up being a hand-me-down, and you never do get to be the first to do much of anything.”

“You’re not the youngest in your family,” Harry pointed out. “That’s Ginny.”

“I know, but it’s different since she’s the only girl in I don’t know how many generations,” Ron said. “It’s not like Dad made her wear Percy’s old trainers.”

Personally, Harry thought Ginny would have looked wonderful even in a beat up pair of Percy’s old shoes, but he decided to keep mum on that topic.

“Finally, the youngest sister turned fifteen, and her grandmother dressed her regally since she was now a grown up princess,” Hermione said.

“She was grown up at fifteen?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “In Muggle culture back in olden times, people were sometimes married off quite young since they didn’t live very long. In Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, Juliet is only thirteen and her parents arrange a marriage for her, with her mother mentioning she got married when she was only twelve.”

“Uh… huh,” Ron said. “So this Shakespeare chap has been dead a long time, right?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, “almost four hundred years.”

“Good. Sounds like a right perv,” Ron said, shaking his head. “Anyway, go on. How’d Gran dress up—wait, what’s her name?”

“She doesn’t have one,” Hermione said. “When Disney made the movie years later, they called her Ariel.”

“Like Prospero’s servant spirit?” Ron said. “Wasn’t Ariel a boy?”

“Well, that’s left kind of vague in The Tempest,” Hermione said. “Wait, how do you know about that play? I thought you didn’t know anything about Shakespeare.”

“I don’t,” Ron said. “Prospero’s on a Chocolate Frog card.”

“Oh,” Hermione said. “Well, that does explain it, though now I’m wondering how Shakespeare found out about a real wizard. It could even be possible that Midsummer Night’s Dream is based on reality, with Titania and Oberon being based on actual fairies from the time period or historical
conglomerations of multiple powerful beings. Perhaps Puck might actually be an archetype from one of the lesser known pixie species. But if Shakespeare did have knowledge of actual wizarding practices, it sheds a different light on his treatment of the three witches in, um, the Scottish play.”

Ron had been nearly on the point of napping again when he noticed Hermione’s hesitation.

“‘The Scottish play?’ Ron asked. ‘That’s what he named it? Bit of a boring title.”

“No,” Hermione said carefully. “It’s just that many Muggles consider it bad luck to say the name of that play unless they’re actually performing it. I don’t like to be superstitious, but it does seem like we can’t be too careful at the moment.”

“They won’t say the name?” Harry said, his interest suddenly peaked. “That seems awfully familiar. It’s almost like Vol…”

“Will you just not say that!” Ron yelped, slapping a cushion over Harry’s mouth. “It makes me nervous.”

“Sorry,” Harry’s muffled voice said through the pillow.

“Good,” Ron said, drawing his attention back to Hermione. “So we’ll skip the Scottish play. This Shakespeare sounds like a bit of weirdo.”

“He also wrote a play called The Winter’s Tale with a character named Hermione in it,” she said with a wry expression. “She’s where my parents got my name from.”

“Oh,” Ron said, glancing at Harry. “Well, that explains it, I suppose.”

“Explains what?” Hermione said.

“Well, your name’s a bit unusual, yeah?” Ron said, and Harry silently sent mental pleadings for him to shut it before Hermione’s temper blew a completely unrepairable hole in the tent.

“You have a sister named Ginevra, and we go to school with Luna, Astoria, Cho, and Draco, and we know a Filius, Mundungus, Daedalus, Bellatrix, Narcissa, Lucius, and Walpurga,” Hermione said, almost visibly shaking.

“Well, yeah, those are normal names,” Ron said. “Your name’s odd.”

Harry quickly interposed himself between the two of them before Ron tempted her towards justifiable murder.

“So how did the grandmother dress up the youngest mermaid?” Harry asked, desperately hoping the ploy would work.

Hermione snapped her head towards him, her eyes actually sparking in the dim light of the tent, while Ron looked like he might have finally figured out he had made a serious tactical error, especially since they were camped so close to a cliff.

“New seashells?” Ron said tentatively with a weak smile.

Hermione took a deep, steadying breath, then shook her shoulders.

“Actually, yes,” she said, apparently having decided to let the whole thing go via one of the most massive acts of will power Harry had witnessed thus far. “She let eight oysters attach themselves to the mermaid’s tail as decoration, and the girl said that it hurt, but the grandmother said that beauty
must suffer pain.”

“Yow,” Ron said. “How pretty can she be if she’s wandering around in agony because the equivalent of eight Monster Book of Monsters are biting into her fin?”

“Good point, but it’s practically the same thing as wearing high heels,” Hermione said.

“They hurt that much?” Ron asked, actually appearing interested.

“Imagine shoving your feet into a pair of oboes and then trying to walk on tiptoe all night,” Hermione said.

“Okay,” Ron said, wincing. “I suddenly feel extra sorry for Ashyweeper and her glass shoes.”

“So the youngest mermaid was allowed at long last to rise to the surface of the ocean and see the human world for the first time,” Hermione said. “When she first poked her head through the waves, she could see a great ship with many lights blazing on its deck. It was growing dark…”

“Wait, dark?” Ron cut in. “How long did it take Grandma to shove eight oysters on her grand-kid’s fin anyway? She wasted the whole day!”

Hermione looked strained, but continued on gamely, “There was a wonderful fireworks display going on, and she was stunned by the beauty of the brightly colored flowers in the air drifting towards their reflections in the water.”

“Oh, so it’s a dramatic time shift,” Ron said, nodding knowledgably. “I wasn’t supposed to notice the gap in events because it was more important for the pretty scenery to come in. And it is pretty. Fireworks on the water… kind of reminds me of the Quidditch World Cup.”

“Yeah,” Harry chimed in, remembering the day fondly. “The Bulgarians and Irish had some really cool looking stuff in the air that night.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, looking excited. “Do you remember the Omnioculars we bought? I used them to watch someone in the third row pick his nose over and over again.”

“I tell them the lead up to the most romantic part of the whole bloody story and he starts talking about—that,” Hermione muttered to herself. “There is absolutely no hope at all, none.”

“Hmm?” Ron said, seeming to remember she was there. “What did you say?”

“Not a thing,” Hermione said. “At any rate, during all of this, the little mermaid looked at a young boy who stood on the deck watching the fireworks. He was dressed very regally, and she assumed he must be a prince. She couldn’t help thinking he was extremely handsome.”

“Uh-oh,” Ron said, looking at Harry. “I’m sensing Cupid’s twanging bow.”

“Quite,” Hermione said. “The little mermaid fell head over heels in love at first sight with the young prince, but suddenly a vicious storm came up, and before she knew it, the prince’s ship was cracking to pieces in the high waves.”

“Shoddy workmanship, that,” Ron said, shaking his head. “Boats really should stay afloat. It’s sort of the definition of thing, yeah?”

“Well, regardless of the skills of the boatwrights who built the ship, she split to pieces,” Hermione said.
“Who did?” Ron asked, looking alarmed.

“The ship,” Hermione said, staring at him as though he’d grown another head.

“But you said ‘she split,’” Ron pointed out. “Who’s she?”

“Muggles use the feminine pronoun to refer to ships sometimes, as well as automobiles, planes, spaceships, motorbikes, that sort of thing,” Hermione said.

Ron looked at Harry, sensing he was treading dangerous waters.

“Ehm, why is the boat a girl?” he asked.

“No idea,” Harry said. “Hermione?”

“I suppose it could have to do with the innate possessiveness associated with owning a member of the female sex as well as a certain fondness for the object and a desire to personify something that essentially is responsible for the safety and welfare of those riding it,” Hermione said, squinting one eye shut as staring towards the roof of the tent. “I’m rather surprised at myself for falling into the idiom without questioning it. It’s obviously sexist but perhaps not overtly misogynistic.”

“Oh, well that’s good then,” Ron said, and Harry could tell he was making a desperate stab in the dark. When Hermione didn’t immediately answer but remained rapt in her own bemusement, he quickly shifted gears and said, “I mean, it’s bad and awful and terrible and repressive and shockingly… and stuff.”

Hermione shook her head as thought to clear it, then gave him an odd look.

“Yes,” she said, though Harry couldn’t tell which end of Ron’s thoughts she was agreeing with. “In any case, the ship went to the bottom of the sea, leaving bits of flotsam and jetsam dotting the murky waters along with one little mermaid who was looking about in vain for the prince.”

“That’s nice,” Ron said, frowning. “Just ignore all the other blokes who are drowning because she’s got to find Prince I-Don’t-Know-His-Name-But-He’s-Fit-So-I-Looooove-Him.”

“Well, she’s a mermaid,” Hermione said, shrugging. “Normally she and her sisters would be luring sailors to their deaths out of habit, so it’s at least a step in the right direction.”

“Okay, I guess that’s progress,” Ron said, swallowing hard.

Personally, Harry suddenly found that stained glass window in the Prefects bathroom a lot less alluring.

“So did the mermaid find him before he kicked off?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said, “she pulled the prince from the wreckage. He was unconscious, and she carefully kept his head above water all through the night, watching over him and kissing his brow.”

Ron grimaced.

“Nice that she kept him from drowning to death, but couldn’t she have just refrained from, you know, molesting him?” he said.

“She’s more than a little forward, yes,” Hermione said. “Reminds me a little of Romilda Vane”

“Reminds me more of Colin Creevy’s brother and the Giant Squid in his first year,” Harry said.
“Remember when he fell out of the boat crossing the lake and it saved him?”

“Yeah,” Ron said, looking nostalgic. “I miss old Squiddy. Hope You-Know-Who doesn’t have a thing against oversized sealife.”

“In any case, when dawn broke, she was still pillowing his head on her breast as she pushed them towards land,” Hermione said.

Harry started to cough rather forcefully at that particular image, but oddly Ron appeared to be trying to figure something out.

“Nope,” he finally admitted. “I can’t suss out the anatomy on that one, even with a fishtail.”

“Just go with it,” Hermione said. “At long last they reached a beach with a lovely little church and convent, the bells just pealing to welcome the dawn, and she careful laid him on the beach, then hid herself near the water’s edge by cloaking her head in sea foam, waiting to see who would come to him and if he would wake.”

“Sea foam as camouflage,” Harry said. “Okay, I can see that.”

“Until a high wind comes up anyway,” Ron said. “So who found him?”

“A group of girls processing from morning services to the school at the convent were walking along the edge of the beach, and one, the most beautiful of them, noticed the prince lying on the sand. She called for help and then knelt beside him, and at once he opened his eyes and began to show signs of life,” Hermione said.

“So he’ll be okay,” Ron said. “Well, that’s nice anyway. The mermaid saved his life.”

“Actually, the prince said the girl had saved his life,” Hermione said.

“What, by not tripping over him?” he said.

Hermione shrugged and nodded.

“Muggles are weird,” Ron said to Harry. “So what’d the seamaid, mermaid, mersea, whatever, do?”

“Well, she went back to her father’s palace below the sea, but she was heartbroken. She began spending all her time in her garden, for she had found a life-size statue of the prince that had fallen from the wrecked ship, and she put it beneath a great tree of coral at the very center. She spent hours wrapped around the statue, longing for him,” Hermione said.

“This girl needs to get a life,” Ron said.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “She’s starting to sound a little creepy.”

“There’s a limit,” Ron agreed. “I mean, when you had a thing for Cho in fifth year, you didn’t actually try to make out with her picture or something.”

“No,” Harry said, “but I’ve caught you sneaking a goodnight kiss to your picture of Cindy Crawford.

Harry was at once pummeled with a sofa cushion, and Ron blushed so brightly his freckles disappeared entirely into the redness.

“The little mermaid refused to tell anyone what was bothering her, but she did speak to her
grandmother, asking her about the lands above the water,” Hermione said.

“The same one that stuck painful shellfish on her tail?” Ron asked.

“The very same,” Hermione said.

“Somehow I don’t think that’s going to end well,” he said.

“‘Grandmother,’ she asked,” and here Hermione spoke in her usual high falsetto she reserved for female fairy tale characters, “‘Do humans ever die like we do?’”

“Argh! That’s it, the prince needs a restraining order pronto!” Ron said, looking honestly terrified. “Of all the things she can ask, that’s her number one pressing question?”

“Do I even want to know why she’s asking that?” Harry said, wondering if he had turned as green as his eyes.

“Oh, it just gets better at this point,” Hermione said, and Harry noted she was actually enjoying this a bit. “The grandmother explained that yes, people died, but they didn’t live as long as merpeople do, who all live to be a hundred years old.”

“Okay, that’s wrong on a bunch of counts,” Ron said. “First off, Dumbledore was human and lived to be over 150, so we’ve got them beat there.”

“Yes, but that’s wizards,” Hermione said. “Muggles don’t usually make it to one hundred, and none of them ever live that long.”

“Fine, Muggles are in delicate health, but every single merperson just collapses in a heap on their hundredth birthday?” Ron said.

“According to the grandmother in the story, yes,” Hermione said.

“Okay, that’s deeply depressing, but then what happened to the little seamaid’s mum?” Ron said, folding his arms in satisfaction as though he’d found a flaw in one of Percy’s cauldron-bottom reports.

“I… I don’t know,” said Hermione, honestly surprised. “She’s obviously dead in the story, but if the seamaid’s grandmother is still alive, her mother should be as well.”

“Well spotted, Ron,” Harry said, giving him a bow in respect.

“Thank you,” he said, smiling smugly.

Hermione, meanwhile, was chewing on her lip and staring into space.

“Ehm, Hermione?” Ron asked, waving a hand in front of her face. “You still in there?”

“Anderson never stipulates whether the grandmother is paternal or maternal,” she said as though she were talking to herself. “If she’s the paternal grandmother, the father is still alive, so that would be acceptable, though it would suggest the king married a seamaid significantly older than he was, actually older than his own mother. However, it’s never stated whether or not the merpeople age, except, no, wait, the grandmother is definitely described as having gray hair. Now, if she’s the maternal grandmother, then her daughter would have predeceased her, meaning the mermaid’s mother couldn’t have reached one hundred. If so, that means that merpeople live a century unless there’s an accident or violence of some kind, raising the specter of foul play.”
Harry and Ron looked at each other. If they didn’t intervene, this could go on indefinitely.

“Tuna boat,” Ron said.

“Huh?” Hermione said, snapping back.

“She got caught in one of those illegal tuna nets that nab dolphins,” Ron said.

“That’s terrible! I don’t want the little seamaid’s mother to have died in a tuna net!” Hermione said, looking traumatized.

“Okay, okay, no tuna net!” Ron backpedaled, looking to Harry for help.

“Let’s just assume that something happened that the story didn’t cover and leave it at that,” Harry said.

“Fine,” Hermione said, giving a little shudder.

Harry was pretty sure that when this whole Horcrux mess was over, she was going to start a companion group to SPEW that focused on proper tuna harvesting techniques.

“So, merpeople usually live to a hundred years and then kick off,” Ron said helpfully. “Go on.”

“Right,” Hermione said, pulling herself together. “The grandmother went on to say that although humans lived shorter lives, they had immortal souls capable of going to heaven when they died, but merpeople, though they lived longer, just turned to foam on the sea when they died and didn’t have a soul.”

Ron blinked.

“Well, that’s specist of old Anderson,” Ron said indignantly. “Why does he assume the only sentient beings on the planet with souls are humans?”

Harry didn’t say much, but he thought of Sirius and Dumbledore, Mad-Eye and Cedric, his mum and dad, and he hoped Anderson was right on at least half of that.

“Oh, that’s only part of it,” Hermione said. “The grandmother explained that there was a way for a mermaid to earn a soul.”

“Well, that’s peachy,” Ron said. “What’s that?”

“If a mermaid could make a human man fall in love with her and married him, when the priest joined their hands, her husband would give her a soul while retaining his own,” Hermione said.

“Oh, come off it!” Ron said. “Seriously? If she marries some bloke she gets a soul out of the bargain?”

“It’s an anti-Horcrux,” Harry said in a flash of realization. “The husband splits his soul without committing a murder, and that’s why it stays whole instead of being damaged.”

Hermione and Ron looked at one another in shock.

“You’re right,” Hermione said, her voice shaky. “It really does sound like that, doesn’t it? I wonder how Anderson knew about dark magic?”

“Creepy,” Ron said, shuddering. “And here I was thinking the weirdest part of all this was that the
story was really, deeply, scarily sexist and treated women like incomplete moral beings without the
guidance of a supposedly superior male proprietor.”

Harry’s and Hermione’s eyes nearly bugged out of their heads.

“What?” Ron said. “You were thinking it too.”

“Yes,” Hermione said carefully, “I was. Almost verbatim. I just didn’t think you were.”

Ron smiled beatifically and motioned for her to go on with the story.

“In any case, after the little mermaid’s conversation with the grandmother, one of her sisters
eventually realized something was bothering her,” Hermione said.

“Big clue there was little sis trying to jump a lump of granite,” Ron mumbled out of the corner of his
mouth to Harry.

“Finally she confided in one of her sisters, and that sister told the other five, and then the sisters told
their most intimate friends who told only their very closest acquaintances,” Hermione said.

“And by that time, the secret had warped so much in the telling that everyone thought kid sister had
eloped with Stubby Boardman and was plotting to take over Bulgaria,” Ron said.

“Considering the rumour mill at Hogwarts, that wouldn’t be unlikely, but as it happened one of the
other mermaids knew where the prince lived, in a castle built right beside the sea, and the little
mermaid followed her there to see what had become of the prince,” Hermione explained.

“I suppose dropping in once to see if the fellow’s all right after that many hours unconscious is fairly
reasonable,” Ron said. “Maybe actually introducing herself.”

“Every night she swam up the canal to the castle, where the prince’s bedroom had a balcony over the
water, and she would rise out of the ocean, her arms raised beseechingly, hoping to catch the smallest
glimpse of him from the shadows,” Hermione said.

“And we’re right back in the land of Deeply Disturbing,” Harry said. “She peeps in his window?
Isn’t that illegal?”

“Really, it’s not all that different from Romeo standing under Juliet’s balcony window and
eavesdropping on her,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but he only did that the one time, not every night, and he was honest about it and owned up
to the fact he was there after a bit,” Ron said. “Besides, I always sort of suspected she knew he was
there anyway. Who wanders onto a balcony and starts blithering to no one about that really cute boy
she just met and how much she hopes he asks her out unless she thinks he’s standing there hiding in
the bushes?”

Hermione blinked. Harry blinked.

“What?” Ron asked.

“I thought you said earlier you didn’t know anything about Shakespeare?” Harry asked in complete
disbelief.

“Okay, so I read that one once,” Ron admitted sheepishly.

“Closely enough to have come up with staging directions and motivations for the sequence of
dialogue in the balcony scene?” Hermione said, narrowing her eyes.

“I got bored one day when we were shut in during that freak snowstorm in Cornwall three weeks ago, grabbed a book out of your beaded bag and started reading,” Ron said.

“You brought Shakespeare on a Horcrux hunt?” Harry said, refocusing his look of bewilderment on Hermione. “What for?”

“It’s Shakespeare,” Hermione said, looking unruffled. “He’s appropriate for any situation.”

“So, anyway, the little stalkermaid is floating about, staring in the prince’s bedroom window at night and generally behaving like she’s gone right round the twist,” Ron said, obviously trying to move on from his perusal of the romances of the bard. “Then what?”

“Her father, the king of the merpeople, threw a party,” Hermione said.

“And she plucked up the courage to ask the prince?” Ron said, brightening.

“No,” Hermione said. “Besides, how would he go to a party at the bottom of the ocean?”

“Bubblehead charm?” Harry suggested. “Gillyweed?”

“Partial human transformation into a really stupid looking shark/man?” Ron mumbled almost inaudibly.

“All right, so there are ways,” Hermione huffed, “but not if you’re a Muggle.”

“Scuba diving gear?” Harry said.

“Fine! So there are ways even if you are a Muggle, but not in the 1700s or whenever this is bloody well supposed to have happened!” Hermione all but screamed, then paused. “Well, aside from diving bells, but they wouldn’t solve the problem of the massive water pressure at that depth. In any case, no, she did not ask the prince to the ball!”

“Fine,” Ron said. “She was too scared to ask him. Whatever.”

“Yes, because it’s so easy to ask the person you fancy to go to a ball,” Harry said, sarcasm in his tone.

“Well, you eventually got up the nerve,” Ron said as though he were trying to make Harry feel better.

“Not him, you idiot,” Hermione said, snorting. “I believe he meant you.”

“I… what?” Ron said, suddenly looking cornered.

“Wasn’t it Harry who ended up getting Parvati to ask Padma to go to the Yule Ball with you?” Hermione said. “If he hadn’t, you’d have been stuck up in Gryffindor Tower alone, what was the phrase you used in regards to me, ‘crying your eyes out’?”

“Oh,” Ron said, looking as though somehow he’d been let off the hook. “Well, if you want to get technical about it, yeah, though I don’t think I’d be doing much weeping.”

“So the little mermaid was called upon to sing at the ball, and she was judged to have the most beautiful voice of all the merfolk, who of course had voices far lovelier than any heard on land,” Hermione said.
“So, out of desperation for her one true love, the little mermaid wins a singing competition?” Harry said.

“That’s odd,” Ron said, smiling, “but at least it’s healthy. She went out and got some other interests to take her mind off things.”

“Then later than night she ran away from home to make a deal with the Sea Witch so she could win the prince’s love,” Hermione said.

“So not so much with the outside interests then,” Ron said. “I’ve got to hand it to the kid on one thing, though. She’s tenacious.”

“The Sea Witch lived on the other side of a horrible collection of underwater polyps that tried to grab anything that went past, strangling them to death, so the little mermaid decided the best plan was to —”

“Go home,” Ron cut in.

“Probably, but she decided to propel herself through the field as quickly as possible, hoping they wouldn’t grab her. She rocketed forward with all her strength, and the polyps reached out their horrid tentacles towards her, but they couldn’t catch her. She saw all sorts of things they were holding, skeletons of fish and people, and even a mermaid,” Hermione said.

“Hey! Maybe that’s her mum!” Ron cried as though he’d solved the world’s greatest mystery.

Hermione considered for a moment, then said slowly, “Possibly.”

“Yeah, and she didn’t turn into foam on the water, either,” Harry said. “What’s up with that?”

“Yeah, Gran’s story seems to be full of some pretty gaping holes,” Ron said.

“I… I don’t know,” Hermione said, throwing her hands up in despair. “Even if the grandmother’s story isn’t full of holes, Anderson’s is at any rate.”

“Yeah, but then so are all of the rest of them,” Ron said reasonably. “They’re still a decent way to pass the time. What else are we going to do? Shadow puppetry on the tent wall?”

Harry tried very hard to school his features into an expression that would be worn by someone who hadn’t been trying to create the silhouette of a hippogriff next to the kitchen sink three hours ago.

“Fine, well, when she got to the witch’s house, the old woman already knew why she had come. ‘So, you want to go ashore to win the prince’s heart, do you,’ said the witch,” Hermione said, providing the witch with a suitably crackly voice.

“So, what, the witch is a Legilimens?” Ron asked.

“Perhaps,” Hermione said, considering. “It would explain a lot. Then she went back to feeding her pet toads with sugar cubes from her mouth.”

“Eugh!” Harry and Ron chorused together.

“That is just plain unsanitary!” Ron said, shuddering.

“Yeah, even Neville never did that with Trevor,” Harry said.

“Be about the only way he’d ever get a kiss, though,” Ron said with a snort.
“I think you’re selling Neville quite short,” Hermione said primly, looking very offended. “There are lots of girls who think he’s quite wonderful.”

“Oh, come off it,” Ron said. “Neville’s an alright sort as far as he goes, but seriously, I think Colin Creevey might be able to beat him up?”

“Why do boys always assume girls choose the attractiveness of boys based on whom they’re capable of besting in physical competition?” Hermione said, highly annoyed. “Why on earth would anyone even want to beat up poor Colin?”

“Cause they can?” Ron offered lamely.

Harry heard Hermione muttering some choice words under her breath about the fate of humanity based on the relative morality of adolescent males, but a moment later she continued the story.

“The Sea Witch agreed to help the little mermaid get a pair of legs so she could walk about on land,” Hermione said.

“Okay, well, that’s nice enough,” Harry said. “At least this story has a positive portrayal of witches in it.”

“Leaving out the whole toad-sugar-cube-kissing thing,” Ron added.

“Not exactly,” Hermione said. “Her payment was to be the best thing the littler mermaid had.”

“Her crown?” Harry guessed.

“Her multiple painful oysters stuck on her tail?” Ron asked.

“Her… mermaids don’t really seem to have a whole lot of possessions,” Harry said.

“No, her voice,” Hermione said.

“Um… seriously?” Ron said. “The Sea Witch wants to make her have chronic laryngitis?”

“No, she wants to cut out her tongue,” Hermione said, looking rather green herself.

Harry looked back and forth between the two of them, trying to decide who was in danger of getting sick first. Personally, he was feeling more than a bit nauseated himself. He was also starting to wonder whether the Dursleys might not have done him a bit of a favor by saying he couldn’t read fairy tales.

“That is just plain repulsive and makes no sense at all!” Ron finally spat out. “Blech! I mean, what’s she going to do, make a necklace out of it or something?”

“No, she wanted to put it in the potion with the rest of the ingredients,” Hermione said.

“That’s just… okay, there’s dark magic, and then there’s bloody freaking pitch black dark magic, and then there’s this!” Ron yelled. “I hope the kid wised up, went home, and married some nice hinky punk or something.”

“No, she agreed,” Hermione said, “even after the witch warned her that the potion would make it feel as though she were being cut in two with a sword and that every step she took would be as though she trod on razor sharp knives.”

“Mental,” Ron said, shaking his head sadly. “That’s not even funny anymore. She’s just plain sick.”
“She also warned her that on the morning after the prince married someone else, the mermaid’s heart would break, and she would at once turn to foam on the ocean, disappearing into oblivion with no soul and no hope of an afterlife,” Hermione added.

“This is not a good deal,” Ron said. “This is a very, very bad deal.”

Harry nodded numbly. Granted, though, most of Hermione’s stories usually ended happily for the main character, so perhaps things weren’t quite as bleak as they seemed.

“I quite agree,” Hermione said. “However, the little mermaid took the potion from her, rose to the surface, lay down on the beach, and then drank it down. The Sea Witch had been true to her word, and a pain as though a sword were slicing her in half burned white hot through her body until she passed out. When she awoke, still in pain, she found she had two of the loveliest legs in all the world.”

“Great, so she’s Betty bloody Grable,” Ron said. “Has someone forgotten to tell her that in the 1700s women didn’t go around with their legs visible anyway?”

“Betty Grable?” Hermione said, looking startled.

“I have layers,” Ron said. “Besides, Dad always fancied her. He’s got a picture of her in his workshop next to the poster of all the different kinds of plugs.”

“I’ve never seen that in there,” Hermione said, frowning as though she were trying to recall the layout of the room.

“Of course not,” Ron said, grinning. “Dad’s not dumb. It’s bewitched so that anyone with two X chromosomes only sees a gardening calendar. Mum would have kittens.”

“Well, regardless of your father’s appreciation for Miss Grable’s appendages, you’d normally be quite right about the cultural taboos regarding exposed legs in public during this era,” Hermione said. “However, when the mermaid awoke, who was standing over her but the prince himself, checking to see if she was alive. Embarrassed, she covered herself in her long hair.”

“Yeah, that’ll work,” Ron said to Harry. “Not unless she was that parsnip bird.”

“Rapunzel,” Hermione corrected him automatically. “In any case, the prince asked her kindly what her name was and what she was doing there.”

“Kindly, huh? He finds a naked girl on the beach and wants to know her name and address. I’m not thinking he’s qualifying for sainthood from all this completely unselfish kindness,” Ron said with a snort.

“Point taken,” Hermione said, blushing a bit. “However, the mermaid couldn’t speak, so she tried to tell him with her eyes all that had happened.”

“How’d that work out for her?” Ron asked mock-seriously.

“Not too well. The prince had no memory of the mermaid who had saved him, but he decided to bring her back to the castle and have a page’s outfit made for her. She soon became his favorite of all his servants, and she followed him everywhere. She even slept outside his bedroom door on a cushion he had made for her,” Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

“So… she’s his pet?” Harry said.
“Apparently so,” Hermione said. “He called her his ‘dear dumb child’ and she used to go on expeditions with him and his other servants and slaves and courtiers up into the hills around the castle, but all the time she was still in pain. Occasionally her feet would actually start to openly bleed on the ground, but she made light of it and tripped on gaily, so no one thought anything of it.”

“He just… let her bleed all over the rocks?” Ron asked. “Didn’t he maybe think of calling a doctor?”

“Apparently not,” Hermione said.

“Talk about self-absorbed,” Ron said. “This guy makes Draco look like a sensitive soul.”

“Yeah, I think even Dudley would have at least told somebody else to call the hospital, even if for no other reason than to keep her from ruining his carpet,” Harry added.

“But she could still walk, even with the knives and daggers and needles and pins and red hot pokers or whatever it was in her feet?” Ron asked.

“She not only walked but she danced as well. In fact there’s a ballet version of this whole story,” Hermione said. “The prince held a ball one night, and he applauded one of his servants for singing particularly well, though the mermaid knew her own voice had been far sweeter. However, when the band began to play again, she danced before the prince, as light as a bubble on the wind and just as graceful, and she was regarded as the most beautiful of them all.”

“I see,” Ron said. “You know something, ‘Mione? This is one seriously messed up story.”

“Yes,” Hermione agreed. “However, the little mermaid had hope, for the prince told her that she with her ‘speaking eyes’ was dearer to him than anyone else in the world, and that if he had his own way, he would marry her rather than any other girl.”

“Right, because dancing and bleeding are key parts of all relationships,” Ron said. “Speaking of speaking eyes, did she learn sign language or anything?”

“No, there’s no mention of that in the story,” Hermione said. “Sign language existed in Denmark at the time this was written, though it wasn’t widely studied, but Anderson doesn’t bring that into the story at all.”

“So no conversation, not that she could have even introduced herself, what with the lack of a name,” Ron said, snorting. “Granted, they’re on fair footing there since he doesn’t seem to have one either.”

“However,” Hermione continued, “the prince’s parents thought it was high time for him to marry and insure the lineage would continue, and his marriage to a princess had been contracted at birth.”

“That doesn’t bode well for our little bloody-footed princess,” Ron said, looking serious.

“Wait, how old is he supposed to be again?” Harry asked.

“About sixteen,” Hermione explained. “Again, it’s quite young, but if Edward VI had managed to marry and produce at least one child by his death at age 15, the whole mess between Mary I and Elizabeth I could have been avoided.”

“Mary the first what and Elizabeth the first what?” Ron asked.

“Queen,” Hermione said.

“How could they both be the first queen?” Ron asked, looking completely confused.
“No, just the first queen named Mary and the first queen named Elizabeth,” Hermione explained.

“Of England, I take it?” Ron said.

“Well, there were a few queens named Mary in Hungary, but yes,” Hermione said. “At any rate, both of them were daughters of the previous queen by different mothers, and they went back and forth over who was supposed to be queen after their only brother died.”

“Right,” Ron said, looking bored. “So they married ‘em off young to keep the monarchy going or something. Let’s get back to nameless bleeding girl and nameless narcissist prince.”

“At any rate, he told the princess that his parents wouldn’t force him to marry the other girl,” Hermione said.

“Bully for them,” Ron said.

“Quite,” Hermione agreed. “For the time, they’re actually very open-minded. The prince told the little mermaid, ‘O, there is but one other lady in all the world who could capture my heart, and as it is not she, I would as well have you.’”

“And who might that be?” Harry asked.

“Well, the prince and his parents went to the seashore to greet the young princess, you had been away at a convent school,” Hermione said.

“Wait,” Ron said, frowning. “Convent school. You can’t be serious.”

“You’ve picked up on it,” Hermione said, nodding approvingly. “The girl who disembarked from the boat was indeed the same girl who had found the prince lying on the beach after the mermaid had saved him.”

“The same one he claimed had saved his life by not tripping over him?” Harry said.

“The very same,” Hermione said, “and it turned out she was the only other girl he had ever thought he could love. Overjoyed, he enfolded his blushing bride into his arms and declared himself the happiest man in the world, insisting the wedding take place at once.”

“Yowch,” Harry said, wincing.

“He didn’t exactly ask her if she was willing to marry him, now did he?” Ron said. “Bit overconfident, isn’t he?”

“All things considered, it sort of fits with his character though, doesn’t it?” Harry said.

“Very true,” Hermione said, beaming at both of them for their realization. “In any case, the wedding was held that very day upon the same ship that had taken the princess to the harbor, and the little mermaid stood as maid of honor during the ceremony.”

“Okay, that’s just plain mean,” Ron said. “Were her feet bleeding during as she walked down the aisle?”

“Let’s hope not,” Hermione said, shuddering. “The prince had told her he wanted her right next to him as the vows were said because he knew she would be happier for him than any other.”

“I hope she kicked him in the bum,” Ron said fervently.
“No, she did not, though she felt her heart breaking, and she knew she must die before the sun rose,” Hermione said.

“This is really sad,” Ron said. “I mean, yeah, she’s a creepy stalker, but that’s just too much.”

Harry had to agree. For a moment, he wondered what it would be like to see Ginny marry someone else, or worse, have to stand best man to the fellow doing it. He shuddered in sympathy.

“Yeah, Hermione, there’s got to be a way out of this one,” Harry said. “There always is, right?”

“Well, sort of,” Hermione said. “That night, after the band had finished playing and the little mermaid had danced to the delight of all the guests…”

“…this girl just swallows pain whole, doesn’t she?” Ron cut in.

“…the little mermaid stood on the deck and looked down into the water, realizing that in a little while she would be nothing but foam. At that moment, her sisters arose out of the ocean in a group, their arms stretched towards her,” Hermione said.

“Finally, the cavalry arrives!” Ron said.

“It’s over,” Hermione said, and her expression didn’t inspire much hope in Harry. “The oldest sister rose quite close to the little mermaid, and it was then she realized that her sisters’ hair had all been cut off short.”

“Of for crying out loud, did the witch from Rapunzel open a beauty parlor or what?!” Ron asked.

“You’re actually pretty close. The sister said that the six of them had all gone to the Sea Witch, and they had traded their hair for a solution to save their sister,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said, looking satisfied. “That seems like a pretty reasonable fee, all told. So what’s the solution?”

“The oldest sister handed the little mermaid a knife and said, ‘Before dawn, you must steal into the bridal chamber. There, plunge this knife into the prince’s heart. When the blood pours forth, let it flow over your feet, and they shall instantly become a fishtail again. Then you may return to us and live out the rest of your hundred years of life, carefree and happy,’” Hermione explained.

Harry and Ron looked at each other.

“Uh… huh,” Ron said slowly. “There is so much wrong with that statement that I’m not even going to touch it. Just keep going.”

Harry nodded as well, not sure he could find words to express just how disturbing the story was.

“The little mermaid took the knife from her hand, and the sisters splashed back beneath the surface of the waves, out of sight,” Hermione said. “Slowly, the little mermaid crept towards the beautiful silk tent that had been pitched on deck, where the prince and his bride were now sleeping.”

“Right,” Ron said, giving Harry a glance. “Sleeping. Sure.”

“Oh, come on, Ron, it’s a children’s story!” Hermione said in annoyance.

“Yeah, a kid’s story about slicing out tongues, walking around on bloody feet, and killing people with knives then bathing in their blood,” Ron said. “Silly me to make it sound sordid in some way by suggesting the prince and his new wife were doing what normal couples would on their wedding
Hermione tipped her head to one side, considering.

“Point taken,” she conceded. “She carefully opened the entrance to the tent…”

“Geez, she really has completed the full course in stalkerhood at this point,” Ron said, making a face.

“…and she stared down at the prince and his bride as they lay sleeping,” Hermione said.

Harry saw Ron actually bite his lip to restrain himself from saying anything. Frankly, even he could have come up with some fairly apt ribald words on that one.

“The prince stirred slightly, then said the name of his bride in his sleep, and stilled again,” Hermione said.

“That was probably a mistake,” Ron said. “I don’t think she’s going to need much more to set her off.”

“The little mermaid raised the knife, ready to strike, but at the last moment she ran from the tent and threw the knife into the ocean, where blood spurted from the surface of the waves,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said. “Well, that was bloody decent of her. Sounds like she might have accidentally knifed one of her six sisters, though.”

“You know, it’s very possible that’s what’s being implied, though I’ve never really thought of it that way before,” Hermione said, closing one eye and squinting. “Yes, that’s a perfectly acceptable assumption.”

Ron looked so pleased with himself that Harry rolled his eyes in disgust.

“Just at that moment, the edge of the sun came above the eastern horizon, and the little mermaid felt her body starting to dissolve. She threw herself into the water, feeling her flesh become only foam on the waves,” Hermione said.

“Wait, she died?” Ron said, really looking upset. “The poor kid actually died?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “She knew she didn’t have a choice, so she tried to face it as bravely as she could.”

Harry shuddered. He didn’t think he’d be able to handle something like that so reasonably.

“Yeah, but,” Ron said, still looking very sad, “these stories have a happy ending all the time, don’t they?”

“No, not always,” Hermione said.

“That bloody well stinks!” Ron said. “I mean, she was a real weirdo, but I didn’t want her dead or anything.”

“I didn’t say it was the end of the story though, did I?” Hermione said kindly.

“Oh,” Ron said, slightly mollified. “Go on then, though usually there’s not a whole lot that fixes dying.”

“Well, the little mermaid suddenly looked about her and realized that she was still herself, though she
wasn’t in her body anymore, and she saw many lovely invisible spirits in the air, and she suddenly realized she had a body like theirs now,” Hermione said.

“That’s… different,” Harry said, not sure what else to say.

“Better than drifting off into nothing at any rate,” Ron said.

“One of the spirits took her by the hands and said, ‘Dear little mermaid, you have proven yourself patient, courageous, and loving, and by your great suffering, you have become like us, the Daughters of the Air,’” Hermione said, using an appropriately misty voice that Harry thought sounded quite a lot like Luna.

“Daughters of the Air?” Ron asked. “Okay, whatever, but I rather thought she was going to be able to go to heaven now or have a soul or something. What’s a Daughter of the Air even do?”

“The spirit told the little mermaid that they brought cooling breezes to those in faraway lands, and that through their good works, they hoped in time to earn a soul,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, kid, because you’ve had it so soft with the tongue amputation and the mangled tootsies,” Ron said. “So she’s what, a breeze now?”

“Pretty much,” Hermione said. “Just then, the little mermaid saw that there was a commotion on ship. They had realized she was missing, and after searching everywhere, the prince and his bride stared forlornly into the sea, thinking she must have drowned.”

“Wow. He managed to work himself all the way up to forlorn,” Ron said, pretending to look impressed. “So what’d the little mermaid do?”

“Well, she made a little breeze to cool the bride’s face, kissed the prince on the cheek, and rose into the air with the other spirits,” Hermione said.

“So how long does she need to work to get a soul?” Harry asked.

“Oh, the spirit told her that it would take them three hundred years,” Hermione said.

“Three hundred years?” Ron said, looking stunned. “Seriously?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “But then she added that when they invisibly visited a house where there was a good, kind child who deserved his or her parents’ love, a year would be taken off from their time of trial, but when they came upon a bad, wicked child, the Daughters of the Air would cry, and each tear added a day to their wait.”

Ron looked at her for a moment, then blurted out, “So this whole thing is just a blackmail story to get kids to behave! ‘Be good, junior, or you’ll make the poor little mermaid cry and she’ll wind up in Breeze Limbo forever!’”

Hermione pursed her lips together for a moment, then said, “Yes.”

“I… that’s… I… it’s amazing you lot have any sanity left at all by the age of seven,” Ron said, dropping back against the cushions in emotional exhaustion. “That is just completely unreal.”

“Well, at least it got your mind off food for a bit,” Hermione said.

“Too right. I should go to bed, but I’m a little afraid of the nightmares this is going to give me,” Ron said.
“If it makes you feel any better, when Disney remade the film, the little mermaid ended up marrying the prince and living happily every after,” Hermione said soothingly.

“Yeah, I suppose so,” Ron said, still looking uncertain.

When Harry went to bed that night, he couldn’t help thinking of the strange, underwater world he’d see at the bottom of the lake where the Merpeople had threatened Hermione and Ron. He was glad they couldn’t remember any of it. But as strange and horrible as much of Hermione’s story had been, the thought that haunted him most was the image of the little mermaid walking forward to her death, knowing that the only way she could prevent it was to trade the lives of those she loved for her own.

He didn’t know why, but it gave him chills.
The Three L(ack-in-Any-Sanity)ittle Pigs

For once it wasn’t raining, but the wind was more than making up for it. Hermione had Apparated them to a moor near the Scottish border, and while it was perfectly isolated and therefore very safe, it was also very exposed. They’d needed to cast a Silencing Charm to keep the incessantly gusting wind from all but deafening them, and even now the roof of the tent kept rippling. Harry stared up at the moving fabric, which, although it was now almost eerily quiet, was still very unsettling.

“Hermione?” Ron asked as he threw the Deluminator back and forth from one hand to the other in what was becoming a nervous habit. “There’s no chance the whole bloody tent is going to up and fly off in the middle of the night, is there?”

“Not unless we get stuck in the middle of a hurricane,” Hermione said, but she looked a bit worried. “Granted, the Death Eaters have been known to conjure those at times, but we’re pretty much in the middle of nowhere. I think we’ll be safe enough.”

“If anywhere is safe,” Harry said.

He was feeling in rather a sulky mood, probably egged on by the Horcrux which, as usual, was making everything around it seem worse. Currently it hung around Harry’s neck on its chain, which seemed to weigh far too much for such a little thing.

Hermione looked at him sympathetically, and even Ron seemed to have picked up on the idea that Harry was out of sorts. He screwed up his mouth, seeming to be fishing about for something to break the mood.

“Well, it’s getting to be about that time again, I think,” Ron said, turning to Hermione expectantly.

“Time for you to complain about my potatoes again?” Hermione asked with false innocence.

“Ehm, no,” Ron said, though he snuck a guilty look at Harry. In all honesty, as much as it was a treat to have potatoes, Harry had been hard pressed to identify them as anything other than rocks after they’d come off the stove.

“To expound on how hungry you are?” she suggested, smiling a tad too sweetly.

“No, I’m full up,” Ron said, though Harry suspected that might be because the potatoes were laying like a brick in his stomach.

“To tell me for the umpteenth time that my hair is a frizzy disaster?” Hermione said, and Ron actually winced. “I believe your last comparison involved the Whomping Willow and a direct lightning strike, didn’t it?”

“Actually, I just wanted one of your lovely, daft, highly amusing stories, Hermione,” Ron said, trying to look charmingly hopeful. Harry had to hand it to him; it might be annoying as sand fleas in his socks to have to watch Ron practicing faces in the mirror every time Hermione was out of sight, but he really had gotten this one down pat, as Hermione’s reaction showed.

“Well…” she said, looking uncertain. “All right then, especially since you’ve reminded me of one by something you said earlier.”

“Did I?” Ron said, brightening. “Something about a tree that gets struck by lightning?”
“No,” Hermione said, sighing in frustration, then muttering something that sounded a good deal like, “I swear I’m going to chop the whole lot of it off when we’re done with this wretched business.”

“So, what then?” Harry asked, hoping that she this would be one of the more insane stories if for no other reason than to distract him. Weirdly, the Horcrux never seemed to bother him so much when she was telling them a particularly bizarre fairy tale.

“Oh, you’ll see soon enough,” Hermione said, and she looked a bit less annoyed. “Once…”

“…upon a time,” Ron said, settling into a cushion and looking as attentive as a kindergartner during story time.

“Yes,” Hermione said, and she nearly laughed, which was a good sign. “There lived a mother pig who had three piglets.”

“Is this going to be a talking animals story again?” Ron asked.

“It is,” Hermione said, as though daring him to find fault with that. “Why?”

“Oh, that’s fine,” Ron said, smiling. “It’s just I like to be prepared for the particular flavour of crazy that’s on the menu. Makes it a bit less of a shock.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him, but continued on.

“The three piglets, all brothers, got along with one another splendidly, but while the first and second brothers were inclined to be lazy and think of pleasure before work,” and here Hermione seemed to give Harry and Ron a rather accusatory look, “the third pig worked hard, studied, and waited to play until after his toil was done.”

“What kind of ‘toil’ does a pig have to do?” Ron asked, drawing air-quotes around the word. “He had to put in so many hours a day at mud wallowing school?”

“Or maybe he needed to polish his trough and practice oinking?” Harry said.

Hermione looked back and forth between the two of them, then shrugged.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Whatever it was that pigs do as work, the third pig did it and the other two didn’t.”

“Fair enough,” Ron said. “We’ll sweep it under the rug, then. Carry on!”

Hermione sighed again, and Harry spared a moment to think that her lungs really must be getting very strong from doing that so often, but she sallied forth once more in a moment.

“When the little pigs had grown up, the mother pig told them it was time for them to go out into the world and make their living,” Hermione said.

“As what?” Ron asked. “Accountants?”

“Well, that would be fitting if they were piggy banks,” Hermione said with a grin, but it seemed to go over Ron’s head. “Pilots, then? You know, ‘when pigs fly’?”

Ron looked at Harry with concern as though he thought Hermione might have finally cracked from the stress.

“Never mind,” she said. “They were pigs that walk on their hind legs, talk, and wear clothes. Maybe
they really were going to be accountants or clerks or something. Anyway, the three little pigs walked off into the great big world together.”

“What about the mum?” Ron asked.

“She stayed at home,” Hermione said.

“And was there a father pig, by any chance?” Harry asked.

“He’s never mentioned in the story. It’s implied that the mother pig is a widow, though it’s never really said outright,” Hermione said. “I suppose it would be a bit of a lonely life for her, what with the piglets all grown and out in the world on their own.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, frowning. “Reminds me of Mum. I kind of wish she still had one or two little ones at home for company’s sake. She’s got to be climbing the walls by now, worrying about the lot of us and not having anyone to take her mind off it.”

Hermione looked at him kindly, and Harry noticed she put a hand lightly on his arm.

“There’s always your father, you know,” she said consolingly.

“True,” Ron said, looking up at her. “But by now, she’s probably hen-pecking him to death. You know how women are.”

Hermione’s hand was suddenly very absent from Ron’s arm, and she seemed to have managed to move as far from him as humanly possible while still remaining on the couch. Ron looked a little confused, and Harry just shook his head at him. At this rate they should progress to their first kiss somewhere around the twelfth of never.

“At any rate, the three little pigs—” Hermione began when she was suddenly interrupted.

“Wait, I thought you said they were grown up now,” Ron said.

“Yes, I did,” Hermione said, and Harry noticed she was closing her eyes and appeared to be steeling herself for the worst. “What’s wrong with that?”

“You said they were three little pigs,” Ron said. “How can they be little if they’re grown? Are they mini-pigs or something?”

Hermione appeared to be in danger of rubbing her nose right off her face out of frustration by the time she said, “Ronald, the story is called ‘The Three Little Pigs.’ They are full grown pigs, yet they are still little. If you want to infer from that the pigs have some species of dwarfism, I shall not say thee nay, but for the love of Merlin, just go with it!”

“’I shall not say thee nay?’” Ron mouthed to Harry, looking rather alarmed, before continuing in a very even, calm tone to Hermione. “Alright, then, the little pigs are grown up big pigs that are still little. I can handle that. Ehm… can you?”

“YES!” she hollered, then caught herself, shook her head vigorously, and sighed. “Sorry. At any rate, the three pigs of whatever relative size struck out on their own. The first little pig, who was quite lazy, decided to build his house of straw.”

“Makes sense,” Ron said. “After all, the barn they were living in probably was full of the stuff, so he’s used to it.”
“Yes, but the problem is it’s a house made entirely of straw with no barn attached,” Hermione said. “It’s just a cottage made of straw, walls, doors, roof and all.”

“So?” Ron asked.

“So how strong do you think that’s going to be?” Hermione asked, sounding remarkably like Mrs. Weasley.

“Oh,” Ron said. “Hadn’t thought of that. I bet it was right cheap though.”

“Probably,” Hermione said, “and it was almost undoubtedly fast to build.”

“Well, now, I’m not so sure about that,” Harry said, breaking in. “I mean, really, it seems like it would take kind of a long time to make a house entirely out of straw.”

“Yeah,” Ron chimed in. “Think how long it would take to plait it all together and figure out how to put in the floor plan and so on.”

“You’re over-thinking this,” Hermione said. “It’s not like he was making a creation by Frank Lloyd Wright or something.”

“Who?” Ron and Harry asked.

“He was an architect of the early to mid twentieth century who specialized in the Arts and Crafts movement and revolutionized much of modern building,” Hermione rattled off automatically. “The point is supposed to be that the lazy first little pig didn’t do his homework and wound up getting Ts on all of his NEWTs… I mean, he didn’t do what he was supposed to and built a very weak house.”

Hermione blushed crimson at her slip but plowed on gamely.

“The second little pig, who was nearly as lazy as the first one, built his home of sticks,” Hermione said.

“Well, that’s a bit better,” Ron said. “I mean, isn’t it?”

“Structurally speaking, wood would indeed be stronger than straw since straw is technically a form of grass, and trees obviously have more structural integrity than grass would, but the point is he just picked up a bunch of random sticks off the ground, shaped them into something that looked a little like a house, and called it a day so he could go outside a play,” Hermione said. “He still made a very poor job of it.”

“I’m starting to think this story’s moral is something about having fun being a bad thing.” Ron said to Harry with a grimace of distaste.

Hermione rolled her eyes, but continued on.

“Finally, the last little pig, who was industrious and clever, built his house out of bricks,” Hermione said.

“How?” Ron asked.

“What?” Hermione said, staring at him blankly.

“How did the third pig get hold of bricks? I mean, straw and sticks, you’re likely to find those just lying about, yeah? But you’re not going to find bricks just sitting there. Did he apprentice himself to a bricklayer who was really open-minded about hiring runty pigs or did he just steal a load of bricks
or what?” Ron asked.

“How would you even go about stealing a load of bricks?” Harry said, looking at Ron.

“I suppose he could have made off with a lorry full of them,” Ron said shrugging. “He can walk, talk, and build a house out of bricks, so I’d guess learning to drive wouldn’t be too outside his abilities.”

“This took place long before lorries were invented,” Hermione said, but Harry could tell from her expression that she was actually trying to figure this out. “However, I suppose he might have stolen a cartload of bricks from an unwary mason, though that undermines the story’s idea that hard work is important in life by having the pig become a dishonest thief in order to do honest hard work. On the other hand, he might have simply come upon a crumbling ruin of an old brick house and taken the bricks to the place he’d chosen for his home on a brick by brick basis, which would underline the theme of hard work as that would be particularly bothersome… though it would also suggest he’d have to sleep out of doors with no protection at all during the building process, which isn’t very intelligent of him. Still, it’s a decent solution that doesn’t involve stealing and would even suggest the importance of recycling in modern retelling. Yes, I suppose that would be the most logical solution and the one most in keeping with the spirit of the original.”

Privately, Harry wondered whether the pig could simply have used Hermione’s potatoes instead of bricks and gotten the same result, but as she was finally smiling again, he decided it might be wise to hold his tongue.

“Or he stole the bricks,” Ron said with a shrug. “Six of one.”

“In any case, the third little pig built himself a very fine house of brick,” Hermione said, as though she were convincing herself to ignore Ron’s comment out of sheer willpower. “The two other little pigs laughed at their brother, saying that they got to play all day long while their brother worked at things they thought weren’t very important, and they called him foolish and boring and a lot of other mean things, but he was still very satisfied that he’d done a good job of his task.”

Ron shot Harry a look that suggested he was seeing through the paper-thin analogy Hermione was making, but to his credit, he kept mum.

“Not long after, a big, bad wolf came prowling through the forest. He was very hungry, and he had smelled the tempting odor of pork floating towards him,” Hermione said, giving the wolf a gravelly voice that sounded rather like he’d had a bit too much Ogden’s. “The first little pig replied, ‘Not by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin!’”

“The hair of his chinny-chin-chin?” Ron said slowly with a tone of deep disbelief. “Seriously?”

“Pigs actually do have hair on their chins, being mammals,” Hermione said, putting her hands on her hips. “It’s not totally ridiculous, and it completes the rhyme.”
“I mean, at least the pig is smart enough not to let the wolf in, I suppose,” Ron admitted, “but there’s got to be a better rhyme that ‘chinny-chin-chin.’”

“Go away or I’ll throw you in the bin?” Harry suggested, mimicking the tempo Hermione had used.

“Not bad,” Ron said appraisingly. How about ‘Get away from me, you stupid has-been!’?”

“Back off or I’ll hit you with a rolling pin?” Harry threw in.

“Stop it right now or I’ll kick you in the shin?” Ron added.

“Leave or you’ll need to alert your next of kin!” Harry said, starting to really enjoy himself.

“Desist at once or I’ll whack you firmly over the head with my hardcover copy of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*!” Hermione said triumphantly.

Harry and Ron stared at her.

“Not that it’s a very thick book,” she mumbled in embarrassment. “I suppose *Encyclopedia Britannica* would be more effective, but it’s the only one I could think of that rhymed.”

“You think the issue with that one was the page count?” Ron said.

“It was either that or a reference to Anne Boleyn, but that seemed historically insensitive,” Hermione said giving a little shudder. “In any case, the wolf replied with ‘Then I’ll huff, and I’ll puff, and I’ll blooooonnnn your house in!’”

Hermione really had gone for broke with the wolf’s voice on this one, trying to make it as creepy as possible while at the same time nearly passing out from how long she extended the o in blow.

“Wait, is this a relative of the talking freak wolf in ‘Moderately Sized Sun Bonnet’?” Ron asked without sounding the least impressed by Hermione’s acting skills, which had almost rendered her unconscious.

“What?” she asked. “Oh, ‘Little Red Riding Hood.’ No, I… hmm. I suppose he could be. Of course, wolves show up fairly often in fairy tales as villains, but still, they do have quite a lot in common, don’t they?”

“Including breaking and entering,” Ron said, nodding. “Rather, really, attempted breaking and entering for this wolf, because that couldn’t possibly work, blowing a house down.”

“Oh, but it did,” Hermione said off-handedly as she was still apparently considering the question of the related wolves.

“The wolf blew the house down?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“With TNT, right?” Ron said.

“No, he just took a deep breath and blew all the straw away,” Hermione said. “The little pig hadn’t worked hard enough at building his home, so the wolf was able to destroy it just by breathing on it.”

“That’s either some seriously shoddy craftsmanship… er, craftspigship, or a wolf with one very good pair of lungs,” Harry said.
“That’s not possible, though,” Ron said, looking at Harry. “You can’t just breathe on a house, even a straw one, and make it blow away.”

“Actually, it’s stated that the house blew in, not away, which might not take as much pressure,” Hermione said. “As for the average air pressure of a wolf’s breath, I don’t know off the top of my head, but humans can blow at as high as 2.8 pounds per square inch if they’re in very good physical condition. One would assume that the writer of the original story must have been familiar with wolves howling, and the noise is really rather stunning. It can travel miles away under the right conditions. The storyteller must have come to the conclusion that a wolf would generate a tremendous amount of air if it concentrated its breath in one place, which, while faulty in practice, does make some sense on a metaphorical level if not a scientific one.”

Ron paused, looked at Hermione for a moment, then turned back to Harry and said, “You can’t just breathe on a house, even a straw one, and make it blow away.”

“Right,” Harry said, patting his arm. “You can’t. But this is a story.”

“Story,” Ron said to himself, as though cherishing a final shred of sanity. “It’s a story. And Hermione knows about the psi of human breath and the audible distance of wolf calls at the drop of a hat. That at least I can believe.”

“In any case, the wolf blew in the straw house, and the first little pig was left standing there with no defenses at all,” Hermione said. “Then the story goes one of two ways. In one version, the pig runs quickly next door to the second little pig’s house. His brother lets him in then bolts the door before the wolf can get inside.”

“He bolts the door on his sloppily made house of sticks?” Harry asked.

“It doesn’t really take all that much to make a bolt beside a few sticks anyway,” Hermione said defensively.

“Fine, the second little pig installed a deadbolt in his stick house,” Ron said. “What’s the other option?”

“The wolf eats the first pig,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said, looking unhappy. “I rather liked him. Let’s go with option one then rather than killing off the anthropomorphic piggy.”

“Fine,” Hermione said with a nod. “The wolf came to the second little pig’s door and said once more ‘Little pig, little pig, let me come in.’”

“Even if he already ate the first pig?” Harry said.

“Yes, it’s the same in both stories,” Hermione said. “I suppose one could read into that the idea that the story also has a moral against gluttony as well.”

“I could eat a pig,” Ron said with a shrug. “Maybe two, if they were little.”

Hermione gazed into the middle distance for a moment, then shrugged as well. “Point taken. Anyway, the little pigs chorused together, ‘Not by the hair of our chinny-chin-chin!’ and the wolf said, ‘Then I’ll huff, and I’ll puff, and I’ll bloooooooooooow your house in!’”

Harry was starting to be concerned that Hermione was actually going to be rendered unconscious if she kept up the wolf’s voice much longer, but then he supposed that might give Ron an excuse to
perform mouth-to-mouth, thereby ending the perpetual unresolved sexual tension that was threatening to go nuclear at any moment. In that case, it could be worth it.

“So, did the wolf with the superhumanly huge lungs blow down the house of sticks as well?” Ron asked seriously.

“Yes, he did,” Hermione said. “Just as before, in one version the second pig is eaten, but in the other, the two little pigs run to their brother’s house, and he lets them in and bars the door before the wolf gets there.”

“The wolf must run pretty slowly not to catch them,” Harry said.

“Don’t forget, he’s still recovering from the whale-like exhaling he’s been doing,” Ron said. “I’ll cut him some slack on that as he must be out of breath to start with.”

Hermione appeared to be squinting at nothing, and Ron had to elbow her to continue.

“Oh, sorry;” she said. “I was just wondering what the air pressure of a blue whale’s blow hole would be. In any case, the wolf did come up to the third pig’s house, and once again he said…”

“‘Little pig, little pig, let me come in?’” Ron suggested.

“You must be psychic,” Hermione said sarcastically.

“Those Divination classes had to pay off eventually,” Ron said with a wink.

“Well, would you care to guess what might happen next?” Hermione asked.

“I’d wager that the pigs made some reference to the hair on their chins, followed the wolf saying he was going to blow their house in,” Ron said sagely.

“Correct. Except he couldn’t,” Hermione said.

“So the wolf’s breath is finally foiled by something,” Harry said. “Nice to know the story wasn’t being purposely weird.”

“No, the talking wolf who could start his own demolition company using only his own lungs did have his limitations,” Ron said.


“Good way to start hyperventilating, that,” Ron said in some concern.

“No, the wolf didn’t—” she started.

“I meant you,” Ron said, peering at her. “You feeling okay?”

“I guess I am a little out of breath,” she admitted with a smile. “I always wondered why my father didn’t tell this story more often. I think I’ve got the answer. Anyway, the wolf wasn’t able to move the brick house at all no matter how hard he tried.”

“Good, and that’s the end of the story?” Harry asked.

“No, the wolf was still hungry and very determined, and realized that he could get into the brick house through the chimney,” Hermione said.
“Did he dress up like Father Christmas first?” Ron asked.

“No, he did not,” Hermione said with prim decorum, but she seemed to be hiding a grin. “But the third pig, who was extremely clever, had realized that the wolf would try to find another way in, so he had built a great fire in the fireplace and put a large pot of water over it to boil.”

“Wait, I see where this is going,” Ron said. “The wolf couldn’t be stupid enough to jump down a chimney that had smoke coming out of it, could he?”

“He was indeed,” Hermione said. “The wolf bolted down the chimney and landed right in the pot of boiling water, shrieking in agony, and the third little pig clamped the lid down fast before the wolf could hop out again.”

“So the wolf… boiled… to… death…” Ron said, looking ill.

“Would you rather the little pigs had been eaten?” Hermione asked.

“No, but I don’t see why anyone’s absolutely got to die in all these stories,” Ron said.

“I suppose it’s just the way they drive home the moral,” Hermione said. “Because of the third little pig’s dedication to hard work, instead of being eaten, they ate wolf stew for dinner than night, and the three pigs, or the one pig in the other version, lived happily ever after.”

“Wolf stew?” Harry said, grimacing.

Ron thought a moment, then said, “At this point, I probably wouldn’t say no to it as long as the wolf wasn’t talking prior to being popped in the pot, or, you know, wearing a grandmother’s nightgown and bonnet. You’ve got to draw a moral line somewhere.”

Harry and Hermione laughed, and outside the wind continued to blow ferociously. It was growing late, and the silhouette of the full moon was dimly visible through the thin fabric of the tent. Somewhere, Harry thought, Professor Lupin was becoming into a wolf again, and the image unsettled him deeply after the story they’d heard. Harry somehow was more aware of the darkness than ever, of the very thin barrier between them and the Death Eaters who lurked in the night, hunting for prey. Eventually, they turned in for the night, each going to their own accustomed spot and trying to find solace in sleep for a few short hours. But after a few minutes, the silence was broken.

“Um, Hermione?” Ron said from near the couch.

“Yes?” her voice came from somewhere around the kitchen.

“Thanks for, you know, learning how to build a house out of brick and letting us in,” Ron said softly.

There was a pause before she said, in an equally soft voice, “You’re welcome… little pig.”

In the darkness outside, the big, bad wolf with red eyes still roved, but he could not enter the house of the three friends. Somehow, within the insubstantial walls of the tent, Harry felt safe.
It had been a deceptively calm, mild autumn day. While the Horcrux hunt was still fruitless and their bellies were far less full than they would have liked, at least nothing dreadful had happened in the last twenty-four hours. Their campsite on the far edge of a sheep pasture was actually quite picturesque, and if Harry closed his eyes and imagined hard, he could almost pretend they were on holiday. Almost, but not quite.

“I never thought I’d say it, but I miss Fred and George’s explosions,” Ron said as he tossed the Deluminator towards the ceiling, catching it with his left hand. “Aside from the sheep, it’s too quiet out here by a long ways. It’s making me nervous.”

“Yes, well, I suppose we should be glad we’re not somewhere that’s blowing up,” Hermione said, straightening up from her latest perusal of Beedle. “Still, I miss some of the little things I took for granted at Hogwarts.”

“Like Monday always being pear tart day,” Ron said, leaning back and looking up wistfully at the lamp overhead.

“And how the First Years get lost well into February just going from the common room to the Great Hall,” Harry said with a laugh.

“I miss the smell of the library, all musty and soft,” Hermione said.

“How’d I know you were going to miss the library most,” Ron said, chucking her gently on the shoulder. “Of course, I miss the smell of the Quidditch pitch right after it’s mowed, so I’m not much better.”

“I almost wish I could see Professor McGonagall shaking her head in total disbelief at something we’ve done that’s broken fifty school rules,” Hermione said.

“Yeah,” Harry said, “and the way that Peeves always comes whizzing out of nowhere when you least expected him and causes total mayhem.”

“Mmm,” Ron said in agreement. “I miss that badly dressed blighter. At this point I’m almost nostalgic for Filch and that wretched Mrs. Norris of his.”

“I miss Crookshanks,” Hermione said with a sigh. “I hope your mother doesn’t mind him staying at the Burrow. I keep thinking that maybe I should have brought him with us.”

“That mangy fleabag?” Ron said, sitting up. “What good would he be out here?”

Mentally, Harry pleaded with Ron to shut it. He knew Ron had never liked Hermione’s cat, even if he hadn’t eaten Scabbers, although it turned out that maybe it would have been better if he had. But Hermione obviously loved the ugly thing, and he didn’t even have to glance over at her to know that she was probably vibrating with rage.

“I’ll have you know that Crookshanks happens to be a highly intelligent cat,” Hermione said in a tightly controlled voice that boded all sorts of danger. “He’s half Kneazle, you know.”

“So what?” Ron said. “He’s still not exactly the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“There’s more to someone than just looks, you know,” Hermione said, obviously getting even more
“Fine, but name one useful thing that freak of nature could do out here in the middle of nowhere,” Ron said with a nastier tone than Harry thought the situation warranted.

“He’s good at picking out people who can’t be trusted,” Hermione said, snapping her book closed, “so maybe he could tell when Death Eaters are about.”

“Doubtful,” Ron said. “He’d just be another mouth to feed. Though I suppose if things got too bad we could eat him. There’s usefulness for you”

That was it, Harry thought. They were now all going to die from being in such close proximity to Hermione’s head as it exploded, though perhaps it might manage to take out the Horcrux in the explosion. That was one option that hadn’t explored yet. Harry braced himself for the inevitable angry tirade, only to be met with the last sound he expected: Hermione giggling uncontrollably.

“What?” Ron asked, completely confused.

“Yeah, that’s what I’d like to know,” Harry said, almost feeling cheated.

“No, it’s just he sounds exactly like the miller’s youngest son in ‘Puss in Boots,’” Hermione said. “He underestimated a cat too.”

“Is that another fairy tale?” Harry asked, deeply relieved that Ron had accidentally said something funny.

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“Well, what are you waiting for,” Ron said, leaning back against the sofa cushion. “On with it.”

Hermione glared at him.

“Ehm, please,” Ron added, looking a bit embarrassed.

Hermione gave him a little nod, then sat cross-legged on her chair in the pose Harry was beginning to associate with her storytelling.

“Once…”

“…upon a time,” Harry finished.

The other two stared at him.

“Isn’t that usually my line?” Ron said, pretending to be affronted.

“What, I can’t play audience participation too?” Harry said, trying to look innocent.

“Wonderful,” Hermione muttered. “Now there are two of them. Anyway, yes, once upon a time, a long time ago, there lived a widowed miller who had three sons.”

“So far, so good,” Ron said. “Then what?”

“The miller died,” Hermione said, giving him another glare for interrupting again so soon.

“Oh. Well, that was fast,” Ron said. “Is there a wicked step-mum involved in this one?”
“No,” Hermione said. “For once, there isn’t a pseudo-maternal figure who connives against the next generation.”

“Bully for Captain Picard,” Harry said automatically.

“Who?” Ron asked.

“Sorry, you wouldn’t get it. There’s a Muggle television program about a spaceship captain, well, actually, two of them,” Harry said.

“Two captains? That’s bound to cause trouble,” Ron said.

“No, two programs, one from the 1960s and another one later on. The second one was called *The Next Generation,*” Harry said. “I got to see it once in a while over Dudley’s shoulder since there wasn’t any magic in it.”

“Although it’s arguable that much of the technology on the *Enterprise* is actually Muggle wish fulfillment on a par with the use of magic, such as the use of the replicator to conjure up any food of the person’s choice or the holodeck standing in as a replacement for a variety of enchantments by permitting the character to create or recreate an environment of his or her choosing within the parameters of the computer program,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “There’s really a remarkable amount of crossover between science fiction and traditional fantasy tropes when you examine them closely.”

Ron blinked at her.

“Huh?” he asked intelligently.

“Plus Klingons’ voices do sound remarkably like Merpeople’s,” Hermione said as though she hadn’t heard him.

“Right,” Ron said, shooting Harry a completely baffled look. For once, though, Harry had actually managed to follow part of that.

“Kirk or Picard?” he asked her with a grin.

“Neither,” she said dismissively. “It’s really all about Spock, isn’t it? Anyway, where were we?”

“The miller’s dead,” Ron said, sounding like he was desperately grasping at straws. “That much I know.”

“Yes, right, and the three sons divided up the miller’s worldly possessions among themselves. The oldest son got the mill itself,” Hermione said.

“Why did the oldest one get it?” Ron asked. “Shouldn’t they have flipped a coin or something?”

“I suppose that would have been fairer,” Hermione said, “but at the time of the story, the rule was that the oldest son got pretty much everything, sort of like with Muggle royalty where the king’s oldest son gets to be the next king and any other sons get lesser titles and things.”

“What do the girls get?” Ron asked.

Harry silently counted to two hundred while Hermione explained once again that females were treated as property by their parents and were used to arrange peace agreements, but that they very rarely inherited anything on their own. This included a brief history lesson on Queen Elizabeth I and
Queen Victoria, as well as a nod to the current monarch as notable exceptions to the rule.

“Well, wouldn’t matter much in our family anyway,” Ron said with a shrug. “Girl or not, if they were going by age by the time they got down to Ginny, about all that’d be left is Dad’s collection of electric plugs.”

“At any rate, the oldest son got the mill, so things actually went pretty well for him. The middle son got the family donkey,” Hermione said.

“Wait, a donkey?” Ron asked. “Of all the possessions they’ve got, he gets a donkey?”

“Remember, the miller didn’t have much, so it’s not like the son picked it over a set of rubies or something. Besides, a donkey would be quite useful and worth a fair bit. Normally it would have been used to turn the wheel in the mill so they could grind wheat into flour, so it was really quite important,” Hermione explained.

“So what’s the first son going to do? Pull the wheel himself?” Ron asked.

“I suppose he could,” Hermione said. “It would make much more sense for the two older brothers to work together so the mill could keep functioning as intended. Perhaps they did. The story doesn’t really say, only that the middle son got the donkey.”

“Okay, fine, so we’ve gone downhill from a mill to a donkey. What’s the youngest son get?” Harry asked.

“The family cat,” Hermione says. “Then they threw him out the door.”

“What?” Ron said. “Oh, I would have like to hear that conversation. ‘Oy, I’m oldest, so I get the mill, and you get the donkey, but you, little brother, I never did forgive you for that time you got mud on my new broomstick when you were six, so here, have a cat and get out!’”

“Who knows? Maybe it was something like that. Families hold all sorts of strange grudges,” Harry said. “Aunt Marge has a brother she hasn’t talked to in forty years because they disagreed over a china pattern when he got married. Lucky fellow.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, “and there’s Mum’s second cousin, the accountant. They never did forgive him.”

“For what?” Hermione asked.

“For being an accountant,” Ron said, wrinkling his nose in disgust. “I mean, really. An accountant?”

“What’s so horrid about being an accountant?” Hermione asked, frowning. “Is he dishonest or something?”

“No, he’s just an accountant. That’s more than enough,” Ron said with a shrug.

Hermione opened her mouth as though to argue the point, but she just shook her head, obviously choosing to pick her battles, and thundered ahead.

“In any case, the youngest son…,” she began.

“Does he have a name?” Ron cut in.

“Not yet,” Hermione said.

Ron also opened his mouth as though to protest, but shrugged.
“Okay, you let the accountant slip by. I may as well give you a pass on this,” he said magnanimously.

“Thank you,” Hermione said with a sigh. “The youngest son took the cat, who was a very large ginger, quite a bit like Crookshanks, put him in a bag over his shoulder, and went off down the road to seek his fortune.”

“Bit sad that, really,” Ron said. “Loses his father, his home, his job, and his donkey.”

“But he did have the cat,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, that’s a comfort. Knowing cats, the thing probably wanted him to stop off and get cream and salmon, and if it was served on the wrong color plate or something similarly daft, he probably got a set of scratch marks for his trouble,” Ron said.

Hermione screwed up her face in a disgusted expression that Harry thought probably warranted extreme caution. On the other hand, he couldn’t help silently agreeing with Ron since almost exactly that scenario had happened at the Weasleys’ home that last summer. Harry still had the scratch marks on his arm to prove it.

“The youngest son had just decided to make camp for the night and was feeling very hungry,” she said, sounding rather edgy. “He said, ‘I have no food in my bag, but I do have a cat. I suppose I must kill and eat him. At least I shall have a supper, but then I will have nothing left at all.’”

“Okay, I admit I was joking about eating Crookshanks,” Ron said, looking a bit sick. “The kid’s actually going to eat the cat?”

“He seriously considered it,” Hermione said, “but then he heard another voice say, ‘O Master, if you spare me, I think you will be well pleased with the outcome.’”

“The cat talks,” Ron said wearily. “Of course. Why not? This was the first story that’s been reasonably logical up to this point, but why spoil the record for being barking mad?”

“If you want me to tell you more realistic stories, I can read you some of Jane Austen’s works or the Bronte sisters or maybe some Dickens, but I doubt you’d find those as fun to pick apart,” Hermione said.

“Eh, Dickens only works at Christmas for me,” Harry said.

Hermione gave him a surprised look, but shrugged.

“At any rate, the boy was stunned by the talking cat, and he opened the bag. He asked the cat why it had never spoken before, and it replied, ‘I never needed to,'” Hermione said.

“Actually, that does sound like a cat,” Ron said. “So what’s it going to do?”

“Well, first the cat asked to have the bag for himself, along with the boy’s boots, which were really rather magnificent, and a suit of clothes,” Hermione explained.

“Uh… huh,” Ron said. “The bag, boots, and clothes. Because all cats need those.”

“Well, he did let the cat out of the bag, so it’s really the boy’s fault,” Harry said.

Ron and Hermione simultaneously rolled their eyes at the pun.

“No, really, the cat asked for those three things, and the boy thought it over, decided he had nothing
to lose, and gave the cat the bag, the clothes, and his boots. Hence the name of the story, ‘Puss in
Boots,’” Hermione said.

“Okay, so the bag is obvious. It’s sitting right there. I’m guessing the boy was wearing the boots and
now has to walk about barefoot, though technically the cat would still be half-barefoot anyway since
the boy would only have two feet,” Ron said.

“The cat walked upright on his back legs,” Hermione said. “Usually in illustrations the cat’s boots
are rather too big for him.”

“Yeah, but what about the clothes?” Ron asked. “The cat and the boy are the same size?”

“No, of course not,” Hermione said. “The boy went to a tailor and had him make the cat a suit of
clothes.”

“He… hired a tailor… to make his cat… a suit…,” Ron said slowly. “Where did he get the money?”

“He must have had a little bit saved aside,” Hermione said.

“Right. So he’s so poor he’s considering eating a cat, but hey, he’s carrying about enough money for
a hand-tailored suit for his kitty. I’ll just assume he spends all the money he has on the dress robes for
the cat, who of course is nameless too,” Ron said.

“Yes, to both parts,” Hermione said. “He does indeed spend his last bit of money on the clothes, and
yes, the cat has no name.”

“Rather pointless giving a cat a name anyway,” Harry said. “They don’t come when you call. Mrs.
Figg’s cats only answered to the can opener.”

“Maybe their names were actually Whirrrrr-Clink,” Ron said, trying to do a passable imitation of a
can opener and succeeding quite admirably, Harry thought.

“Do you want me to continue with the story or not?” Hermione asked icily.

“Oh, yeah!” Ron said. “This one’s good fun.”

Hermione rubbed her head as though she felt an approaching migraine and continued.

“Each day, the cat would go out with the bag and stand in the middle of the reeds on the bank of the
river, and when a fine fat duck or goose or partridge came by, he popped the bag over its head and
killed it,” Hermione said.

“Does he really need the bag for that?” Ron said. “I mean, don’t cats generally just kill things?”

“Yes, Ron, but it’s part of the story,” Hermione said.

“Fine, okay, he used the bag to catch and kill game,” Ron said. “At least that’s useful. He takes it
back to the boy, right?”

“Not exactly. He lets the boy have enough to eat, but most of it he presents to the king,” Hermione
said.

“Huh?” Ron asked intelligently.

“Yes, you see the cat had a plan,” Hermione said. “Each day, the cat went to the castle of the king,
bringing the bag with him and whatever he’d killed that day, and he would say ‘A gift to his majesty
the king with the compliments of the Marquis of Carabas!"

“There are so many things wrong in that paragraph that I’m not sure where to start,” Ron said, “but for starters I’d say the king really needs to tighten his security.”

“Well, he is a cat,” Hermione said. “Not many of them are assassins.”

“No, but not many of them talk, wear clothes, walk on their back paws, demand boots, or present gifts of recent killed carcasses to the king either,” Ron said. “Somebody ought to get sacked.”

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it again.

“When you put it that way, you really are right,” Hermione said with a shrug. “Aside from that, I’m supposing you want to know what the cat is actually up to.”

“And who the bloody hell the Marquis of Carabas is,” Ron added conversationally, “if you don’t mind.”

“The cat was trying to get on the king’s good side by giving him presents,” Hermione said.

“So the cat wanted to ditch the kid and trade up to the palace,” Ron said. “Not stupid, is he.”

“No!” Hermione said. “He was trying to make the king like his master!”

“The kid from the mill is the Marquis of Carabas?” Harry asked.

“Well, yes and no. The cat made up the title, but at least the boy has a name now. Sort of,” Hermione said, smiling as if this made everything crystal clear.

Harry and Ron looked at each other, and an entire conversation passed without either of them speaking a word. In those seconds, they agreed that neither one of them had any idea what was happening and that it was completely idiotic to expect otherwise.

“Okay,” Ron said, “so the Marquis of Kumquats…”

“Carabas,” Hermione corrected him.

“Right,” Ron said, “is presenting gifts of fresh game to the king. So why does the cat have to wear clothes to do this?”

“He didn’t want to feel underdressed,” Hermione said, though she didn’t actually sound very sure herself.

“Why don’t we all just agree that the cat has the same love of fashion as Lockhart and leave it at that,” Harry said.

“Great,” Ron said, “now I’m picturing that smarmy git’s voice coming out of the cat’s mouth. I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Honestly!” Hermione said. “Fine, I admit there are some plot holes and issues with characterization and nonsensical decisions and even serious problems with the national defense strategy of the non-existent country in which this takes place, but aside from that it’s a very good story!”

“Let me guess,” Ron said. “The book you read it in when you were a kid had absolutely adorable illustrations of the ickle pussycat and his ickle booties.”
Hermione glared at him before saying, “What of it?”

“Fine,” Harry said, “let’s just get back to the cat’s plan, shall we?”

Hermione looked at Ron, who was trying (and failing) to look angelic, but she collected herself once more and began again.

“This continued for several weeks with the cat arriving and presenting the king with the complements of the Marquis of Carabas along with fowls, the occasional fish, and even a brace of deer,” Hermione said.

“Deer?!” Ron said, coming completely unwound. “The cat brought down a pair of deer?! How is that supposed to be possible? What’s it going to bring next, a bear? The freakish talking wolf who eats grannies in one bite? Crikey, why not just kill a Basilisk or two while he’s at it?”

“It’s a magic bag, all right!” Hermione yelled back. “He uses a magic bag!”

“Not unlike you,” Harry said, trying to get a little calm back.

“Huh?” Hermione and Ron said in tandem.

“You’ve got a magic bag,” Harry pointed out. “The bag the cat has apparently is big enough to carry a whole pair of deer in it, so obviously it’s got an extension charm on it, and for a cat to carry it, there would need to be a spell for lightening the load as well, wouldn’t there? Kind of like your beaded evening bag.”

“I thought we decided she got that idea from the magical box in ‘Hotty McHotterson and the Weird Waterbuffalo of Love’ or whatever it’s called,” Ron said.

Hermione snorted loudly.

“Let’s just say it’s an object that shows up in several stories and leave it at that,” Hermione said. “In any case, the king was very pleased with the generosity of this neighboring marquis that he had never yet met, and the meat was so excellent that he couldn’t help becoming very impressed.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t mind a bit of venison and some quail on a regular basis either,” Harry said. “Still, not sure I’d be accepting food from a stranger, even if I was really hungry.”

“At this point, I’d take a bit of bangers and mash even if it had a gift tag saying, ‘With love from the Malfoy family,’” Ron said.

Hermione thought about it for second, and then said, “I’m not quite that hungry. Yet. But it’s a near thing. At any rate, the cat’s plan was progressing well, and at last one day he saw the perfect opportunity present itself.”

“For what?” Ron asked.

“That’s just what the boy asked. You see, the cat had realized the king’s coach was driving along the road that led into the forest where they were living and would pass by them in few minutes time. There was a lake nearby, and the cat told the miller’s son to take off all his clothes and jump in the lake,” Hermione said.

“The cat literally told him to go jump in a lake?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said as though this were the most normal thing in all the world.
“Fine. Let’s assume the apparent Marquis of Casabas decides to jump starkers into a lake because his cat said it’s a spiffing idea,” Ron said, rolling his eyes. “Then what?”

“It’s Carabas, not Casabas,” Hermione said, “and the cat hid the boy’s clothes.”

“Nice. That’ll make an impression,” Ron said.

“Actually, that’s precisely what it did. The cat stood by the side of the road yelling ‘Thieves! Thieves! My master the Marquis of Carabas was stopping to bathe in this lake, and a pair of thieves have stolen his royal raiment!’” Hermione said, though Harry noted her version of the cat’s voice was starting to resemble Mr. Humphries’ voice from Are You Being Served.

“Because that will accomplish what exactly?” Ron said, looking completely confused.

“Well, the king was delighted to meet the marquis who had been sending him such lovely food, and he was happy he could do him a favor by helping him out of the predicament he was in,” Hermione said, “so the king gave him his cloak.”

“The king, even though he’s a bit of an idiot, is also a fairly decent sort of fellow if he’s willing to help a friend out like that,” Ron said. “Okay, I like him.”

“I’m glad he meets with your approval. The cat was very happy to see his plan was working, but he cautioned the boy to say nothing. The cat said, “Oh, my poor Marquis of Carabas! He is so stunned by this horrible assault! My lord the king, would you be so kind as to have your coachman drive him back to his home?”

“What, the mill?” Ron asked.

“No, his castle,” Hermione said. “The king said he would indeed, and he helped him into his carriage where he sat next to his daughter the princess.”

“I take it back. This king’s an imbecile,” Ron said, his face screwing up in disgust. “He’s letting some naked fellow he’s never met before sit next to his daughter? Bonkers.”

“I admit that there are a dozen ways this might not have ended well,” Hermione admitted. “In any case, the cat, wearing his boots, took off at top speed down the road until he met a group of farmers out tilling their fields.”

“The cat outran the horses?” Ron said in disbelief.

“They’re magic boots,” Hermione replied.

“Right, because a miller’s son would have a pair of those hanging about along with a magic bag,” Ron said.

“Look, I didn’t make up the story. Just go with it, will you? It’s already got the talking cat. Is a pair of magic boots so difficult to believe?” Hermione said, folding her arms stoutly.

“Yes,” Ron said. “Yes, actually they are. But for the sake of finding out what’s up with puss, I’ll bite my tongue.”

“That ought to last three seconds,” Harry said quietly, but he grinned.

“In any case, the cat told the farmers that if anyone asked them who those fields belonged to, they were to reply ‘The Marquis of Carabas owns them,’” Hermione said.
“Whom,” Ron said.

“The Marquis of Carabas,” Hermione repeated. “You know, the miller’s son.”

“No, I mean it should be ‘whom those fields belonged to,’” Ron said.

Hermione blinked in surprise, then drew some invisible lines in the air with her finger, apparently drawing arrows back and forth from one word in the sentence to the others. When she was through, her face fell.

“You’re right,” she said, sounding remarkably like a child who’d just been told there is no Father Christmas. “Fields would be the subject of the subordinate clause, and it should be whom not as that would be the objective case pronoun. To whom do those fields belong – it’s so obvious! How could I have made such a ridiculously horrible grammatical blunder!”

Harry was actually afraid for a moment that she was about to start crying, and apparently Ron scented danger as well.

“It’s probably the stress and hunger,” Ron said, patting her shoulder affectionately. “Doesn’t the brain start to have trouble when there’s a shortage of food?”

“That’s true,” Hermione said slowly, then with increasing panic in her voice. “It could be that the lack of nutrients is starting to have an effect on my reasoning abilities. Oh, Merlin, am I going to turn into a doddering nitwit if I don’t get a decent meal soon?”

“Or maybe I just misheard you!” Ron said, backing away from her as though he was afraid she might explode. “Or I could be wrong, or maybe there is no such word as whom, or, or… Harry, a bit of help please!”

“Hermione, relax,” Harry said. “It’s not that big a deal.”

“Ron just correctly corrected my grammar! I am massacring the English language like an addle pated baboon or a drunken Cockney cabbie or an American or something!” Hermione said.

“Hermione, did you manage to figure out what you did wrong?” Harry said carefully.

“Yes,” Hermione said in a small voice.

“All right then. You simply misspoke. It happens to everyone now and again. It’s fine. The universe has not come unstuck,” Harry said. “Now why don’t you go on with the story?”

“Yeah, before you have a complete meltdown, I want to know what happens to the naked man and the talking cat,” Ron said, sounding perfectly serious.

“Sorry, just… I put a bit of pressure on myself sometimes,” Hermione said, clearing her throat. “Where was I?”

“The cat told the people to say the land belonged to the Marquis of Carabas,” Ron said promptly. “Oh, and none of them bothered to notice that a talking cat was giving them orders to lie.”

“Yes, right,” Hermione said. “In some versions of the story, the cat says the people will have a great reward if they say the lands are his, and in others he says he’ll chop them into mincemeat or scratch their eyes out if they don’t do what he says.”

“Nice little kittycat,” Harry said with a laugh.
“Okay, so now that we've learned the ginger cat isn't one to mess with unless you want to go blind in your sleep, what happens?” Ron said.

“Exactly what you might think,” Hermione said. “The king’s carriage comes past the fields, and he asks for the name of the owner, only to have everyone reply that they belong to the Marquis of Carabas. The cat does this over and over: through a forest, in a small town, in a vineyard, in a hayfield, and everyone responds that they belong to the Marquis of Carabas.”

“Let me guess. The king was impressed by how wealthy his nude guest was?” Harry said.

“Precisely. The cat also got the king to take the most round about way, while he went straight to a big castle,” Hermione said. “It belonged to the real owner of the surrounding countryside.”

“And that would be?” Ron asked.

“An ogre. A particularly wicked one, too, and all of the people who lived on his lands hated him for his cruelty,” Hermione said. “This particular ogre did have one unusual quality, though. He was a shape shifter.”

“Like an animagus?” Ron asked.

“Not quite, it was more than that. He could turn himself into any form he wanted to, or so the cat had been told,” Hermione said.

“Sounds like the Muggles got an ogre confused with a Boggart,” Ron said.

“Hmm,” Hermione said. “You know, that’s quite an interesting possibility. I suppose that many Muggles would be frightened of ogres, and a Boggart might well change into one if the right person saw it. All that would need to happen is for another Muggle to come along and the supposed ogre to change into something else for them to get the idea that ogres really could change into other forms, never realizing the ogre itself was never really an ogre.”

“Like Lupin’s class,” Harry said.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “Well, in any case, the cat went up to the ogre, who immediately threatened to eat him.”

“This cat gets that a lot,” Ron said. “He must look tasty.”

“But the cat was very clever, as most cats are,” Hermione said. “The cat said to the ogre, ‘Oh great ogre, I came to see you because I could not believe the tales people told that you can turn into any creature you wish. Is that so?’ The ogre laughed and said, ‘Indeed it is. I can become any animal I want.’”

“Nice that the ogre speaks English, but then again so does the cat,” Ron said.

“I cannot quite believe that,” said the cat. ‘Could you change yourself into something so I could see?’” Hermione continued. “In a blink of an eye, the ogre had become a horrible fire-breathing dragon, so enormous that the room could barely contain him.”

“Hagrid would love that,” Harry said. “He’d probably want to adopt him.”

“Yeah, Norbert could have a friend, you know, if they don’t kill one another first,” Ron said.

“Actually most dragons ignore one another’s presence outside of mating season or immediately after
their young hatch as precautionary measures for the continuance of the species and to provide the best defense against possible predators,” Hermione said.

“You actually read *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much,* didn’t you,” Ron said.

“I thought it might be useful,” Hermione said. “You never know if we might run into another one again.”

“I am done with dragons,” Harry said vehemently. “You can bank on that.”

“Well, at any rate, the cat was really quite frightened, but he managed to stammer out, ‘Oh marvelous sorcerer! What a truly amazing person you are! And yet, I must admit, I am curious still.’ ‘About what?’ asked the ogre who was now a dragon. ‘Well, obviously you can turn into a large creature, but you could turn into something quite small? Say, a mouse, perhaps?’”

“I think I see where this is going,” Ron said.

“You probably do, but the ogre didn’t. Just to prove that he could change into anything he liked, he transformed into a little grey field mouse. The cat immediately caught it and killed,” Hermione said.

“And stuffed it in his magic bag to give the king?” Ron asked.

Hermione sighed once more.

“No, Ronald, he ate it himself,” she said, rubbing her hand over her forehead.

“Oh. Well, Crookshanks made a present of a dead mouse to me over the summer. Left it on my pillow. Lovely surprise,” Ron said.

“Yes, he does do that on occasion,” Hermione said, looking at him curiously, “but usually only with people he especially likes.”

“Exactly how do I get him to hate me?” Ron asked.

“In any case, the ogre was now dead,” Hermione said, choosing to ignore him.

“You know, he took an awful risk that the mouse would turn back into an ogre in his stomach,” Ron said thoughtfully. “That would be very uncomfortable.”

“Usually wizards do remain in animagus form if they are killed while they look like an animal, so it would probably still apply here. Of course, there are some exceptions. Werewolves, for example, take on a human appearance again if they’re killed even during a full moon,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “I suppose since the ogre isn’t really either an animagus or under a curse, it was a gamble on the cat’s part.”

“I’ll assume he didn’t explode?” Ron said.

“No, he didn’t. Instead, he went around the castle, putting things in order since the ogre had been a horrible housekeeper, and then stood to wait at the front door for the king’s carriage to arrive,” Hermione said. “When at last it did, he bowed low and said in a loud voice, ‘Welcome home, Marquis of Carabas!’”

“And the miller’s son just went along with it?” Harry asked.

“Yes. Of course, he’d never laid eyes on the castle and all its riches before, so he was very surprised, but he managed to try to act as though this were normal,” Hermione said.
“Okay, so the cat commits murder and theft after getting dozens of people to lie, and the miller’s son takes the castle?” Ron said.

“Pretty much, yes,” Hermione said. “The cat presented him with the castle and the lands, thereby making him the Marquis of Carabas. None of the tenants on the land objected since the ogre had been so terrible to them.”

“It’s a good thing this king didn’t get around to visiting his neighbors often,” Harry said.

“The cat ushered the king, his daughter, and the miller’s son into the dining room, where the ogre had been planning on having a large supper, and they ate a wonderful meal on golden plates,” Hermione said.

“Like Hogwarts,” Ron said.

“Precisely like Hogwarts,” Hermione agreed, “though I don’t think he had House-elves but just regular servants. The king’s daughter was extremely taken with the miller’s son, for he was quite handsome…”

“…and also apparently still naked except for her dad’s cloak,” Ron said. “Guess she liked what she saw.”

“Ehm, I assume he changed into some clothes once he arrived at the castle, but yes, well, that could have been a factor I suppose. In any case the king proposed that the miller’s son marry his daughter, and since the princess was also quite pretty, he agreed,” Hermione said.

“No pressure or anything,” Ron said. “Just marry my daughter who you met an hour ago.”

“It is a ridiculously fast courtship, but the father had already seen that the Marquis of Carabas was very wealthy and would be a good ally for his kingdom, and among the nobility wealth and power were usually the real causes of marriage, not love,” Hermione said.

“Eh, I think I’d rather be poor then,” Ron said. “I’d rather not be married off to Pansy Parkinson just because she’s rich or something.”

“Say, do you think that’s why Draco took up with her?” Harry said.

“I’m pretty sure it wasn’t her sparkling conversation that garnered his attentions,” Hermione said. “So the miller who had been so poor he owned only a cat, a bag, and the clothes on his back wound up with a beautiful castle filled with riches, lots of property, and a princess for a wife, and all through a bit of kindness to his cat.”

“What happened to the cat?” Ron asked.

“Oh, well, there are two endings. In one, the cat lives forever with the miller’s son, who’s terribly grateful for all the cat has done for him, and the cat wears the boots for the rest of his days and is waited on hand and foot, hunting only for pleasure,” Hermione said.

“And the other ending?” Harry asked.

“The miller’s son throws him out a window so no one knows who he used to be,” Hermione said, wincing.

“Wow, that’s one ungrateful brat,” Ron said. “I think I’ll go with the first ending, which is probably what Crookshanks is doing at the Burrow right now.”
“You really think so?” asked Hermione.

“Sure,” Ron said. “Mum likes cats, and I don’t think she ever really did get used to spending the days alone after all of us went off to school. He’s probably grown to twice his size off her cooking.”

“Oh, I do hope so,” Hermione said, looking a bit teary. “I miss him.”

“He’s fine,” Ron reassured her, putting an arm around her again, and in that moment Harry was certain Ron wouldn’t mind putting up with Crookshanks forever under the right living circumstances. “No boots, thought. That would be taking it a bit too far. I suppose Mum might knit him one of her jumpers, though, with a big C on it.”

Hermione laughed at that, and Harry was glad to see that she was feeling a bit better. They were all homesick, he supposed. Ron missed his family and his home, Hermione missed her parents and her cat, and Harry… well, he had no home to go back to, no family left. Even Hedwig was gone now. He supposed what he really missed was Hogwarts, and he wondered if they might go back there again someday. For now, his real family was right in this tent with him, and he supposed that made the cat-smelling, drafty old place home. In that moment it seemed like enough.
The What Is in These People’s Tea?)ild Swans

Chapter Notes

This version uses bits and pieces from at least five different versions of "The Wild Swans" (or "The Twelve Swans" or "The Three Ravens" or "The Swan Princes" or whatever else this was called).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I want…” Ron began as he sat at the kitchen table, staring forlornly at the vacant cloth in front of him.

“Food, yes, we know,” Hermione said, not looking up from her knitting and sounding more than a little cross.

Harry couldn’t blame her. They’d finally managed to get a decent meal that day, a really rather princely windfall due to a cook at a local restaurant pitching a fit and tossing a whole leg of mutton at a butcher who was supposed to bring lamb chops instead. Thinking quickly, Harry, who had been rummaging a nearby dumpster from under his invisibility cloak, had managed to throw a Summoning charm at the exact moment when the mutton left the chef’s hand. In the confusion of all the yelling and shrieking and demands for payment and declarations of never using the butcher again, no one had bothered to notice what had become of the mutton, which Hermione had managed to turn into a very passable lunch. It seemed a bit rude, really, for Ron to be complaining yet again when they’d actually done quite well.

Ron, however, just continued looking glumly at the table before mumbling, “No, not food. I want to see Mum and Dad. And Fred and George. And Bill and Charlie and Ginny. I wouldn’t even mind a peek at Percy, the prat.”

Hermione’s needles stopped clicking at once, and Harry saw her blush in embarrassment.

“Sorry,” she said. “I just sort of assumed…”

“Natural assumption. Any other time you’d have been right, but I’m just feeling rather homesick, I guess,” Ron said, picking absentely at a bit of lint on the worn out tablecloth.

Harry felt sorry for him and a bit jealous at the same time. He really didn’t have a home to miss, and despite the cease fire between Dudley and him, family wasn’t really on his list of things to look forward to after the Horcrux hunt was over. He had absolutely no plans to tell Ron, though, that he wasn’t the only one who missed Ginny. Still, Ron was in low spirits, much lower than usual, and Harry couldn’t help wondering how long it would be before a sort of constant cloud of depression swallowed them all up.

“Well, I do know a story about a family that reminds me a little bit of yours,” Hermione said tentatively. “I could tell it to you if you think it would make you feel any better.”

“Is it mental?” Ron asked, looking a bit brighter.

Hermione tipped her head to one side as if considering carefully before saying with a smile, “I’d say
“Then by all means, let’s have it,” Ron said, moving to a nearby chair so he could see better.

“But once….,” Hermione paused, and Harry knew she was expecting Ron to interrupt, “upon a time.”

She blinked as Ron just continued to listen, and Harry was actually alarmed by Ron’s nonparticipation. He must really be feeling low. The same thought had obviously occurred to Hermione as well since she looked rather alarmed.

“There lived a king who had six sons and a daughter, who was the youngest of all,” Hermione said.

“Okay,” Ron said, smiling a little, “I think I see the resemblance.”

“To be honest, in some versions of the story there are twelve brothers, but others do have six, and the sister is almost always the youngest one,” Hermione said.

“Twelve brothers?” Harry said.

“I don’t think Mrs. Weasley would have a shred of patience left with thirteen kids running around.”

“Can you imagine if the other six were three more sets of Fred and George?” Ron said, now really grinning. “The house would have been blown to smithereens years ago.”

“And then the smithereens would have blown up,” Harry added.

“So, the father’s there, but where the mum?” Ron asked.

“Oh, um, she’s sort of… dead?” Hermione said, looking apologetic.

“Eh, that’s okay,” Ron said. “Mothers have a mortality rate like dragon pox in these things. Let me guess, there’s a step-mother involved?”

“There is,” Hermione said, “but she comes about in a strange way. One day the king is riding through the forest and gets very lost. He comes upon an old woman and asks her for directions, and she agreed to help him get out of the forest on one condition.”

“Let me guess. He has to marry the old woman,” Ron said.

“No, of course not,” Hermione said. “He has to marry the old woman’s daughter.”

“Oh,” Ron said. “Well, same thing I suppose. So the king just decides to marry this girl, sight unseen, to get out of the woods. This whole thing could have been avoided with a simple Four-Point Spell.”

“Yes, but the king is a Muggle, Ron,” Hermione said. “They don’t have locator spells, though really there’s no excuse for his not having a compass. But yes, he does agree to marry the girl.”

“And I’m guessing she’s got some sort of issues,” Ron said. “What, is she an ogre or a troll or a banshee or something?”

“No, she’s actually extremely pretty,” Hermione said.

“Well, not so bad then,” Ron said. “Well done, king.”

“But there was also something about her that made the king feel very strange, like there was something deeply wrong with her,” Hermione added with a glare that Harry knew was her way of
trying to remind Ron for the thousandth time that pretty and good were not always the same thing, though personally Harry was grateful she wasn’t about to give the same speech yet again.

“It’s generally not a good sign if your bride-to-be gives you the collywobbles,” Ron said, nodding.

“Even more suspicious, it seemed as though the young woman had been waiting for him when he came to her mother’s house, for her bags were already packed and she left with him without so much as a word,” Hermione said.

“Sounds like a set up to me,” Harry said. “Was the old woman a witch by any chance?”

“You’ve got it in one!” Hermione said. “And so is the daughter, of course.”

“Now that’s interesting,” Ron said, squinting into the distance as if he was trying to figure something out.

“What?” Hermione asked.

“The witch has a daughter,” Ron said. “None of the other witches in these stories have children, well, except for in the one about the really hairy girl, and she’s just a payment for her birth mother’s lettuce addiction.”

Harry snorted, but Hermione tipped her head to one side, obviously thinking.

“You know, you’re quite right,” Hermione said. “I don’t think I can recall a single other instance of a witch having actually given birth to a child in any other fairy tale, and this one does inherit her mother’s ability with witchcraft, so it’s fairly accurate to the way magic is usually handed down in traditional magic or half-blood families. It’s highly intriguing that the storyteller makes a point of creating a family background as opposed to just having the king meet the young woman instead, thereby at least partially humanizing the old witch through her concern for her daughter’s future. I wonder if the writer might actually have met a witch at some point.”

“Or it was just convenient for the story,” Ron said, shrugging.

“Or that,” Hermione said. “In any case, the king, feeling something was off about the woman, became concerned for his seven children and decided it might be best to keep them out of sight until he was sure of how she would behave with them.”

“He’s just not going to mention he’s got better than half a dozen children?” Harry asked.

“That’s not going to work,” Ron said. “I don’t care how big that castle is. There’s some sort of a row at our house at least three times a day, and usually it’s even louder than the ghoul in the attic. Unless the woman can’t hear well, she’ll suss it out sooner or later.”

“Ah, but he doesn’t keep them in the house,” Hermione said. “Instead he hides them in a cabin in the woods.”

“How deep?” Ron asked, looking suspicious.

“A fair walk,” Hermione said. “Why?”

“Because Xeno Lovegood actually heard Mum when she was bawling out the twins a few years ago for not getting enough O.W.L.s,” Ron said. “He sent over a note by owl wanting to know if we’d been attacked by Snorkacks. That’s almost a mile away. So he better hide those kids deep.”
“We’ll assume he did,” Hermione said, and Harry couldn’t tell whether she looked impressed or vaguely terrified by Mrs. Weasley’s vocal abilities. He was guessing it was a combination of the two. “The new queen had no idea she had seven step-children.”

“That doesn’t really seem right either,” Harry said. “It’s a pretty huge lie.”

“It is,” Hermione agreed, “but he wanted to keep his children safe.”

“Then why didn’t he just not marry her in the first place?” Ron asked.

“Because he’d given his word to the old woman in the woods,” Hermione said.

“So?” Ron asked.

“So he can’t just break a promise, Ronald,” Hermione said, sounding rather sharp. “It was a matter of honor.”

“Between breaking a promise or protecting his kids by stuffing them in a cabin in the middle of nowhere? At that point honor ought to take second place, I think,” Ron said with a firm nod.

“But that’s not the way Muggles did things back then,” Hermione said. “It would have been a really bad breach of etiquette. Still… you have a point.”

“So he abandons his kids in the forest,” Ron said. “Then what?”

“Oh, no, he doesn’t abandon them,” Hermione said quickly. “He goes to visit them very regularly, almost every day.”

“That’s a bit better,” Ron said, sounding placated. “Okay, I don’t dislike him so much now.”

“Unfortunately, that’s what led to the trouble, though,” Hermione said. “The new queen wondered where her husband went every day and finally she followed him in secret.”

“Thought he had a bit of fluff on the side,” Ron said, shaking his head knowingly. “It does look suspicious.”

“I suppose so,” Hermione said. “It would certainly have been a common enough situation back then. Most royal males had multiple mistresses.”

“What about the royal females?” Ron asked.

“Oh, no,” Hermione said. “At least, not as commonly. That was considered high treason and would have led to being executed.”

“So if it was so common for the fellows, why would she be angry about it?” Ron asked.

“Just because something’s usual doesn’t mean that it stops upsetting people,” Hermione said.

“Like when Mum gets upset at us for tracking mud into the house when we’ve been out degnoming the garden and forget to wipe our feet,” Ron reasoned. “We do it all the time, but she still blows her top.”

“Yes, Ronald, tracking mud in the house causes exactly the same level of anger and betrayal in women as marital infidelity,” Hermione said, shaking her head. “At any rate, she saw the six boys come running out of the house to greet their father, and she was furious.”
“Can’t say I blame her at this point,” Harry said. “As secrets go, that’s enormous.”

“Wait, where was the girl?” Ron asked.

“She was inside, tending to the soup over the fire, so she didn’t come out to see him, and the queen didn’t know she was there, which was lucky for the girl,” Hermione said. “Well, at least that’s the case in one version. In another, she sees the girl isn’t as threatened by her.”

“Threatened?” Ron said. “Of a bunch of kids? How rowdy are they?”

“Oh, that’s not it,” Hermione said. “You see, if the king had legitimate children with his first wife, which she now realized was the case, her own children by him wouldn’t have any claim to the throne unless something happened to all of them, or at least all the sons.”

“Say,” Harry said, “didn’t anyone else in the castle or the rest of the kingdom or anything know about the seven kids?”

“I suppose they must have,” Hermione said.

“They just didn’t say anything at all?” Harry said.

“The king probably ordered them not to,” Hermione explained.

“I don’t care how much he threatened them, someone would have slipped,” Ron said, and Harry nodded in agreement. “That’s unrealistic, that is.”

“It’s a fairy tale,” Hermione said. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed this yet, but they’re not especially noted for their accurate portrayal of realism.”

The two boys paused before they eventually both shrugged in tandem.

“Fair enough,” Ron said. “It’s not like that Picasso fellow really thought people were stripy, multi-colored collections of triangles and circles with two eyes on one side of their face, so I guess not everything has to be realistic to be artistic.”

“You know about Picasso?” Hermione said, her eyes widening in surprise. “How?”

“Oh, ehm, Fred and George,” Ron said, starting to blush. “They, um, lifted a book of his prints out of a Muggle bookshop once.”

“Let me guess,” Hermione said, smirking. “A collection of his nudes?”

“Uh, yeah,” Ron said and turned a darker shade of pink. “They thought it’d be, you know, fun. But mostly it just made them really confused. Also, for a while they thought Muggle girls were blue and had single-sided noses.”

Hermione sighed deeply and pinched the bridge of her nose, but soldiered on.

“Well, it gets stranger from here out,” Hermione said. “The queen went home and made six white shirts, one for each son.”

“Aw, that’s sort of nice,” Ron said. “She wants to make them a present.”

“Not exactly,” Hermione said. “The queen cast a horrible spell on the shirts. The next day, she followed the same path through the forest to the cottage, and when the birds began to call out as though someone were coming, the boys came running, thinking it was their father.”
“I’m guessing that didn’t end well,” Harry said.

“No,” Hermione said. “The queen threw the shirts into the air, and each one landed on one of the boys so that he was wearing it.”

“Now wait just a second,” Ron said. “How can you throw six shirts in the air and have them just naturally come to rest so that the boys are wearing them? At the very least, that’s going to take some participation from the kids, that is.”

“Yeah, I’ve never had that happen,” Harry said. “It’d be convenient, though, just being able to throw your clothes in the air and have them all land in place.”

“Well, it happened this time,” Hermione said stoutly, folding her arms, “and that’s not even the strangest thing that happened with the shirts.”

“Oh, I already figured that bit out,” Ron said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “She poisoned the shirts and they’re all dead, right?”

“No,” Hermione said, looking aghast at the suggestion, though Harry couldn’t help thinking that was rather rich considering how gory most of these were. “The shirts turn the boys into swans.”

Harry and Ron looked at each other.

“You know, that might actually be worse,” Ron said.

“Well, I suppose it would be rather horrifying to suddenly have yourself turn into an animal,” Hermione said, “particularly if you don’t even know about the existence of magic. In fact, I think the story probably hits upon the innate fear latent in the human psyche of losing the ability of advanced cognitive processes and having the inner ego cave to the forces of the animalistic id, as seen in some of the stories about werewolves, for example, though those are of course based in fact. That would suggest that one of the greatest shared irrational fears is the suppression of higher thought and a return to a pre-evolutionary nature. Added to that, there’s the possibility that the human and reasoning side of the six brothers is still at least tangentially aware within the animal form assumed, or in this case forced upon them, and therefore they can have the reasoning capacity of humans to be appalled by their loss of their own humanity. Really, it’s quite similar to what Barty Crouch Jr. did when he punished Malfoy by turning him into a ferret. That particular breach of protocol really should have raised more red flags concerning his fitness for a teaching position. As much as I loathe Malfoy, Professor McGonagall was right: Transfiguration should never be used as a disciplinary tool.”

“Um, I just meant it would probably be worse than death for a bunch of boys to be stuck as such girly birds,” Ron said. “It might not be so bad if they were hawks or eagles or something, but swans?”

“For your information, swans can actually be quite terrifying and vicious, particularly if they’re provoked by having their young endangered,” Hermione said rather coldly.

“Harry? Back me up on this one?” Ron said.

“Sorry Hermione, but swans do seem sort of automatically feminine,” Harry said. “Maybe it’s just because that’s Cho’s patronus. In any case, I’d prefer being a ferret to a swan given the choice.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, in one version of the story the boys are turned into ravens. Is that better?” Hermione said, still sounding rather put out.
“A raven would be better than a swan,” Ron said, nodding. “Actually, I’d prefer that to a ferret. So the hierarchy of possible animal changes would be, in order from most to least desirable, raven, then ferret, and finally swan.”

“Wonderful, now I can’t help mentally calling this story ‘The Wild Ferrets,’” Hermione grumbled before setting off again. “In any case, the six swans all flew away, leaving their sister behind.”

“Aw, now that really is sad,” Ron said. “What happened to her?”

“Well, it depends on the version,” Hermione said. “In one she’s still quite a little girl, and the queen sends her to live with some peasants for several years while the king goes nearly mad trying to find her. Then, when she’s sixteen, the peasants give the girl back to the king, but the queen tries to destroy her.”

“Of course,” Harry says. “So, how?”

“Yeah, this has got to be good,” Ron said.

“Poisoned toads,” Hermione says.

The boys blinked.

“Okay, I wasn’t expecting that, but I’ll give her points for originality,” Ron said. “How exactly does she attempt assassination via Trevor’s nasty cousins?”

“She’s actually not trying to kill her outright. The queen waits until the princess is about to take a bath, and she slips three toads into her bathwater, telling the first one to settle over the girl’s heart, the second on her forehead, and the third on the top of her head. The one on her head was supposed to make her stupid, the one on her forehead was supposed to make her ugly, and the one on her heart was supposed to turn her towards evil.”

“Muggles really just do not get how magic works, do they?” Ron said.

“No,” Hermione said, “though I suppose you could say that one is supposed to Confund her, another is a sort of camouflage spell, and the third is a form of the Imperius Curse.”

“Okay, maybe,” Ron agreed. “So what happened?”

“Nothing,” Hermione said. “The three toads climbed onto her in the bath, but she was so good and kind and pure that they turned into roses instead and did her no harm.”

“Uh… huh,” Ron said. “That’s… I think the word I’m looking for here is ‘unique.’”

“She can turn toads into roses?” Harry asked.

“Apparently,” Hermione said with a shrug.

“So is she a witch?” Harry asked. “Because it does seem like something she might be able to do with Transfiguration.”

“You know, when you put it that way, you really do have a point,” Hermione said, looking excited. “Oh, that would be interesting, wouldn’t it! We’d have a good witch in one of these stories for once, though of course they wouldn’t call her a witch since the term is automatically evil in all the old stories, but she does seem to have some rudimentary skills at least, and there’s even more of that later in the story if you look closely enough. That’s really quite refreshing!”
Ron gave Hermione a pat on the shoulder as she beamed happily. As usual, Harry noticed his hand lingered a few seconds past what would be normal, casual contact, not that Hermione seemed to mind.

“So, what does dear old Step-Mum do when the toads don’t turn the daughter into an evil, ugly idiot?” Harry asked.

“The queen was furious, so she scrubbed the girl’s face with walnut dye and smeared horrible ointments in her hair to make her look bad, then took her to the king,” Hermione said. “He said his daughter couldn’t possibly be so ugly, so he rejected her and sent her away into the forest.”

“He doesn’t recognize her because her face is dirty and her hair is untidy?” Ron said. “Ladies and gents, we have yet another winner in the Lousy Fairy Tale Father contest.”

“Well, to make it a little less terrible, remember he wouldn’t have seen her for ten years and the queen might have used magic to alter Eliza’s appearance as well,” Hermione said.

“Wait, she has a name?” Ron said.

“Oh, yes, I forgot,” Hermione said, looking embarrassed. “It’s only in some of the versions, specifically those based off of Andersen’s take on things, but he does call her Eliza.”

“Oh, yes, I forgot,” Hermione said, looking embarrassed. “It’s only in some of the versions, specifically those based off of Andersen’s take on things, but he does call her Eliza.”

“Okay, two things. First, Eliza is a perfectly normal name,” Ron said. “I mean, there is literally nothing odd about it at all. Am I right on this, Harry?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I think there were at least a couple of Elizas at the school I went to before Hogwarts.”

“So Eliza can join Jack the Giant Killing Moron in a very select group of fairy tale characters with less than insane names,” Ron said.

“You said two things?” Hermione prompted him.

“Oh, right,” Ron said. “Almost forgot while basking in the glow of normalcy.”

“Your view of a normal name might be a bit tilted. Don’t you have an uncle named Jklnszkrtpb?” Hermione said.

“Well done with the pronunciation on that,” said Ron looking impressed, “yeah, and Aunt Gordon. But at least I know those are odd. In any case, who’s Andersen?”

“I mentioned him once before. He was a Danish fellow who wrote several fairy tales or came up with new versions of them,” Hermione said. “‘The Little Sea-Maid’ was one of his.”

“Oh, yeah, the one about the bleeding tongueless girl. He must have been a cheerful fellow,” Ron said, voice dripping sarcasm.

“Not particularly. He wrote a story about a homeless little matchgirl who hallucinates about food and having a family as she slowly freezes to death,” Hermione said. “That’s about par for the course with him.”

Harry snorted loudly.

“What?” Hermione said. “It really is a sad story.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it,” Harry said, “but who on earth read that one to their kids at bedtime?”
“Victorians,” Hermione said with a shrug. “Anyway, that’s Andersen’s take on the swan story. In other versions, the father comes by the day after the boys turn into swans and the daughter runs out to him and explains what happened, but because she’s never seen the queen, she doesn’t know who it is who did the charm. The king says he will return for her the next day and bring her back to the castle after he tells his new wife about her. After he leaves, it occurs to the girl that the wife is probably exactly who did this in the first place, so she runs off into the forest so the queen won’t kill her.”

“Smart girl,” Ron said. “Either way, the nameless girl or Eliza or what have you winds up all alone in the woods. Then what?”

“Well, she wanders through the woods for a while, and finally she comes to a lake where there are six swans swimming,” Hermione says.

“Shouldn’t that be ‘six geese a-laying’ and ‘seven swans a-swimming?’” Harry said with a grin.

“Oh, Merlin, that song is going to be stuck in my head for hours,” Hermione said, looking horror struck. “Lovely. Anyway, as the swans were also wearing golden crowns, she knew they must be her brothers.”

“Well, that’s lucky,” said Ron. “Nice that they got to keep their headgear, even if they lost pretty much everything else. It’s a bit too convenient that they’re still so close by, of course, but if it’s the one where this all happens the next day, they really shouldn’t have flown that far anyway.”

“Actually, swans can fly up to 50 miles per hour under the right conditions, so they could have been very far indeed,” Hermione said.

“You just know the flight velocity of a swan off the top of your head?” Ron said, looking stunned.

“European, not Afrian, and unladen only, no coconuts,” Hermione said with a giggle, then when both of them stared at her with no reaction, she sighed and mumbled, “Note to self: after this is all over, rent Holy Grail and force the boys to watch it.”

“Okay, so the princess finds her brothers, only they’re birds,” Harry said. “Now what?”

“Well, the brothers started to blow on one another, and as they did so, their feathers blew away, and there they stood in the white shirts the queen had thrown upon them,” Hermione said.

“They blew off their feathers?” Ron said, grimacing. “ Seems messy.”

“Yeah, and sort of an anti-climatic story,” Harry said. “So they go back to the king and explain what happened and that’s the end?”

“Oh, no,” Hermione said. “The enchantment lifts for only fifteen minutes every evening.”

“Well, that’s bloody inconvenient,” Ron said.

“In yet another version, they become human from dusk until dawn, which is a bit more like the lycanthropic tales, but the oldest versions we can find do seem to have the fifteen minute problem in them,” Hermione says.

“Right,” Harry said. “Because… no, that just makes no sense at all.”

“Whatever,” Ron said, waving away the strangeness of the spell as though he was becoming used to this sort of nonsense, “but she does take them to the castle and has them hang about until the father
sees them for that fifteen minutes, right?”

“No,” Hermione says. “The brothers say if they come anywhere near the king again, the queen will kill them on sight.”

“Oh,” Ron said, looking dejected. “Well, I guess that actually does make sense.”

“But they’re very concerned for their little sister,” Hermione said, “and they want her to go away with them to a faraway land. In the version where it’s been several years since she’s seen them, there’s actually a clause in the spell that says they can set foot on their homeland only one day a year, and she just happened to find them on that day. In the others, they just decide it would be better to leave.”

“Probably not the worst decision they could make,” Harry said. “Basically, it’s sort of what we did, really, keeping on the run so we aren’t caught.”

“I suppose so,” Hermione said, looking a little sad. “So the brothers weave a big net out of vines for her, and when dawn comes, she lies down in the net, they take the edges of it in their beaks, and they fly off with her across the sea.”

“Pretty, but maybe not the safest way they might have done it,” Harry said. “What happens if they turn back into humans only partway across?”

“Oh, they do,” Hermione said. “There’s this whole big race against time sequence where they’re trying to make it to a rock at the halfway point across the water, but they forgot to factor in that they’d be flying more slowly due to carrying their sister. They just barely beat the setting of the sun, and they have to spend the whole night on a very tiny, slippery island in the middle of a tempest before continuing their journey the next day.”

“Brilliant planning,” Ron said, rolling his eyes. “I suppose they couldn’t just use a boat as it wouldn’t be nearly as batty. I take it they don’t slip off the rock and die in the ocean?”

“No, they reach land,” Hermione said. “Once they do and the brothers are human again for a bit, Eliza asks them if there isn’t any way the enchantment could be undone. Then, depending on the version, they either say they don’t know and she gets the information for how to fix things in a dream, or they do know and tell her, but say there’s no possible way anyone could accomplish the task.”

“And that is?” Ron asks.

“She has to make them another set of white shirts,” Hermione said.

“Oh no!” Ron cried in mock horror. “Who could possibly make shirts! Why doesn’t she just go down to the tailors and get them made up?”

“It’s never that easy in a fairy tale, Ron,” Hermione says. “She has to go out and gather prickly nettles that grow on graves at midnight, trample them with her bare feet until they become flax, spin the flax, weave the cloth, then sew the shirts. She has to finish all of the shirts in six years, and she cannot speak or laugh in all that time or else the brothers will be stuck as swans forever.”

“Blimey,” Ron said. “Okay, now that’s a challenge.”

“That is one seriously specific spell,” Harry said.

“Being the heroine of the story, Eliza does indeed undertake the charm, which again shows that she
might be some sort of a witch. Her brothers come to her the next day when they’re human again and find her working on the nettles and not speaking. They’re very sad, but grateful to her,” Hermione said.

“As they should be,” Ron said. “I don’t think Ginny could manage not talking for six years. Might make it a couple hours, though.”

“I think you’re underestimating her,” Harry said. “If you or your brothers were really in trouble, you’d have a time of it getting her not to do anything.”

“You’re probably right,” Ron admitted, looking homesick again. “Of course, she’d probably just take out her wand, curse the queen with a truly spectacular Bat Bogey hex, and force her into undoing the spell, though.”

“Yeah, that’d be Ginny,” Harry said, smiling a little too fondly at the thought, and he found himself clocked over the head with a throw pillow.

“Oy, less drooling over my kid sister, yeah?” Ron said, though he didn’t really look too offended.

Hermione shook her head at Ron’s attitude towards his sister’s private life but went forward, “So things went quite well for a time. Ginny… I mean Eliza. Now you’ve got me doing it, Harry! Eliza worked very well, and although the nettles stung her hands and feet until they blistered, she never spoke a word of complaint or made any sound.”

“Poor kid,” Ron said. “At least she’s actually doing something instead of waiting around for someone else to fix everything.”

“I quite agree,” Hermione said. “Some critics point out that the removal of the character’s voice is an example of the silencing of women by society, but I prefer to think of it more as her choice to remain silent to create a society that she prefers in rebellion against the status quo. And yes, she doesn’t just sit about waiting to be rescued. She’s actually the rescuer here.”

“Like the mermaid with the bleeding feet saved the prince when his ship sank,” Ron said knowledgably. “So Andersen may be a strange blighter with a weird tendency to add in details about foot pain, but his female characters do at least do things.”

Hermione stared at Ron.

“What?” he said.

“No, it’s just… I think you might be right. Andersen’s version does play up the idea that she steps on stinging nettles in her bare feet and winds up blistered, and the little mermaid’s feet stab her like pins and needles, and he even wrote a story about a girl who wore a pair of red shoes to church,” Hermione said, looking shocked.

“What happened to her?” Harry asked.

“Her feet got chopped off by an ax,” Hermione said, looking rather sick, “but that still isn’t enough to pay for her sin of vanity, and the shoes with the bloody feet in them dance in front of her, blocking her from entering the church.”

“Oh, that’s nightmare fuel I didn’t need,” Harry said, turning green.

“I wonder if there’s anything about feet in ‘The Little Matchgirl’ or some of his other stories,” Hermione said in a tone that suggested her curiosity was piqued. “I don’t recall ever reading anything
about Andersen undergoing foot-related trauma, but perhaps he was investing his stories with some of his own experience.”

“Maybe he had bunions,” Ron suggested.

Hermione had already reached into her little beaded bag and produced a bit of parchment on which she was scribbling down notes that Harry was absolutely sure were research questions.

“Possibly,” Hermione said. “That was really a very astute deduction, Ron. You’ve obviously been paying attention.”

“Aw,” Ron said, turning a pleased pink, “it wasn’t anything. Besides, listening to you is a lot less boring than staring at the wall.”

Hermione stopped scribbling and looked up at him.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’m so glad I’m more interesting than a blank canvas tent sheet.”

“You’re welcome,” Ron said, smiling and apparently not catching her sarcasm.

“So, we’ve gotten off topic,” Harry said quickly. “Gin… I mean Eliza, had finished one shirt.”

“Right,” Hermione said, snapping her attention back to the story. “The six brothers and Eliza lived in a cave deep in a forest, and she would go out to work by daylight when her brothers were off flying as swans.”

“Why’d she live in a cave?” Ron asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Hermione said, sounding exasperated. “I guess she couldn’t build a whole house alone, and with her brothers being human only fifteen minutes a day, they couldn’t very well accomplish much. So they lived in a cave. Is that acceptable?”

“I suppose,” Ron said, but he looked discontent. “Couldn’t a swan use a hammer?”

“Swans don’t have thumbs, Ronald,” Hermione said through gritted teeth. “It’s rather hard to operate a hammer without those.”

“Eh, I see your point,” he said, looking happier. “Okay, so she lives in a cave with her brothers.”

“One day, as she was working, a few men from the king’s court came by. She was frightened of them, so she climbed high into a tree to get away,” Hermione said.

“Too bad those vicious swans weren’t about,” Ron said.

“Well, really, I suppose they could have bitten the men,” Hermione said.

“Or pooed on them,” Ron said seriously.

Hermione rolled her eyes as Harry and Ron chuckled.

“Yes, fine, let’s all stoop to the level of First Years,” she sighed. “I can’t wait to see what you do with the next bit. The men wouldn’t leave her alone and kept trying to get her to talk, so she tossed her necklace at them, hoping they would take it and go away.”

“Well, it’s a fair bribe,” Harry said. “Did it work?”
“No,” Hermione said, “so she tried throwing them her girdle, which was studded with precious stones.”

“Her girdle?” Ron said. “Like the kind my Great Aunt Tessie wears? Because even if that was covered in rubies as big as the ones on Gryffindor’s sword, I’d run as far away as possible from that.”

“Not that sort of girdle,” Hermione said. “This would have been like a fancy belt.”

“Oh,” Ron said. “That’s less terrifying, then.”

“The men still wouldn’t leave, so she tossed them her garters, which were of fine silk,” Hermione continued.

“Wait, I think she’s unclear on the concept of making men want to leave,” Ron said. “There’s a pretty girl up in a tree, and she starts basically doing a strip tease to make them go away. With most males, that isn’t going to have the desired result of having them leave.”

“Well, considering most of the stories say she next flings her dress at them, you’re not far wrong,” Hermione said.

“Naked girl up a tree,” Ron said. “Yeah, that’ll really make them take off at a swift jog.”

“She’s not naked,” Hermione said crossly. “She’s still got her underclothes on, which would undoubtedly have been quite modest.”

“Okay, so a girl up a tree in her knickers,” Ron said. “I’m going to take a wild guess here and say the blokes stayed around hoping for an encore.”

Hermione cast him a seething glare, but went on.

“The king happened by on his horse,” she said, and Ron’s jaw dropped.

“Her dad’s going to see her sitting in a tree starkers?” he said. “Oh, wow, that is not going to be a good reunion.”

“Not that king! He’s on the other side of the ocean, remember? This is the king of the land they’re currently in,” Hermione said.

“Well, that’s a relief,” Ron said.

“The king was quite taken with her as she was remarkably beautiful,” Hermione said.

“I’ve no doubt,” Ron said. “Pretty, mostly naked girls don’t grow on trees. Except, apparently, when they do.”

“She is not almost naked!” Hermione shouted. “You’ve seen the pajamas I wear. Eliza probably had on something very similar.”

“Eliza was wearing a set of striped pink and white flannel trousers and a tee-shirt with a picture of Paddington Bear on it?” Ron said.

She gave him a look of patent disbelief, rubbed her hand over her face, and went on.

“I’m not even going to question how you know who Paddington Bear is,” she said, and while Ron was about to volunteer the information, she raised a warning finger for silence. “The king tried to ask
her what her name was, using several different languages, but he received no answer. Eventually, he realized she was mute. However, he was still so overcome with her loveliness that he decided to take her back to his castle and marry her.”

Harry and Ron looked at one another.

“That was a rather fast courtship,” Harry said. “Did he bother asking her?”

“I suppose, but she couldn’t answer, of course,” Hermione said.

“Well, she could shake or nod, couldn’t she?” Harry said.

“Hmm,” Hermione said. “I suppose she could, but she doesn’t. Perhaps that would fall under the idea of talking somehow, or at least she didn’t want to risk it. She never attempts writing a note either, and being a princess she most likely would have known how to write at least a little, so I think it’s safe to assume that she’s not allowed to communicate at all.”

“So, no sign language? No pointing at things? No sketches?” Ron asked.

“No, I guess not,” Hermione said. “She really is remarkably isolated.”

“That is deeply disturbing,” Harry said, shuddering. “So essentially the king kidnaps her.”

“I guess you could say that he does,” Hermione said. “He takes her back to the castle, though she insists on bringing the one completed shirt and the nettles with her. However, she wasn’t very well received. Many people in the kingdom were unhappy about having the mute girl as the queen.”

“Well, considering she can’t communicate at all, even if she is pretty, she probably wouldn’t be able to do much in the way of royal duties, except maybe posing for postage stamps or something,” Harry said.

“Not quite. There was one duty she could perform,” Hermione said. “Once the wedding was celebrated—”

“Wait, exactly how did they handle the bit about saying ‘I do,’” asked Ron.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “It wouldn’t be a binding ceremony without her consent, would it?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said, coming up short. “You know, that really is a remarkably good point. I have absolutely no idea, unless they said something like, ‘If you object, then leave, and if you accept, then stay.’”

“But wouldn’t that still be communicating?” Harry said.

“Technically yes,” Hermione said. “I’d guess that more than likely the king probably had the right to marry anyone he wanted with or without her permission, so he might have done away with asking her at all.”

“Well, that’s just plain rude!” Ron said.

“Got to agree with you,” Harry said. “That is a very twisted king.”

“We’re unanimous on that,” Hermione said. “If only we could have as easy a time reaching a consensus on who was going to do the washing up each night.”

“I still say we should do it alphabetically,” Ron said.
“Right, since using either first or last names you go last,” Harry said.

“S’true,” Ron said, grinning. “So, go on, the king and the girl who can’t talk or communicate in any way somehow have a wedding in which no one bothers to ask her anything and yet this is somehow legal in the bizarro country they’re currently in. Now what?”

“Eliza continues to make the shirts,” Hermione said. “The king actually gives her a wedding present of a room made to look as much as possible like the cave she was living in.”

“That must have been hard to gift wrap,” Ron said.

“Let’s just pretend he put a nice bow on the door and leave it at that,” Hermione said, looking tired.

“Did he put in those stalactite thingies? What about bats? Maybe some well chosen lichens and moss for a dash of color?” Ron said.

“I agree it’s strange, but it did make Eliza happy as she was able to continue working on the shirts in peace and quiet,” Hermione said, sighing. “Oh, peace and quiet. Those are things I miss.”

“So she starts making shirts again. I take it the king never notices her hands and feet are covered in blisters?” Harry asked.

“No, she wears gloves all the time,” Hermione said. “She was doing quite well, and about a year later, she gave birth to her first child.”

“Wait, she had a kid?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “As a queen, bearing offspring would have been one of her royal duties, easily the most important one, and she could perform it whether she was mute or not.”

“You’re telling me this poor girl went through labor without making a single sound?” Ron said, staring at her.

“Well, yes,” Hermione said, grimacing. “I suppose she would have had to.”

“Okay, there’s a limit to how much a kid sister can be rationally expected to stand in order to free her brothers from a stupid swan curse,” Ron said, “and that is far beyond that limit.”

“Have to agree there,” Harry said. “Ow.”

“Agreed,” Hermione said, “but Eliza is just that determined. Unfortunately, the king’s mother never liked Eliza, and she decided to do something really horrible to try to get rid of her.”

“Her mother-in-law?” Harry asked. “What could Eliza have even done to get on her bad side? She can’t talk at all.”

“Yeah, so she obviously didn’t insult her cooking or call her fat or talk too much,” Ron said, then tipped his head to the side, considering. “You know, in some ways, that’s sort of a perfect wife, isn’t it?”

Hermione looked almost murderous at this, and Harry quickly stepped in to stop an explosion.

“I think I’d prefer a wife who could tell me what she was thinking,” Harry said pointedly.

“Yeah, I suppose so,” Ron agreed, “though from what I’ve seen they sort of expect you to read their minds anyway. It would get awfully lonely, though.”
Hermione had developed a tic in her left eyebrow by now, and Harry could see her moving her lips as she silently counted to fifty. Ron used the pause to retie his shoelaces, apparently not noticing.

“Okay, so the girl goes through labor in perfect silence,” Ron said, prompting her to go on. “Then what?”

“The mother-in-law steals the child and claims Eliza killed him,” Hermione said.

“Whoa,” Ron said, his mouth dropping open. “That is extreme. Mum used to claim that Dad’s mother didn’t like her cooking, and she swears to this day that one Christmas Gran snuck into the kitchen and did something to the roast goose so it didn’t turn out right to make her look bad, but this is a whole new level of bad.”

“It’s really horrible,” Hermione said. “Andersen actually has the local bishop framing Eliza, but most of the stories use the mother-in-law. She even goes so far as to sneak into their bedroom and dab blood on Eliza’s mouth while she’s sleeping, claiming that she not only stole the child but ate him.”

“Ate him?” Harry said, turning green. “I don’t think even Vol…”

“Please, just don’t say it, mate,” Ron interrupted him quickly. “My nerves are already on edge, yeah?”

“All right,” Harry said, rolling his eyes, “I don’t think even You-Know-Who has a penchant for eating babies. He has to be a line drawn somewhere, and I guess that’s it.”

“Yeah,” Ron said. “I’m pretty sure even if he had managed to off you when you were a little tyke, he wouldn’t have tried to turn you into shepherds pie or something afterward.”

“So, what did the king do?” Harry asked, staring at Ron and thinking he would probably never eat shepherds pie again.

“At first, nothing,” Hermione said. “He declared that he didn’t believe that his wife was capable of anything so terrible, and he ignored his mother’s accusations, saying she didn’t have any real proof.”

“Well, at least he got one part right,” Ron said. “I’m guessing that didn’t go down well with Mum, though.”

“Indeed it did not,” Hermione said. “Eliza became pregnant again, and after the second child was born, the mother-in-law did the exact same thing, stealing the child and smearing the mother’s lips with blood, claiming she was a cannibal.”

“It seems like the castle really should have tightened up on security after the first go around,” Harry said, “or is the mother-in-law meant to be a witch as well?”

Hermione considered this for a moment before saying, “It’s not impossible. She’s certainly every bit as villainous as the step-mother was, or the step-mother’s mother for that matter.”

“This story has a lot of mother issues,” Harry said. “The only living mother figure in here who isn’t evil is Eliza, and her kids keep being stolen, so I’m not sure that even counts.”

“Now that you mention it, it really is odd,” Hermione said. “The king once again doesn’t believe the accusations. Of course, had Eliza spoken on any of these occasions in her own defense, she could have explained what really happened, but she couldn’t.”

“That is one tricky spell,” Ron said. “And I thought Polyjuice Potion was a pain.”
“Eliza continued to work on the shirts, and at long last she had completed five of them, and the end of six years was starting to get very close. She became pregnant for the third time and had yet another child who the mother-in-law spirited away in precisely the same manner as before. This time, the king’s trust in his wife was starting to wane.”

“Well, there is a limit,” Ron said sympathetically. “There’s only so many times you can wake up to find your kid gone and your wife with blood on her lips before you suspect something’s up, even if she does seem nice.”

“I suppose that’s true. In any case, he starts to secretly follow her, wondering if anything she’s doing is at all suspicious. At this point, the nettles Eliza had originally gathered ran out, and she still needed to finish the last shirt. So at midnight, she got out of bed and went to the cemetery to gather more,” Hermione said.

“You know, we go to a school of witchcraft, and even I have to admit that really does not look good,” Ron said.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “From a Muggle perspective it would appear pretty damning.”

“It gets worse as there happened to be a group of ghouls sitting on one of the tombstones. It took all of Eliza’s courage to go forward and take the nettles with them sitting there, but she did it. Unfortunately, the king saw her, and he at once believed the stories that his mother had told him that she was blood-thirsty and a witch when he saw where she was, believing that she might possibly even be a ghoul herself,” Hermione said.

“Wait, ghouls? What’s so awful about ghouls? I mean, besides the racket, the one who lives in the attic at the Burrow is actually kind of homey,” Ron said, “and he was very nice about pretended to be me with spattergroit.”

“Muggles don’t understand what ghouls are,” Hermione explained. “They think they’re evil creatures that live in cemeteries and eat the flesh of the dead, so you see it looked doubly bad for Eliza since she’d been accused of doing fairly close to just that.”

“Your lot really do have morbid imaginations,” Ron said, wrinkling his nose.

“The king obviously thought that he’d been wrong and his mother right all along, and he had Eliza arrested and thrown in the dungeon. She was tried for witchcraft and sentenced to be burned at the stake,” Hermione said.

“Well, that’s not so bad. Witch burnings are completely ineffective. Binns taught us that much,” Ron said.

“They’re ineffective for actual witches, Ron. For Muggles, they’re lethal,” Hermione said.

“But she is a witch… ehm, right?” Ron said.

“I suppose if she actually is, there wouldn’t be a better time to pull off some unschooled self-protective magic, but more than likely, no, she’d just die,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said, looking glum. “That’s not good, then. Poor kid goes through labor three times in complete silence, spends years with blistered feet and hands, can’t even say whether or not she wants to marry the king, and she winds up dead. This is a rotten story, Hermione.”

“But it’s not over yet,” Hermione said. “You see, the people hated her so much that the only blankets she was permitted in prison were the very shirts she had been making, and instead of straw to sleep
on they’d given her the nettles. This meant she was able to work on the last remaining shirt up to the morning of her execution.”

“Yeah, that’s comforting. By the way, where are her brothers during all this?” Harry asked.

“Off being swans, I suppose. They were very upset when she was gone from their cave, and they spent a long time looking for her, but they hadn’t been able to find her,” Hermione said. “However, as Eliza was being carted to the stake, with the shirts and nettles in the cart with her, her brothers caught sight of her and landed around it, hissing wildly and putting out their wings, refusing to let it move forward.”

“Well, maybe they are a bit terrifying and vicious,” Ron admitted. “And then?”

“And then Eliza throws the white shirts over her brothers, each landing right around a swan’s neck, and they all changed back from swans into human beings again. Well, all except the last brother. You see, she hadn’t had time to finish his shirt, so there was one sleeve missing. He wound up with one arm that was still a swan’s wing,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, leave it to the youngest brother to always get the worst of it,” Ron said, snorting. “Poor kid probably got hand-me-down crowns his whole life, and he’s the one who gets stuck with a wing for an arm. That’s going to get him laughed at for the rest of his life.”

“Still, it’s better than being a swan with one human arm,” Harry said.

“I don’t know,” Ron said. “It’d be an improvement over just being a swan, anyway. At least he’d be able to use a hammer.”

Hermione scrubbed a hand across her forehead but plodded gamely ahead once more.

“Eliza then shrieked ‘I am innocent!’ and fainted,” Hermione said.

“Obviously that isn’t going to work,” Ron said. “She’d just done magic in front of the whole town. Everybody’s going to know she’s a witch now even if she didn’t eat her kids.”

“Actually, no,” Hermione said. “They all believe her now and burn the mother-in-law at the stake instead.”

“But… that makes no sense,” Ron said. “Why?”

“Well, they just figured someone who was evil wouldn’t be able to do something good like turning her brothers back to human again, and the boys spoke up on her behalf, explaining why she hadn’t been able to talk and why she’d been so obsessed with making the shirts and why she was in the graveyard at night, and the king believed them,” Hermione said.

“Okay,” Ron said, though he sounded like he was still trying to work out how that was supposed to vindicate her, “then what?”

“The six brothers moved into the castle with their sister and her husband, and they all lived happily ever after,” Hermione said.

“Where were her three kids?” Ron asked immediately.

“Oh,” Hermione said, frowning. “I hadn’t really thought about that. None of the stories ever mention them again, so I don’t know.”
“I’m going to assume they just wound up in some nice peasant cottage on the outskirts of town where they can be peacefully turned into swans or ferrets or ravens or whatever and live happily ever after themselves,” Ron said. “At least that’s what I’m going to pretend to assume.”

“Yeah, and what about her father, the one who didn’t recognize her?” Harry said. “Does he really have to live the rest of his life not knowing what happened to his seven kids and stay married to the evil step-mother?”

“Apparently,” Hermione said. “There’s nothing in the story that says otherwise.”

“So the evil step-mother never gets punished for what she did wrong, but the evil mother-in-law does,” Ron said. “I think there’s a moral in there somewhere, but I’m not really sure what it is.”

“It’s supposed to support the idea of goodness and determination conquering all in the end, even if there are hardships along the way,” Hermione said, then added, “but I admit, I don’t really get the part about the step-mother versus mother-in-law conundrum either.”

“But at least she gets to live forever with her five human brothers and one brother who’s roughly 90% human,” Ron said, then clapped an arm around Harry and grinned conspiratorially. “Maybe when Ginny gets married someday, she’ll do the same and invite all her brothers to come live with her. That way we can all keep an eye on her and her new husband twenty-four hours a day in shifts.”

Harry laughed at this, but he did shoot a desperate look at Hermione, hoping that she would give him some sign that she thought Ron was joking. Unfortunately, all she did was looking back and forth between them and give Harry an unsure shrug.

That night, as they were about to go to sleep, Harry just barely heard Hermione whisper to Ron from across the room.

“Ron? How did you know about Paddington Bear?” she asked quietly.

“I had one when I was a kid. Mum got it for me for Christmas because she reckoned it was sweet,” Ron said, then added in a barely audible undertone, “I think it’s still upstairs in the attic back home. Cute little fellow, well, after he got over that problem of turning into a spider.”

Hermione laughed, and then Harry heard her roll over, though later he thought he caught her humming “The Twelve Days of Christmas” in her sleep. For himself, he kept awake for quite some time thinking of another brave and loyal sister and what she might be up to. However, he added with a shudder, all six Weasley brothers would most definitely not be living with them if he ever did get lucky enough to marry her.

Chapter End Notes

N.B. It was only while writing this that I noticed for the first time that Andersen really does seem to have foot issues. The other story I mention about the dancing feet is “The Red Shoes.” To answer Hermione’s question about “The Little Matchgirl,” Andersen does mention three different times that she is barefoot and her feet are freezing.
The Twelve Dancing Princesses

Chapter Summary

Hermione embarks on the tale of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" while Harry is feeling discouraged.

Chapter Notes

For notes, please see chapter 1.

The days were starting to blend together for Harry. At the moment, he thought they were somewhere in Cornwall, but he wasn’t completely sure. One vacant, lonely spot was starting to seem much like another, and he had no idea where they would be tomorrow, only that it would be somewhere else, and that place still wasn’t likely to offer up a Horcrux or a way of destroying the locket. He felt as though he were trapped in a revolving door, always circling past the same place again and again, never able to step out into the world. It was bloody depressing.

“Are there any chips left, Hermione?” Ron asked hopefully.

Well, yes, Harry thought. There was that. They’d managed to cadge some fish and chips from a stand in a nearby town, and while the fish wasn’t anywhere near hot when they’d finally been able to eat it, the mere fact it was food at all was wonderful.

“I don’t think so,” Hermione said, carefully looking through the oily paper sack. “Even the burnt bits at the bottom are gone.

“Ah well, you can’t have everything,” he said, leaning back on the old couch and patting his stomach.

Harry just looked at the pair of them, drew a deep breath, and sighed.

“You seem glum, mate,” Ron said. “Feeling all right?”

“Not especially,” Harry admitted. “I’d say I was homesick, but, well, I don’t have a home.”

He gave a half-hearted smile, attempting to hide the bitterness of the words by pretending it was a joke, and shrugged.

“Harry,” Hermione said, sitting in the chair across from him, “you do know that Ron’s family and mine wouldn’t let you go homeless when this is all over, don’t you?”

“What?” Ron said, looking up from the empty chips sack that he’d been attempting to rummage through in a vain hope Hermione had missed something. “Oh, right. Yeah, Harry, you know you’ve always got an open invitation at Mum and Dad’s.”

“And that goes for my parents too,” Hermione said, then paused before adding, “well, if I ever get
the chance to restore their memories and they come home from Australia, that is.”

Harry gave them both a smile, but it wasn’t the same. It wasn’t as though the Dursleys’ house had ever actually been a home, but it had been a spot where he hadn’t been a guest—though an unwanted intruder, maybe. He’d even thought of going back to Grimmauld Place when this was all over since he did technically own it. If the Order still needed it, he could just kip in one of the little upstairs bedrooms for a while. After all, he’d certainly slept in smaller spots. But Sirius’s old home didn’t have many happy memories in it, and he wasn’t sure he could forget enough of the bad ones to be comfortable there.

“Thanks,” Harry said, but he could tell by their reactions that they knew he wasn’t feeling any better, so he quickly added, “really, I mean, I appreciate it a lot.”

“You’re just upset is all,” Hermione said.

“Aren’t we all?” Ron said as he tossed the chip bag over his shoulder hopelessly.

“You do realize I’m not picking that up,” Hermione said, narrowing her eyes.

“So? Let it rot,” Ron said with a shrug. “Anyway, I think a story would cheer Harry up. Have you got something?”

“Please,” Hermione said.

“Please what?” Ron asked, looking confused.

“Have you got something, please,” Hermione said, laying heavy stress on the last word.

“Have I got what?” Ron said, still looking completely baffled.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake,” Hermione grumbled. “Fine, fine, you want a story? I’ll give you a story. Might as well since that appears to be all I’m considered good for.”

“Bit put out, isn’t she?” Ron muttered to Harry, but he didn’t especially feel like pointing out the obvious once again for his friend. Harry was beginning to despair of Ron ever getting a clue as to what he was doing. He certainly hadn’t been this shy last year with Lavender, more’s the pity.

“I think I’ll tell you the tale of ‘The Twelve Dancing Princesses,’” Hermione said, and while she was obviously still highly annoyed with Ron, Harry noticed that she didn’t really seem reluctant about her role as storyteller.

“Okay,” Ron said, smiling pleasantly and nodding towards Harry. “Sounds good, eh?”

“Fine,” Harry said, staring at a worn spot on the sofa where the stuffing was poking through and feeling listless.

“Okay then,” Ron said, a note of panic in his voice. “Let’s give this a shot.”

“Once upon a…,” Hermione began.

“Time,” Ron chimed in, but he was still looking at Harry with concern.

“Yes,” Hermione agreed, “in a kingdom far away, there lived a king who had twelve beautiful daughters.”

“Uh-huh, that’s…,” Ron started to say off-handedly before he was brought up short. “Did you say
“he had twelve daughters?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “It is rather a lot, I suppose.”

“A lot? When a family makes mine look tiny, that’s enormous! That’s nearly double the number of kids Mum and Dad have! How would they feed them all?”

“Well, he is a king,” Hermione said.

“Oh, right,” Ron said. “I suppose that really wouldn’t be an issue. Probably has money by the roomful. Probably has it spun out of straw by creepy dwarfs or innocent maidens or something. Or maybe he has his daughters spin it. That’d be a profitable business if you could manage it, which of course you can’t since it isn’t possible in the first place, but then when has that ever stopped one of these paragons of confusion?”

“Actually, money is more of an issue in this story than you might think,” Hermione said. “The daughters’ mother had died.”

“Or maybe she just ran out the front door and never came back, especially if a whole gaggle of them hit puberty at once,” Ron said. “Can’t say I’d blame her really.”

“Well, that’s not what happened,” Hermione said with a resigned sigh, “though if you want to pretend it, I suppose it’s a free country. Or it was at any rate.”

“And will be again, right?” Ron said stoutly, glancing at Harry, who still looked exhausted. “Ehm, yeah, right. So, Dad’s got twelve daughters. I don’t suppose any of them have names, by the way?”

“Oh, ehm, no,” Hermione said, obviously startled. Harry suspected she had been gauging his reaction to Ron’s statement as well. “None of the versions of the story that I’ve read actually give them names.”

“As there’s twelve of them,” Ron said, “I suppose we could name them after the months of the year going from oldest to youngest for convenience’s sake. Say, it’d be something if there really was one born in each month. Good planning, that.”

“I suppose so, though usually there’s at least one set of twins in the mix,” Hermione said.

“Oh, that’s easy to fix” Ron said with a wave of his hand. “Fred and George were both born on the first of April, you know. Well, if Fred had been just a little less tardy, he would have been born on the last of March, so they would have had different months for their birthdays. I don’t see why a pair of these girls couldn’t have pulled it off.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows, but she looked intrigued. Even Harry had to admit it was odd to think that the twins were very nearly born in different months.

“I suppose they could have at that,” she said. “In any case, the king had a very great problem when it came to his daughters.”

“I’d guess with twelve of them he had a jolly assortment of problems to pick from,” Ron said with a grin. “Probably one of them is a drama queen, another pinches things from the local market, a third is always tying up the loo, and someone must have been having a sulking fit and not talking for days while her poor dad tries to figure out what he said wrong. Ginny did that once.”

Harry had the distinct impression that Ron was baiting him to respond by bringing up his sister, but he decided to go along with it anyway and asked, “Really? What happened?”
“Oh, it turned out Percy had said something about no real Quidditch fan wanting to watch a match with the Holyhead Harpies because they were all girls, and then he’d gone on to quote a bunch of statistics and biology and stuff about why blokes are better flyers than girls are,” Ron said.

In spite of himself, Harry couldn’t fight a small smile.

“What spell did she hit him with?” he asked.

“That was the beginning of her legendary Bat Bogey Hex,” Ron said respectfully. “I think it took her the better part of two weeks to suss out the details on it, and she really was just insufferable the whole time.”

“I don’t blame her,” Hermione said, shifting her feet around so they were curled next to her on the couch. “Percy can be a bit of a prat.”

“A bit? That’s generous. I’d say it’s more like he’s very rarely a bit human, and the rest of the time he’s a complete prat,” Ron said.

“Well, lately, I’d have to say I agree with you,” Hermione admitted. “However, the king’s problem with his daughters was a great deal stranger than the usual adolescent difficulties.”

“And that would be?” Ron asked.

“Shoes,” Hermione said.

Even Harry reacted to this one. Of all the things she could have said, that wouldn’t have been in the top thousand.

“Shoes,” Ron said, nodding as though that were perfectly normal. “Okay, so, we’ve had a mermaid who trades her tail for feet and winds up bleeding all over her shoes. Then we’ve had Ashyweeper, who loses one shoe and marries a dunderheaded moron who can’t recognize her without said shoe. Oh and that shoe, which is glass of all ridiculous things, winds up filled with clotted gore from her step-mum’s attempts at impromptu Muggle foot surgery. We mustn’t forget Puss and his boots as well, of course, because what cat doesn’t want a lovely pair of trainers to go dashing about in, and then there’s dear old Elisha, who could have used a nice pair of shoes so her feet didn’t bleed as she was trodding razor-sharp nettles underfoot. Shoes. Of course. Makes perfect sense. What sort of painful foot mutilation are we in for this time?”

Harry couldn’t help it. He had to smile at Hermione’s reaction of ill-disguised horror.

“Ehm, none,” Hermione said, wrinkling her nose delicately. “I suppose you do have a point, but the problem was just that the girls were each wearing great holes through the soles a pair of dancing slippers every night, and no one could figure out how since they were locked into their bedroom in a high tower each night.”

“Pajama party,” Ron said, nodding. “They probably were staying up late every night listening to the wireless and dancing about to the Weird Sisters or something.”

“No, they were not,” Hermione said. “They simply went to bed each night, and no sound at all came from the room until morning, when their shoes were found to be quite worn through.”

“No sound at all?” Ron asked. “In a dormitory full of teenage girls, that’s even more suspicious than the shoe thing.”

“As if teenage boys wouldn’t be up until all hours chattering away,” Hermione said.
“Less likely,” Ron said with a shrug. “After the first month or two, most conversations in our dormitory boiled down to ‘Oi! Anyone seen my toothbrush!’”

“Fascinating,” Hermione said, looking as though she meant just the opposite.

“Well, what did you lot talk about?” Ron asked, shooting Harry a sly look.

“Lots of things,” Hermione said vaguely. “Lessons, homework, politics, plans for future careers…”

“Not to mention boys, make-up, fashion magazines,” Ron continued the list on his fingers. “Oh, and probably shoes. Which brings us back to the story, yeah?”

“As if you lot don’t spend all your spare time discussing Quidditch,” she sniffed, but she continued on. “The shoes for the princesses were slowly bankrupting the kingdom.”

“Seriously? They’re shoes. How poor is this kingdom, anyway?” Ron asked.

“But think of it logically, Ron,” Hermione said reasonably. “There are twelve princesses, and each princess is ruining a pair of shoes every night. Inside of one month, they’re going through anywhere from 336 to 372 pairs of shoes, depending upon whether it’s a 28, 30, or 31 day month. Multiply that into a year and the king has to buy 4,380 pairs of shoes, unless it’s a leap year, in which case he’s stuck with a bill for 4,392. At the rather paltry price of a couple sickles each pair, that’s 515 galleons and 5 sickles for shoes per year, or 516 galleons and 12 sickles for a leap year. Even for a relatively affluent small country, that’s a significant drain on financial resources, and if the shoes were more expensive, say in the region of two galleons each, which certainly wouldn’t be outside the realm of possibility for a pair of embroidered silk dancing slippers meant for a princess, well, the price would be nothing short of absolute bankruptcy.”

Hermione said nothing as Ron and Harry proceeded to stare at her in open-mouthed disbelief.

“What?” she said.

“Did you just mentally calculate the price of the princesses’ shoes for a full year using the wizarding banking standard… in your head?” Ron asked, sounding slightly terrified.

“I’ve been taking Arithmancy for years now,” Hermione said, trying not to look too pleased. “It’s not so hard.”

“Blimey, it must be loud in your head,” Ron said. “How do you sleep?”

“I find that calculating pi to a few hundred places helps me drift off,” Hermione said, and Harry wasn’t entirely sure if she was having them on or not. “In any case, the king wanted the mystery of the ruined shoes solved.”

“I would bloody well think so,” Ron said. “That many shoes makes Imelda Marcos look thrifty.”

“How on earth do you know about Imelda Marcos and her shoes?” Hermione asked.

“Please,” Ron said, looking insulted. “There wasn’t any female, whether Muggle, Muggle-born, pureblood, squib, or otherwise who didn’t hear about that collection and water at the mouth. Even Mum.”

Harry gave Ron a slug on the shoulder and laughed, though truthfully he recalled Aunt Petunia having exactly the same reaction. Apparently, some things really did cross all lines of culture.
“Well, the king wasn’t at all happy with his daughters’ shoe collection, and he issued a proclamation to the whole kingdom,” Hermione said.

“Those rarely end well,” Ron said.

“Anyone who could solve the mystery of the shoes could choose one of the daughters as his wife and become the next king,” Hermione said.

“Wait… how old are these girls?” Ron asked. “I mean, let’s say good old January at the head of the line is twenty-four or so. What’s December going to be?”

“Logically, maybe thirteen or fourteen at the oldest, provided there’s just the one set of twins,” Hermione said. “Of course the firstborn might have been older, but in these stories the legitimate age of marriage for most girls is almost over with by the time they’re twenty-five or so, unless of course they’re a widow marrying a previously widowed man, like with Cinderella’s step-mother.”

“Yes, so the whole lot of them turn evil when they hit twenty-six apparently,” Ron said, “but regardless of that, what if some pervy git shows up and figures it out and wants to marry the poor little thirteen-year-old? That’s just wrong, that is.”

“It’s a foolish agreement, certainly,” Hermione agreed. “Granted, some royalty did marry extremely young in the old days, but even so, he’s being very stupid.”

“Yeah, stupid,” Ron said firmly. “Okay, so what happened to yet another idiot of a father and his shoe-obsessed daughters?”

“Several suitors tried to find out the mystery, but of course, they couldn’t be permitted to stay in the princesses’ bedroom all night as that wouldn’t be proper,” Hermione said. “Instead, they had to stand outside the locked door and try to deduce what was happening.”

“Uh-huh, wouldn’t want anything that smacked of impropriety before some strange man marries the youngest kid,” Ron said, looking very stormy.

“It’s the usual obsession with preservation of female chastity,” Hermione said, sounding rather huffy. “Women have to be kept locked up so that there can’t be any possibility of, ehm, physical intermingling with the genders.”

“Either that or the dad didn’t want some unknown weirdo hanging around his daughters’ bedroom in the middle of the night,” Harry said.

Hermione tipped her head to the side, considering.

“Alright, maybe he isn’t entirely an idiot, then,” Hermione conceded.

“Say, what are your mum and dad going to say when they find out you’ve been gallivanting around the countryside with a pair of boys without a chaperone for months?” Ron asked.

“Considering we’re trying to save civilization as we know it, I think they’ll handle the situation fairly well,” Hermione said with a dry smile, “particularly as there hasn’t been any sort of fraternization.”

Harry could almost swear he heard her murmur “damn it,” but he might have imagined it simply because he was so sure she was thinking it.

“In any case, the people who attempted the feat were always unable to come up with an answer, and then they were executed,” Hermione said.
“Wait, what?” Ron and Harry said in tandem.

“Oh, yes, I forgot to mention that bit. If the challenger wasn’t able to figure out what was happening after three nights, his head was chopped off and the next person took over,” Hermione said.

“Just a little thing to slip your mind,” Ron said, goggling at her. “Blimey, you’d have to be pretty desperate to try that.”

“Or mental,” Harry added.

“Six of one,” Ron said, nodding.

“Still, in spite of that, many young men did try their luck, and without exception, each one was executed,” Hermione said. “After a while, very few new suitors appeared, and the kingdom continued to wait, going slowly bankrupt.”

“Couldn’t the king just stop buying shoes?” Ron said.

“What, leave a princess wandering about barefoot?” Hermione said in mock horror. “What would the neighbors think?”

“Yeah, that was probably the only reason the Dursleys even gave me Dudley’s castoffs. It would have looked bad if I’d been dressed like a House-elf,” Harry said.

Ron rolled his eyes but shrugged.

“Then, one day, an old soldier made his way towards the kingdom. He was very poor, and he thought he had nothing to lose if he tried his luck,” Hermione said.

“Wow, that’s depressing,” Ron said.

“Actually, it really is,” Hermione agreed. “As he was travelling through the woods on his way to the castle—”

“What is it with these people and the woods?” Ron asked. “Are they trying to run into talking wolves with a penchant for cross-dressing or murderous witches in gingerbread houses or what?”

“Oh, no, it turns out quite well this time,” Hermione said. “You see, he met an old woman as he went through the woods, and he shared the last of his supper with her because she was hungry.”

“Well, that was nice of him at any rate,” Harry said.

“Yes, and it turned out she wasn’t just any old woman but a fairy,” Hermione said.

“He’s dead,” Ron said to Harry. “That never ends well.”

“You’re forgetting that Muggles don’t think of fairies like wizards do,” Hermione said. “Instead, she told him, ‘I know that you are going to the king’s castle, so I give you two gifts and a piece of advice that, if you are wise, you will use. Do not eat or drink anything you are offered in the castle. The princesses will drug it to make you sleep.’”

“That’s rotten of them,” Ron said angrily.

“Maybe it is and maybe it isn’t,” Hermione said before resuming her croaky old woman voice. “‘These two gifts will help you as well. First, here is a key that will unlock any door. Second, take this cloak that, when wrapped around you, will render you invisible to any eye.’”
“Hey! That sounds familiar!” Ron said.

“Yeah, it does,” Harry agreed, becoming much more interested. “How old is this story, Hermione?”

“Oh, probably back to the 1500s or so,” she said. “Why?”

“The International Statue of Wizarding Secrecy… when was that passed again?” Harry asked.

“In 1689,” Hermione responded automatically, exactly as though she were in class.

“So the story predates it,” Harry said. “Maybe some Muggles actually did know about the cloak, then.”

“I suppose it’s possible,” Hermione said, tipping her head to one side and considering. “I mean, there are other cloaks of invisibility, of course, but none of them work like yours. Well, except for the one in Beedle. That really is odd.”

“It is,” Harry said, and while it wasn’t a clue to a Horcrux, something about it made him feel a little less disconnected from what he was trying to do.

“Yeah, so the old soldier shares a bowl of split pea soup with the highly dangerous fairy, grabs the cloak and the key, and heads to the castle, right?” Ron said.

“Oh, yes,” Hermione said, pulling herself back into the story. “He was treated quite well, probably because no one had volunteered for a while, and that evening he was stationed outside of the princesses’ bedchamber. Just as the princesses were walking into their room for the night, the eldest sister turned to the man and offered him a cup, saying, ‘You must indeed be thirsty. Here, drink this and be refreshed.’”

“That isn’t fishy at all,” Ron said, rolling his eyes. “So, what’d he do?”

“He pretended to take a drink, but really he threw it away without tasting it. Then the princesses went into their room, which was locked with nine deadbolts, and the soldier pretended to sleep, listening all the while for any sign that they were up to something,” Hermione said.

“And?” Ron asked.

“And after a few minutes he heard them moving around the room,” Hermione said. “He waited until all was still again, then he wrapped the cloak around himself and used the key to unlock the door. He crept quietly into the room, and there he saw something extremely strange.”

“The birds were all sitting around with those green mucky masks on their faces and those spongy things in between their toes while they were reading the latest issue of Wizarding Teen Weekly?” Ron said.

“You say that as though you’ve seen it before,” Hermione said, giving him a highly suspicious look.

“Ginny’s had a sleepover birthday party or two,” Ron said, trying to look innocent. “It’s not my fault if they forgot to shut the door.”

Harry was relatively sure Ron never saw the pillow coming that clocked him in the head so hard that it sent him to the floor.

“As I was saying,” Hermione continued, barely having mussed a hair, “the soldier saw something very strange. The girls were indeed all gone, but a great door had appeared in the floor, like the
entrance to a cellar, and a set of steps descended from it deep into the gloom below.”

‘Nobody noticed a trapdoor in the floor before?’ Ron said. ‘Didn’t half look hard, did they?’

“It had been hidden before and didn’t appear until the right time,” Hermione said.

“Hmm,” Ron said, squeezing his face together in thought. “I suppose that could be some sort of Transfiguration spell on a timer or something. Pretty advanced stuff, though.”

“Reminds me a bit of the door Fluffy was guarding in first year,” Harry said, a ghost of smile crossing his face. “Remember?”

“Yeah,” Ron said, sighing. “Those were the days. All we had to worry about were a three-headed dog, some flying keys, and that plant thing that almost ate us.”

“And Quirrel,” Hermione added.

“And Quirrel,” Harry said, nodding. “You know, in retrospect, the turban really should have been a tipoff. That thing really stunk.”

“Not to mention being a serious fashion faux pas,” Ron said. “Besides, having a dark wizard growing out of the back of your head is so seven seasons ago.”

Harry caught himself giggling, but he did feel a little better remembering how they’d been through so much before for so many years. It made now seem less terrifying.

“So did the soldier go down the stairs?” Ron asked.

“He certainly did, and it didn’t take him long to catch up to the princesses, who were going along in a long line with the eldest at the front and the youngest at the back. At the base of the stairs, there was suddenly a great forest,” Hermione said.

“In the basement?” Ron said.

“Yes, sort of,” Hermione said. “Well, it was sort of in the basement, and sort of in a whole other world.”

“That’s one big castle, anyway,” Ron said.

“But what was even more extraordinary was the forest wasn’t a normal one at all. Instead, every tree’s leaves were the purest silver shining under the moonlight,” Hermione said.

“You mean they were silver colored?” Ron asked.

“No, I mean they were actual, literal silver,” Hermione said.

“Be noisy, that,” Ron said. “A good breeze comes along and those things are really going to be clattering away.”

“It’s supposed to be a romantic image, Ronald, obviously wasted on you,” Hermione said. “The old soldier followed close behind the youngest sister, and at one point he accidentally trod upon her gown, making her cry out.”

“Uh-oh,” Ron said. “Not good.”

“The oldest sister called out, ‘What is wrong?’ and the youngest responded, ‘It felt just as though
someone had stepped upon my dress!’” Hermione said.

“But there was no one there to be seen, right?” Ron said.

“Correct, and the oldest sister chided her for making them late when she had probably just snagged her petticoat on a fallen branch,” Hermione said.

“Chided?” Ron said, giving her a look.

“It means she scolded her,” Hermione explained.

“Yeah, I know that, but who ever says chided? That just seems a bit too posh,” Ron said.

Hermione gave him a freezing look then plodded gamely on.

“The princesses continued through the forest, and the trees changed from the grove of silver trees to another that was full of trees whose leaves were made of gold,” Hermione said.

“Okay, this is a very useful basement to have,” Ron said. “Silver trees, then gold ones. All you’d have to do is grab a rake and rubbish sack and you’d be set for life in about three minutes.”

“True, but things became even stranger,” Hermione said, “for after that the forest changed again. At first the soldier thought that ice decorated each branch and winter had come, but he was wrong. The branches of the trees were covered in diamonds.”

“Pretty. Sounds almost like an ice storm came through or something,” Ron said.

“Yes, the writer might have seen one and based the idea off of that,” Hermione agreed. “But soon the princesses came to the bank of a great, black lake and stood upon the bank expectantly, as though they were in a trance. The soldier waited in the shadows of the trees to see what would happen. Soon, out of the darkness, he could just make out twelve boats being rowed across the water towards them.”

“I don’t suppose there’s a castle on the other side of the lake, is there?” Ron asked.

“Actually, yes, now that you mention it,” Hermione said. “Why?”

“Taking boats across the lake at night to a castle? That doesn’t sound familiar to you at all?” Ron asked.

Hermione and Harry both gasped.

“Blimey, Ron, that really does sound like how the First Years get to Hogwarts on their first night there,” Harry said.

“Spookily similar,” Ron said. “So each princess gets in a boat, I take it?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, “and this is where the story goes two different ways. In one version, there’s a handsome prince in each boat, and each prince rows a princess across the water.”

“And in the other?” Ron asked.

“Each boat has a terrible demon in it acting as the oarsman,” Hermione said.

“That’s significantly less appealing,” Ron said. “So what’s our boy do?”
“He jumped into the boat of the youngest princess, and the oarsman of the boat found that he had to row much harder than usual to keep up with the others, but he couldn’t figure out why,” Hermione said.

“Probably thought she’d had too much to eat at dinner that night,” Ron said.

“I doubt she could have eaten enough to explain the weight of a full grown man,” Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

“Yeah, but the way girls talk, if they eat too much they feel guilty enough to think they did,” Ron said.

“That’s… actually that’s probably true in some cases,” Hermione said. “When they got to the other side of the lake, the princes or demons helped the princesses to disembark and took them into the brightly lit castle.”

“Where they were Sorted,” Ron said firmly.

“Where they began to dance,” Hermione said. “There was an orchestra made up of instruments that played themselves, and the princesses whirled across the floor in dance after dance with their escorts, tune after tune, hour after hour without rest.”

“And the soldier probably just stuck by the buffet table and the punch bowl, being a wallflower,” Ron said.

“At long last, each of the princesses had worn a hole through the soles of her silk dancing slippers, and this was the cue for their partners to take them back to the boats and ferry them back across the lake,” Hermione said.

“Their shoes were silk?” Ron asked.

“Or satin,” Hermione said. “The stories go either way.”

“That really doesn’t seem sensible. You couldn’t possibly wear a shoe with a silk sole for very long anyway. Even if they weren’t going out dancing with demon princes all night every night, those shoes would still be falling apart every couple of days at the most.”

“You know, that’s a good point,” Hermione said. “I hadn’t really thought of that before.”

“Now, if you wanted to try to get some shoes that would last, try a pair of those platform shoes Fleur wore last summer. It’d take a good fifty years to wear a hole in those things,” Ron said.

“You noticed her shoes?” Hermione said, and Harry thought she sounded a little sharp.

“Ehm, well, who wouldn’t with those things,” Ron said, sounding a little embarrassed. “Harry, you noticed Fleur’s shoes, didn’t you?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Harry lied immediately. He knew when his best friend was silently pleading with him for help. “Yeah, they were, um, great big tall things. Stood out a mile.”

“I suppose they did,” Hermione said, sounding like she didn’t really believe him, then continued. “The soldier leapt into the youngest princess’s boat once again, and then he followed the sisters back through the woods. When they got to the forest of the silver leaves, he plucked one small branch and hid it beneath his cloak. It seemed as though the youngest sister had heard something when he snapped the twig, for she looked up at once, her eyes searching through the shadows, but she saw
“It seems like the youngest one is the one who’s paying the most attention,” Ron said.

“I agree,” Hermione said. “When at last they had climbed to the top of the stairs, the princesses exited once again into the bedroom, and they were so tired that when they lay down on their beds, they fell at once into a deep sleep, never noticing the door had been unlocked. As for the soldier, he managed to slip in behind the last sister just before the trapdoor closed silently. He stationed himself outside the door, locked it once more, and pretended to be asleep in the chair before the entrance to their chamber.”

“Well, there’s a lot of coincidences there, but considering they just came back from a forest full of silver, gold, and diamond trees where they did the Hokey Pokey with a bunch of possibly demonic princes, I’ll let that slide,” Ron said.

“The Hokey Pokey?” Harry said, staring at him. “How would you know about the Hokey Pokey of all things?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Ron asked, looking confused.

“Well, it’s a Muggle dance, isn’t it?” Harry said.

“It is?” Ron said, looking surprised. “Huh. I guess the Muggles stole it, then. That’s an old wizarding dance, that is. It’s probably based on the old incantation ‘hocus pocus’ and some sort of spell that involved arm and leg movements to cast it. No one’s quite sure what outcome the original wizard who came up with it was going for, but somewhere along the way he decided it was just plain fun to do and went with it.”

“Seriously?” Hermione said, looking stunned.

“Of course not!” Ron said, laughing. “I can’t believe you fell for that one! No, Dean Thomas mentioned it once when McGonagall was teaching us to dance for the Yule Ball. I dared him to do it at the actual ball, but he said no. Too bad. Would have made a ruddy wonderful moment for Creevy to take a picture.”

Harry practically choked he was laughing so hard, and Hermione rolled her eyes, sighed, and continued gamely on.

“The next morning, the princesses unlocked their bedroom door, and the eldest asked the soldier how he had fared. ‘Well enough,’ he said, and at this she frowned. The princesses went down to breakfast, and then, as was customary, the gardeners gave them their morning bouquets,” Hermione said.

“They get flowers every morning?” Ron asked. “Bit weird that the king gets his knickers in a twist over shoes but hands out twelve bouquets of flowers a day like it’s nothing, innit?”

“Not really,” Hermione explained. “It would have been a custom among royalty or anyone who could afford it back then since, well, most Muggles didn’t smell very pleasant. They only bathed once in a great while since it took rather a lot of work. They would have had to haul buckets of water inside and then warm it before it could be used, and then the bathwater was usually passed around to everyone in the family by order of age from oldest to youngest before it was dumped out.”

“Ew,” Ron and Harry chorused together.

“Yeah, I’m not sure which would be worse, smelling bad or getting to be ninth in line after eight
other smelly people had already sat in the bathwater,” Ron said.

“It wasn’t a pleasant experience, I’m sure,” Hermione said. “Added on to that, the soap they used probably smelled terrible, and the water was most likely pretty filthy to begin with. People didn’t bathe much. In fact, many people thought it was unlucky to have a bath any time other than Christmas or Easter.”

“Well, they must have been fresh as a daisy come Easter, what with having taken a bath only four months or so earlier,” Ron said, “or however long the distance is between Christmas and Easter.”

“It’s the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox,” Hermione said automatically, “ranging from March 22 to April 25.”

Ron blinked.

“You’re scary,” he said.

“Thank you, I think,” Hermione said. “Anyway, that was why people carried bouquets or wore perfume or pomanders full of ambergris or civet.”

“Amber what and civic who?” Ron asked.

“Oh, they’re both perfume-type things,” Hermione said with a wave of her hand. Ambergris is a substance in a whale’s digestive tract, and civet, or more properly civetone, is a secretion from the civet cat’s anal glands. Both are supposed to smell quite pleasant, but it’s all highly cruel to the animals.”

“So to smell better, they carried around whale poo and cat poo?” Ron said, looking green.

“While that’s not entirely accurate biologically, you’ve got the general idea,” Hermione said, “but our princesses were using bouquets.”

“Yeah, well, that’s better,” Ron said, still looking ill. “Suddenly, I’m kind of glad we ran out of chips.”

“Anyway, the soldier wrapped himself up in the invisibility cloak and carefully inserted the single twig from the silver forest into the bouquet of the youngest sister when the gardener wasn’t looking,” Hermione said.

“Uh-oh,” Ron said, grinning. “Bet that didn’t go down well with January through November.”

“Actually, when the panicked youngest girl showed her oldest sister, instead of realizing the obvious fact that someone had followed them down to their secret castle, the eldest accused her of being careless and that she must have had a few leaves on her dress still that somehow fell into her bouquet, for nothing else could explain it,” Hermione said.

Ron scrunched up his face again, then shook his head.

“Harry, any idea how that would work in any conceivable way at all?” Ron asked.

“It does seem like it would be pretty random,” Harry said. “Then again, one time Dudley walked around for hours with a half-eaten lolly he’d forgot about sticking out of his back pocket. Finally, he sat on it at the dinner table and screamed blue murder when it poked him in the bum. It took Aunt Petunia half an hour to calm him down, and then I got sent to my cupboard because they thought I’d done it somehow.”
“Yeah, well, from what you’ve told us in the past, after you went to Hogwarts they blamed you for the weather, the stock market, the aphids in the rosebushes, the price of petrol, and the Spice Girls,” Ron said with a shrug. “All things considered, that’s probably the least unlikely.”

Hermione squinted for a moment, then shook her head.

“What?” Ron asked. “Trying to figure out whether that’s really possible?”

“Oh, it’s completely possible to do via a slightly tweaked summoning charm,” Hermione said. “No, I was just trying to figure out if ‘least unlikely’ was a double negative or merely the reverse superlative form of the adverb. I think you’re actually safe there.”

“Oh, good,” Ron said. “Forget Deatheaters. I’m really concerned about the Grammar Police breaking in and accusing me of crimes against the language. Anyway, Jan decides not to pay any attention to her kid sister’s weird floral warning from the soldier, then what?”

“Jan?” Harry asked.

“Well, January’s got to have a nickname, yeah?” Ron said logically. “I figure they’re called Jan, Brewie, Mar, April and May are the twins, June gets a normal name too, then Julie, Gusty, Temmy, Toby, Nova, and Dessie.”

Hermione stared at him.

“Gusty, Temmy, Toby, Nova, and Dessie?” she said slowly in disbelief.

“Hey, I didn’t name the months of the year. Don’t blame me,” Ron said, grinning.

“I’ll endeavor not to,” Hermione said. “At any rate, that night, the exact same thing happened again. The soldier threw away the drink when no one was looking, feigned sleep, unlocked the door, and followed them through the three forests, across the lake, and to the enchanted castle. Once again as the princesses returned home, he broke a twig from a tree, this time in the forest of gold, and once again Dessie, damn, I mean the youngest sister heard him, though everyone thought she was making it up.”

“Let me guess,” Ron asked. “She gets the branch in her bouquet again.”

“Exactly,” Hermione said, “and this time the oldest sister took the threat more seriously. That night, when she brewed the potion to make him sleep…”

“Draught of Living Death,” Ron interrupted her.

“Well, it could be,” Hermione reasoned. “It doesn’t seem quite that strong, though, since it only lasted a few hours. However, that wasn’t what she poured the third night. Instead, she laced the wine with poison.”

“Oi! That’s cheating!” Ron said indignantly.

“I suppose so,” Hermione said, “but of course, the soldier was far too clever to drink it. Once again he followed them under his cloak to the castle, but when they arrived, something quite different occurred.”

“They decided to have a game of chess instead?” Ron asked.

Hermione gave him a withering look before continuing with, “No, the soldier watched the princesses
dance with their partners again, but he decided to bring back a cup from the great feasting table in the hall as proof of what had happened. However, the moment he grasped its stem, a great rumbling was heard."

"Rumblings are rarely good things," Ron said.

"Quite. Suddenly, the castle began to fall to bits around them, and the princesses and their escorts and the hidden soldier ran for the boats as fast as they could," Hermione said.

"No small thing in shoes full of holes," Ron said. "Did they make it?"

"They did," Hermione said, nodding, "but they had to row as fast as they could for the forest bank because the castle was being pulled down into the water and creating a great whirlpool. No sooner had they set foot on dry land than the trees began to shake violently, falling to pieces around them. The soldier took one last branch from the diamond forest, which even the youngest did not hear in all the tumult, and the princesses raced with all speed back through the forest and up the great flight of stairs."

"What about the princes or demons or whatever they were?" asked Harry.

"They disappeared as soon as they returned the princesses to the forest," Hermione said.

"Apparated," Ron said knowingly. "They probably got their licenses already, but maybe none of the girls had passed the test yet."

"I… oh, maybe," Hermione said hopelessly. "In any case, no sooner had the last sister climbed the last step of the stairs, the soldier just on her heels, when a great crashing noise signaled that the whole underground kingdom had collapsed upon itself."

"What a waste," Ron said. "A whole country where money really did grow on trees. Too bad the Forbidden Forest around our castle doesn’t have that."

"That we know of," Harry said, looking curious.

"Huh, yeah," Ron said. "I’m sure there’s a whole load of stuff in there no one’s ever seen, or at least seen and lived long enough to tell anyone about. Anyway, the princesses’ little party looks like it’s over. Then what?"

"Terrified by what they had seen, they fell down exhausted on their beds, and the soldier crept back outside once more, the branch and the cup hidden beneath his cloak." Hermione said.

Harry frowned, but he said nothing, holding his tongue as an idea started to form in his mind.

"The next morning, the king called for the soldier to come forward and explain the mystery or be executed," Hermione continued. "To the king’s surprise, the soldier told the tale of the secret kingdom, the mysterious suitors, and the princesses who had danced holes in their slippers every night. As proof, he held up the golden cup, and he pointed to the bouquet of the youngest, saying, ‘And within those flowers, you shall find a sprig of diamonds from the forest, just as there was one of silver and gold in the days before. I plucked them myself, just as I stole the cup, making the enchantment fall apart.’"

"Ha! Bet that went over well!" Ron said.

"The sisters admitted that it was all true, and of course this is where the story gets muddled between all the different versions again." Hermione said.
“Of course,” Ron said. “They always do.”

“In some, the princesses had been under an enchantment the whole time and were unable to tell anyone what was happening until someone broke the spell. Sometimes their escorts were real princes who were under a similar enchantment. None of the versions of the story that I’ve read explains who worked the enchantment or why, though,” Hermione said.

“Oh, that’s easy,” Ron said, waving his hand airily. “It was the old woman the soldier met in the forest, the one with the cloak, the key, and the advice. She was probably just a bored fairy, and after she’d had enough fun, she gave him the chance to undo it. They don’t really need much of a reason, or any, if it gets down to it.”

“You know, that’s extremely logical,” Hermione said. “If the fairy is behind it, the story would come full circle then, and the loose ends would pretty much all be tied up. That’s very, very good Ron.”

“It’s nothing,” he said, though Harry noticed he was blushing a bit.

“Well, in the versions where there was an enchantment, the princes, as punishment for dancing with the princesses every night, have to spend as many nights in jail as they did dancing,” Hermione said.

“That’s a bit harsh as they were under a spell too,” Ron said.

“Imperius curse,” Harry muttered, looking up suddenly.

Hermione’s hands went to her mouth as she gasped.

“Oh, Harry! You’re right! Even think of when Crouch first showed us the spell! He made the spider —”

“Dance,” Ron finished, looking a little terrified. “Blimey, that is really disturbing.”

All three of them shuddered for nearly a full minute before Hermione continued.

“Yes, well, the soldier is asked which of the princesses he wants to marry,” Hermione said.

“Well, obviously, it’s the youngest,” Ron said. “Disgusting, that.”

“No, actually, in almost every story he asks for the oldest, saying he’s getting on in years and she would match him best,” Hermione said.

“Okay, I did not see that one coming,” Ron said. “So he picked Jan over Dessie, even though she tried to kill him. I suppose all things considered that’s pretty decent of him.”

“Except, of course, that no one asked her if she wanted to marry him,” Hermione pointed out.

“True, but it’s still better than having him marry some little kid,” Ron said.

“Well, put that way, I see your point,” Hermione said. “Then, well, the story can end a couple different ways. In both, the soldier marries the princess and is next in line to throne.”

“But?” Ron prompted.

“Well, in some, that’s it, and he lives in the castles with the other sisters until they eventually are married off, many of them to the suitors they had danced with at the castle,” Hermione said.

“I’m guessing that’s the versions where the princes aren’t great ugly demons or something,” Ron
“Yeah, that wouldn’t make for the most picturesque ending,” Harry said.

“No,” Hermione agreed. “You’re right. That’s only in the versions where the princes were human. In the others, where they were demons, the king has the other eleven daughters executed in the place of the soldier.”

“What?!” Ron and Harry both said.

“That outrageous!” Ron said, really upset. “If they really were under the Imperius, then it wasn’t their ruddy fault! He just outright kills Brewie through Dessie?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, “it’s supposed to be just punishment for the other suitors who tried to find out their secret and were killed for it.”

“Well, I should have known there was going to be something particularly nasty sooner or later,” Ron said grimly. “At least no one ate anybody in this one. Wait, did I miss that bit?”

“No, there isn’t any cannibalism that I’m aware of in it, latent or otherwise,” Hermione said.

“Suddenly I’m not grudging the sisters their little nightly parties so much,” Ron said. “So, what’d you think, Harry?”

“I think I want to know if the golden cup ever wound up belonging to Helga Hufflepuff,” Harry said.

Hermione and Ron both looked at him with their mouths hanging open.

“That would be one big coincidence,” Ron said.

“Or maybe the world has a lot more coincidences than we give it credit for,” Hermione said, and they were all silent for several moments.

“Dangling preposition,” Ron said abruptly, breaking the silence.

“Huh?” Hermione said.

“Dangling preposition. You ended your sentence with the word for. That’s a preposition, and you’re not supposed to end sentences with those,” Ron said.

“I… well, actually, you’re right,” Hermione said, grinning sheepishly. “Maybe I’m spending too much time with you lot.”

“Nah, couldn’t be,” Ron said. “We’ve only been together all day every day for months on end. I’m surprised we haven’t all killed one another yet.”

“Unless you pick up that chip sack, mate, I’d say we’re going to get to that point sooner rather than later,” Harry said.

“Duly noted,” Ron said, picking up the paper sack and Vanishing it. “There, I’ve done my bit for the week.”

Hermione and Harry each lobbed another cushion at him, and they laughed as the wind rushed through the trees overhead, making the branches clatter together as loudly as if they had been made of silver, gold, and diamonds. Inside the tent, Harry was still troubled, the fear of what would soon
come never far from his mind, but as long as he had his friends with him, he wasn’t too worried. At least, not yet.
It was raining again. Harry was rapidly coming to the conclusion that all it ever did in Scotland was rain or snow. Almost at once, the pelting noise on the roof of the tent suggested that the weather was proving him wrong once again as it threw a lovely bout of sleet into the mix for good measure.

Harry sighed and stared for the thousandth time at the locket, still no closer to figuring out how to destroy it. He’d toyed with the idea of throwing it into a Muggle nuclear reactor, but Hermione was quick to point out that might end in a catastrophe. Most likely, she was right. He wondered if chucking it in a live volcano would do anything, but he really didn’t want to recreate the burning of Pompeii either. For now, he was out of ideas, and he felt like his brain couldn’t handle another moment of trying to save the world. Even Hermione was just staring off into space tonight, apparently transfixed by a spot on the carpeting. Ron, on the other hand, was sprawled across the sofa and staring up at the ceiling, but equally silent and seemingly lost in thought.

“You know what we need?” Ron said abruptly, making the other two jump. “A pet.”

“A pet?” Hermione said, raising her eyebrows and coming out of her stupor. “We can barely get enough to eat as it is. How would we feed a pet?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it could hunt for itself like Puss in Boots did. I just kind of miss having one around,” Ron said, shrugging. “I haven’t seen Errol or Pig in ages, and even Arthur the Pygmy Puff is sort of nice company, though never tell Ginny I said it.”

Harry tried not to think about Hedwig. Everything had happened so quickly the night of leaving Privet Drive for the last time that what with Mad Eye’s death and George’s ear, he hadn’t really taken any time to mourn her properly. He didn’t want to fall apart at the seams just now, though, and it seemed Hermione sensed what was up. She abruptly shifted the conversation.

“Well, at least none of us misses Scabbers,” Hermione said, tucking one leg underneath her.

“No, I suppose not,” Ron said, frowning. “I do sort of miss the pet I thought he was, if that makes sense.”

“If I recall correctly, at various times you called him boring, useless, pathetic, and embarrassing,” Hermione said, ticking the words off on her fingers.

“Well, yeah,” Ron admitted, “but that was just me. That’s different. It’s not like I would have let
anyone else call him any of that. Kind of like how we call you a know-it-all bookworm who’s incapable of having fun and downright deadly dull to listen to and acted like a worn out spinster by age fourteen, but we wouldn’t put up with anyone else saying it. Right, Harry?"

Harry’s eyes had slowly widened to the size of dinner plates as Ron had gone into the litany of Hermione’s supposed faults, and his only reply was to move as far as possible away from Ron so as not to be in the path of any jinxes.

“Uh, Harry?” Ron said, now sounding significantly terrified, and Harry schooled himself not to look in Hermione’s direction because whatever facial expression was going across her features at the moment probably made Voldemort in a rage look as dangerous as a Flobberworm by comparison.

“Oh, pants,” Harry heard Ron mutter under his breath.

Harry risked a glance in Hermione’s direction and immediately wished he hadn’t. It was worse than he’d imagined. She wasn’t angry. She was crying.

“That’s not what I meant!” Ron half-yelled, looking panic stricken. “I don’t mean you’re, I mean, you’re not, there isn’t, you don’t, HARRY! A LITTLE HELP, PLEASE!”

“Ron’s a git,” Harry blurted out.

“Yeah, I’m a git!” Ron said, nodding fervently. “A great big prat of a git!”

“Yeah, giant git. Troll-sized. And he’s really rather stupid,” Harry added quickly. “But then you know that.”

“Dumb as a garden gnome. A particularly dense one, really,” Ron said. “One that makes Crabbe and Goyle look bright in comparison.”

“It’s true,” Harry said.

“I see,” Hermione said in a tone that suggested she didn’t believe any of it past Ron’s cruel assessment of her. “I think I’m going to go to bed early as I’ve had enough of today. Good night.”

As she got awkwardly to her feet and began to make her way to the curtained nook where Hermione’s bed was, Ron did something extremely rash. He bolted off the couch, stumbled after her, and slung his arms around her tightly in what looked like a bone crushing hug.

“Really, ’mione,” he said, a look of total terror on his face. “I didn’t mean it. My mouth just runs away from me sometimes, you know how it is. You’re not… any of that. I wouldn’t rather be trapped with anyone else in all the world on this Merlin forsaken camping trip without end. I’m just tired and hungry and cross at the world is all, and I’m not thinking straight. Sorry.”

Harry felt like he really should be in some other place, but other than wandering out of the tent and into the sleet, he didn’t have much choice. Hermione’s face twisted a bit, and she seemed torn between aggravation, emotional turmoil, and the sudden realization that Ron was actually hugging her, something Harry guessed she’d been hoping for going on several months at this rate. Really, he might have to have a talk with Ron. He was hopelessly dense about girls.

“All right,” Hermione said, clearing her throat so it sounded a bit less sniffly and looking up at him. “We’re all under a lot of pressure here and I suppose none of us is acting as we normally would, so let’s forget it then.”

The look of relief that washed over Ron’s face practically lit up the tent, and he gave her one more
rather overly enthusiastic hug followed, to Harry’s and Hermione’s obvious surprise, by a quick peck on her cheek.

“Thanks,” he said, immediately awkward again and abruptly putting the sofa between them. “So, ehm, I don’t suppose we could have a story before bed?”

“A what?” Hermione asked, and Harry couldn’t help thinking she looked like she’d been hit by the Whomping Willow and was trying to regain her balance. “Oh, right, yes, a story. I know those. Of course I do. Just, let me think.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, trying to help her find her mental footing. “What with Ron’s fond attachment to Scabbers, I don’t suppose you know any about a rat, do you?”

“Actually, yes,” Hermione said, looking much more calm now that she was thinking about anything other than the last few minutes.

“Seriously? There’s a story about a rat?” Ron asked, sitting down on the sofa again.

“A whole plague of them, actually,” Hermione said, carefully sitting in the chair opposite. “It’s called ‘The Pied Piper of Hamelin.’”

“What kind of pie?” Ron asked, brightening up.

“No, not pie, pied,” Hermione said. “It’s an old word that means patched or two different colors. Basically, it means he’s dressed in clothes that are two colors. A lot of the old illustrations show him wearing brightly colored striped clothing, but it may just mean that his clothes were old and raggedy.”

“Oh,” Ron said, sounding disappointed. “I thought it might mean people had been throwing pies at him. You know, ‘Oy! Stop playing that pipe on my lawn at three in the morning!’ and then splat, hit upside the head with a shepherd’s pie. Pied.”

“That’s a rather interesting use of verbing,” Hermione said.

“Verbing?” Ron asked.

“Turning a word typically used as noun into a verb via its placement and use in a sentence or by adding endings traditionally associated with verbs, such as pie, a noun, into pied, in your instance used as a past tense of a technically non-existent verb,” Hermione said.

“Adjective,” Ron added.

“What?” Hermione said.

“In the original title, pied describes the piper, so it would be an adjective and not a noun, right?” Ron said.

“Ehm, well, yes, though technically it’s a participle form used as an adjective,” Hermione said, looking impressed.

“So, adjectiving,” Ron said, folding his arms and smiling. “Anyway, I think it’s at least worth considering standing on people’s front lawns at terribly early times in the morning and shrieking until they throw pie at us for our next meal to shut us up. We’ve tried everything else, including theft, covert shopping via the cloak, and rummaging dust bins full of poxy rats. I say we try to get pied!”
“Somehow I think the authorities would probably respond long before people would start pelting us with food,” Hermione said, giving him a look as though she were trying to decide if he was joking or whether the lack of food had completely unhinged him.

“Oh,” Ron said, deflated. “Yeah, that’d be inconvenient. Nix that idea.”

Harry looked back and forth between the two of them, convinced beyond doubt he was witnessing the single weirdest courtship in the history of humanity.

“Okay, so we’ve got a patched piper,” Harry prompted. “Now what?”

“Once upon a time in a land far away,” Ron prompted, but he was stunned when Hermione shook her head. “Did I get that part wrong?”

“Normally you’d be right, but this one begins differently,” Hermione said.

“Crikey, just when you think you’ve got something straight in your head with these nutty things,” Ron said. “How does this one begin? Twice upon a place in a time far past?”

“Not quite,” Hermione said. “The strange thing about this tale is it’s remarkably specific. In the year 1284 in the city of Hamelin in Germany, there was a horrible plague of rats.”

“Is that a real place?” Ron asked, looking surprised.

“Yes, it is. Just a moment,” Hermione said, digging around in her beaded bag, which was never far from her side. “Ah, there it is: *A Complete Atlas of Muggle Communities in Western and Central Europe*. I packed it in case we needed to start looking for Horcruxes abroad. There should be a page in here of Lower Saxony.”

She flipped through the pages rapidly and finally stopped and pointed to a dot on the map very clearly labeled Hamelin. Harry and Ron both stared at it.

“So, do are any other fairy tale places in Lower Saxophone too?” Ron said, prodding the page with his finger. Harry suspected he was trying to get it to move.

“Saxony, not saxophone. If you notice, none of the other ones are really specific about where they take place,” Hermione said. “That’s one of the things that make this story so odd.”

“And 1284?” Harry said. “Not 1283 or 1285?”

“Yes, the year is definite too,” Hermione said. “Granted, not every version mentions that detail, but any of them that do always mention the same date.”

“Okay,” Ron said. “This is just a made up story, right?”

“That’s actually quite open to debate,” Hermione said mysteriously. “At least part of it probably happened, but I’d doubt all of it did.”

“Okay, so there are some rats in Hamelin, which is in Lower Sexy Knee, I mean Saxony,” Ron said, and Harry noticed he had abruptly moved his eyes away from Hermione’s crossed legs. “They’re just a few rats, so what’s the catastrophe there?”

“Not just a few rats, but loads of them,” Hermione said. “There were rats in the homes, in the wells, in the barns, running down the streets, skittering across the roofs, swarming in the cellars, eating
everything in the farmers’ fields, gnawing on clothes and furniture and food, just everywhere. It was a horrible situation.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, screwing his face in disgust. “I mean, we go to a school where people keep rats as pets, and even I’m a bit sick at that idea.”

“I used to sleep with a rat in my bed and it’s giving me collywobbles,” Ron affirmed. “Fine, I’ll grant they have a problem. How did they get that many rats?”

“It’s a good question,” Hermione said. “The thirteenth century was a time of a lot of superstition, and some of it centered around cats. People thought they might be demonic because they could see well in the dark, their eyes turn odd colors by firelight, their caterwauling, and their ability to land upright and unharmed most of the time. Even one of the popes, Gregory IX, thought the devil might appear as a black cat at meetings of witches.”

“Did I miss that part of the curriculum at Hogwarts,” Ron asked with wry grin, “or is that just something you lot get up to at your pajama parties?”

Hermione gave him a withering look and went on.

“Remember, even before witches and wizards went into hiding, the Muggles didn’t understand very well what we did,” Hermione said. “A lot of them thought we were evil, and it did tend to cause trouble for a lot of random people and even animals.”

“Okay, so apparently kitty cats are bad. In Mrs. Norris’s case they might even have a point. But what’s that got to do with rats over running Hamelin?” Harry asked.

“Well, a lot of communities killed cats since they thought they were demons, and that led to a rapid increase in the number of rats in certain areas,” Hermione said.

“Suddenly I feel a lot less sorry for the people in Hamelin,” Ron said with a frown. “I may not be overly keen on cats, but killing them is way too far over the line.”

“Quite,” Hermione said with firm nod. “It was even more dangerous since rats could carry the Black Plague, and that wiped out a lot of towns and cities back then, so they really were in trouble. The people of Hamelin simply couldn’t catch all the rats, and none of the poisons or traps they were using worked. Then one day, a mysterious stranger came to town.”

“The Tarted Tambourine Player?” Ron asked, all wide-eyed innocence, but the wink he shot to Harry suggested he wasn’t quite as daft as he let on.

“The Pied Piper,” Hermione said, over enunciating it, but her smile left no doubt that she was wise to him as well. “Yes, he went to the mayor of the town and said he could get rid of all the rats in return for payment. The mayor, thinking that it would be nearly impossible for anyone to end the plague of rats, agreed to a sum in gold coins if the piper succeeded.”

“Really, the mayor wins either way. Either the piper can’t do it and he doesn’t have to pay, or the piper can and the mayor can stop having to fish rat droppings out of his morning tea,” Ron said.

“Ronald, please!” Hermione said, looking disgusted. “Your choice of imagery!”

“Well, it’s true!” Ron said. “I doubt they’re all politely using the loo and washing up after.”

“Anyway, what does the piper do?” Harry asked, trying hard to forget that picture.
“The next morning, the piper came back to town just at sunrise. He began to play a strange, hypnotic melody on his pipe, and after a few moments, all the rats, thousands of them, came pouring out of the homes and into the street towards the piper,” Hermione said.

“Blech,” Ron said. “If I were him, I think I’d drop the pipe and run.”

“Except that’s not at all what he did. Instead, the piper began to dance as he played, and the rats followed him wherever he went, cavorting and dancing as well.”

“Cavorting rats?” Harry said. “Somehow that’s almost more disturbing.”

“Eventually, the piper and his companions came to the bridge over the River Weser, and the rats dived in of their own accord, every last one, and were all drowned,” Hermione said.

Harry and Ron looked at each other.

“You do realize what that sounds like, right?” Harry said.

“If you’re thinking of the Imperius Curse, then yes,” Hermione said.

“Blimey, is it possible to cast it on that many animals at one time?” Ron asked.

“I don’t know. It certainly does work on animals since Crouch used it perfectly on spiders in Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Remember, he even threatened to have the spider drown itself like the rats. There were supposed to be a lot of wizards under it all at the same time in the last war, so controlling more than one entity isn’t impossible. I suppose if there was a wizard who was particularly gifted at it, he might be able to work out a way to do it, but it would take a lot of concentration,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, I’m not sure I like this piper fellow,” Ron said. “It seems a bit rude, killing all the rats he’d just had a dance number with. Couldn’t he just have Vanished them all rather than turning them into suicidal puppets and drowning them? Rather excessive, that.”

“It is a bit sinister, I agree, but the people of Hamelin were very happy to have their town free of rats once more,” Hermione said.

“Now that I can see,” Harry said. “So how much did the mayor pay the piper?”

“Nothing,” Hermione said.

“Wait, nothing? The piper did exactly what he said he was going to do, though,” Ron said, looking angry. “They cheated him!”

“Not exactly the brightest lot out there, are they?” Harry said. “Take a fellow who can convince every rat in the village to drown itself, and then don’t pay him. Brilliant idea.”

“You’ve seen the problem exactly,” Hermione said. “The mayor was a very greedy fellow and said that since all the piper had done was play a tune, he should be content with a single copper, the usual fee for such a service. The piper was furious that he hadn’t been paid, and he left the town, promising to come back and wreak his vengeance upon them all.”

“Wreak?” Ron said, quirking an eyebrow at her.

“It means he’ll do something awful,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, I know, but wreak? It’s just such an odd word. I mean, do people wreak anything other than
vengeance? Can you wreak happiness or fun or laughter or something?"

“Well, I’ve heard of wreaking destruction or havoc,” Hermione said, tilting her head in consideration, “but aside from that, no. The connotations of the word are heavily negative.”

“Okay, so the piper, who I have to admit I’m kind of siding with at this point, leaves town without so much as a Knut in his pocket for his trouble and fully intent on wreaking. Then what?” Ron asked.

“Then nothing happened for several long weeks,” Hermione said, “and the townspeople began to think his threat was empty.”

“That’s usually when trouble starts,” Ron said.

“Precisely, for they let their guard down. On June 26, the feast of St. Peter and Paul, all the people of the town were in church when the pied piper returned,” Hermione continued.

“Wait, not only do we get a specific city, and a river on top of it, and a year, but now we’ve got an actual date?” Harry said.

“Yes, though a few sources list it as June 22 instead, though that could be a transcription error,” Hermione said. “At either 7:00 in the morning or noon, depending on the source—“

“Now we’ve got the actual time? What is this, the fairy tale news report?” Ron asked.

“—the piper came to the village square. However, instead of his previous brightly colored suit of clothes, he was dressed all in green with an odd little hat of red with a feather on it,” Hermione said.

“Why green?” Harry asked.

“Some of the sources say it was to make him look like a hunter, but there’s a fairly strong tradition of the color green being linked to the Fae, at least in the British Isles, and it’s often regarded as bad luck,” Hermione explained.

“Which is probably why Slytherins wear it,” Ron said. “Bunch of cheeky gits, wandering around in green, thinking they’re so threatening. Anyway, wild guess. The piper pulls out his pipe and lo and behold, all the rats coming running back into the village and he leaves them to sort out the muddle for themselves. How close am I?”

“That does seem perfectly logical and really quite just,” Hermione said.

Ron grinned broadly at Harry, obviously thrilled with his success.

“But that’s not what happened,” she added.

“Oh,” Ron said, looking very disappointed.

“However, it was an extremely good guess, and frankly I like it much more than the way the story does go,” Hermione hurried to mention.

“Fine, so the piper comes back in new clothes, but he doesn’t bring rats,” Harry said. “What’s his revenge?”

“Well, Ron had it at least a bit right. He did begin to play his pipe again, starting with nine loud blasts,” Hermione said.

“What came out of the houses this time?” Ron asked.
“The town’s children,” Hermione said.

“I thought you said all the townspeople were in church?” Harry said.

“Yes, the stories to agree on that point, but apparently they’d left the children home. That actually wasn’t terribly unusual back then since church services could be very long and older children could have seen to their younger brothers and sisters,” Hermione said. “Every child over the age of four, and for some reason the mayor’s grown daughter came out to the piper as though they were all in a trance and began to dance.”

“Wait, what? The kids started following him?” Ron said, looking ill.

“Yes. The piper began to dance along the streets, and the children, never once questioning what they were doing, danced along in a long line behind,” Hermione said.

“On a scale of one to one hundred in disturbing, this breaks the scale like a Hippogriff sat on it,” Ron said. “He’s using the Imperius on a load of kids! That’s just sick!”

“And where’s he taking them?” Harry said. “Tell me it’s not the river or I’m not sleeping for a week.”

“No, none of the versions do that. The piper led them out of town, and then the story has a few different possible endings,” Hermione said.

“Right,” Ron said. “Multiple choice nightmares. Gotta have that.”

“In one, the piper led the children to a cave in the side of a great mountain, and once they were all inside, the cave closed up. Some say the children continued through the mountain and came out the other side somewhere in Transylvania and founded a city, while others say that the 130 children simply disappeared, never to be seen again,” Hermione said.

“Wait, if all the kids were gone, and the adults were all in church, then how did anyone find out what happened?” Ron asked.

“Oh, three children didn’t go with the others,” Hermione said.

“Why?” Ron asked.

“One was blind, another deaf, and the third had a bad leg. The blind one was unable to follow by touch the steep path of the other children, the deaf one had been unable to hear the music and had not fallen under its spell but followed the children out of curiosity for a while, and the one with the bad leg had been unable to keep up. Among the three of them, the villagers were able to piece together the story and understand what had happened,” Hermione said.

“This is seriously one of the less pleasant stories you’ve ever told us, and that’s saying something,” Ron said.

“What’s the other version?” Harry asked.

“That one’s a bit better. In that one, the piper led the children to a hill called either Koppenberg or Koppelberg, and the side of the hill opened up to reveal a lovely enchanted land that the children entered. They stayed there until the townspeople agreed to pay the piper double the original amount of gold, at which time he released them unharmed,” Hermione said.

“That’s less disturbing, though again that sounds a bit like the stories my Aunt Tessie used to tell us
about fairy hills and the like, warning us to stay a good way away from them. Maybe the piper really was one of the Fae,” Ron said. “If so, holding a bunch of kids ransom until he gets paid is actually a fairly light penalty. Most of them would go the first route.”

“This is just a story though, right?” Harry asked.

“Well, it’s hard to say,” Hermione said. “The actual documents of the town all date themselves from the day that ‘the children left,’ and a church window from 1300, only a few years after the event, does depict a brightly dressed piper leading off children dressed in white. Some people think that what really happened is a plague killed the town’s children, and the piper with his magical abilities and control of rats is a personification of death. Others think that perhaps it’s a reference to some sort of Children’s Crusade, that a highly gifted speaker convinced the children to follow him on a trip to the Holy Land or off on a military battle that they never returned from. Others think there was just a large immigration of people from the town to another area of Europe far to the east, and that the term ‘children’ is used to refer to people of the town in general rather than actual children.”

“Oh… huh,” Ron said. “So basically, some wizard or Fae got angry over not being paid and kidnapped a bunch of Muggle children.”

“Honestly, that really does seem like the most logical solution,” Hermione said. “The story obviously has morals about greed as well as possibly the importance of hospitality and a certain xenophobic undertone regarding strangers, but the base incident certainly fits your assessment, Ron.”

“So… who’s the good guy in all this?” Ron asked.

“You mean the protagonist?” Hermione said. “That’s another good question. You’d be hard pressed to find a hero in it at all. Both the piper and the townspeople have bad traits, and an argument could be made that they both protagonists and antagonists simultaneously, a situation verging on modern moral cynicism with a heavy undercurrent of pessimistic fatalism.”

“Oh huh,” Ron said, nodding in a way Harry knew meant he had no idea what she’d said. “Exactly.”

“It sounds a bit too much like the Deathly Hallows story from Beedle,” Harry finally said. “Death shows up to make a bargain that he knows he can win through somebody else’s greed. No matter what happens, he knows he’s doing to get them all in the end.”

“Well, that’s a cheerful outlook,” Ron said, giving Harry a look. “If that’s the case, then why don’t we just turn ourselves in to the nearest Death Eater patrol and be done with it.”

“Because that’s not what it’s about at all,” Hermione said, looking at him sharply. “The villagers had a choice. So do we. They could have cleaned up their own mess, or they could have paid the piper, but because they let things get completely out of control and ignored the future, the worst thing possible happened. Maybe people just needed to realize what was happening and fight to stop it instead of ignoring what was going on outside their own windows. That’s what we’re doing. We’re telling the piper no, he can’t have the future.”

Harry and Ron looked at her for a moment.

“Hermione?” Ron said tentatively. “Have you ever considered a future in politics?”

“Good heavens, no,” Hermione said looking flustered. “I’d be utterly miserable in all that bureaucracy. Who in their right mind would go into the Ministry?”

“Well, if you ever change your mind, you could sure whip up a crowd,” Ron said. “It’s about time to
turn in, though. Another long day tomorrow.”

The other two nodded, and in a few moments the lights were turned down and they had each gone to their own beds.

“Harry, any idea where we’re off to tomorrow?” Ron asked.

“No idea,” Harry said.

“I suppose we could always try Lower Sexy Knee,” Hermione said out of the darkness, but Harry could hear the suppressed laughter in her voice, and he pictured Ron’s blush perfectly. “Night all.”

Harry stifled a laugh and rolled over, trying to bury his worries in sleep. That night, though, he dreamed of a piper playing in the streets of Hogsmeade, leading the children in a macabre dance, his red eyes malevolently glittering in the night.
The Snow Qu(ite-Nutty-Aren't-They?)een

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The snow was falling so thickly outside the tent that when Harry stood at the door and peered out into the storm, he could see nothing at all but a solid sheet of shifting white illuminated by the lights inside their current home. Visibility was down to nothing, and the cold was biting into him like a wild animal in spite of the warm clothes Hermione had managed to pack for them all in her evening bag.

“There’s nothing for it,” he said to the others, turning back around and closing the tent flap behind him. “If we went more than a dozen feet from the tent, we might not find it again. We’ll have to stay in tonight.”

“I suppose the good news is so will the Death Eaters,” Hermione said, huddling a bit closer into her woolliest jumper. “I don’t remember it ever snowing this hard so early in the year before.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, wondering if, like some of the other weird weather phenomena that had been happening since Voldemort’s return, this might not be the work of Dementors.

“At least we have a bit of food for tomorrow,” Hermione said, nodding toward the remaining half of the chicken and ham pie that Ron had somehow managed to cadge from a nearby village. They’d all gotten to the point that nobody was asking too many questions anymore about how exactly food was winding up on the table so long as it was there. “That’s one less worry.”

“Right,” Ron said, looking sour. “Now we just have to worry about saving the world, destroying the Horcruxes, and dying in the middle of a snowstorm. Aside from that, we haven’t a care in the world.”

Harry looked at Ron and frowned. More and more of late, Ron’s complaints were beginning to sound less like random grousing and more like disillusioned accusations. He knew Hermione was picking up on it as well when he saw her puckering her brow and looking at Ron, who was currently staring forlornly up at the ceiling.

“You know,” she said tentatively, “while I don’t much like the cold, I’ve always thought snow was probably the prettiest weather.”

“Uh-huh,” Ron said, still looking at the canvas ceiling where the shadows of the snowflakes could be seen racing overhead. “Real pretty. Then again, so’s the dragon pox virus if you look at it magnified enough times. Doesn’t mean it isn’t still bloody deadly.”

“You’re in a cheerful mood,” Harry said, forcing a laugh out.

“Not especially, no,” Ron said, his voice disturbingly calm.

“Uh, Hermione,” Harry said, shifting his focus and hoping this would work, “you don’t happen to know any stories about snow by chance, do you?”

To Harry’s relief, Hermione smiled almost at once.

“Yes, actually,” she said. “There’s quite a good one about the Snow Queen.”
“Snow Queen?” Ron asked, lifting his head with the slightest bit of interest.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “It’s by Andersen again.”

“The nutter with the bleeding mermaid and the princess with swans for brothers?” he asked, and his interest level was significantly higher now, Harry noted.

“The very same,” Hermione said, “though I warn you, this is rather a long one.”

“Doesn’t bother me,” Harry said. “It’s not like we’re going to get much sleep with the wind screaming away like that outside.”

Ron was knitting his brows together as though he was trying to remember something.

“He’s the bloke who has the thing about maiming feet, isn’t he?” Ron asked.

“Um, well, it seems that way in some of his stories, yes, though he isn’t to blame for Ashyweeper, oh, now you’ve got me doing it! Cinderella!” Hermione said.

Harry and Ron couldn’t help smiling over her mistake.

“Yeah, so, is there any foot mutilation in this one?” Ron asked.

“Hmm,” Hermione said, tipping her head to one side. “You know, now that you mention it, there actually is an incident, but it’s much milder than any of the others.”

“On a scale of one to ten with one being a small blister on someone’s big toe and ten being decapitated feet dancing in a church path, where would it fall?” Ron asked.

“I’d say about a three,” Hermione said, “and decapitated is the wrong word to use there since it’s technically only used for the removal of someone’s head. The term amputated would work better grammatically.”

Ron nodded, a satisfied look on his face.

“Okay, that seems like a reasonable number after a full dinner,” he said. “So, let’s meet the Snow Queen.”

Harry watched as Hermione pulled herself into a cross legged position and collected her thoughts.

“Once upon a time,” she and Ron intoned at exactly the same time.

“Do you know this story, Ronald?” Hermione said, giving him a look.

“The first bit at least,” he said, smiling. “So, go on.”

“Well, once upon a time there were a bunch of horrible demons who were bored,” Hermione said.

“I don’t think that sentence can possibly end well,” Harry said.

“Wait, what kind of demons?” Ron asked.

“Actually, that’s quite a good question,” Hermione said with an approving nod. “Some translations use the word sprites, others hobgoblins, and others say they’re devils of some sort. Whatever they are, they’re supposed to be unpleasant.”
“Doesn’t really seem to matter then,” Ron said with a shrug. “Most Muggles probably couldn’t tell one a Hinky Punk from a Kappa anyway. So what do these horrible generic demons do to cure creeping ennui?”

“They created a large mirror, but the trick of it was that rather than reflecting what things really looked like, instead it distorted everything to look tainted and ugly,” Hermione explained.

“Huh,” Ron said, thinking. “I might have to give that idea to Fred and George. It sounds like something that would be perfect for Weasleys Wizard Wheezes.”

Harry laughed, but he had to agree. Personally, he’d pay a good amount for a mirror that would make old Lucius Malfoy look less than perfect. Hermione had her head tipped to one side, thinking.

“You know, it probably would work with some variation on the Confundus charm,” she said slowly, then snapped back to herself. “However, the real mirror was meant to be terrible. No matter how beautiful or good something or somebody was, the mirror would find fault with it. The demons laughed in glee over their prize and went flying over the earth with the mirror, looking into it and seeing everything warped and ruined.”

“Okay, that’s actually a bit disturbing,” Harry said, thinking suddenly of the Death Eaters at the World Cup and how a perfectly wonderful game of Quidditch wasn’t enough for them until they were able to destroy people to cap it off.

“But they got bored again,” Hermione said.

“What, already?” Ron said, raising his eyebrows.

“Well, I suppose demons aren’t known for overly long attention spans,” said Hermione with a shrug. “They had already looked at the whole world in their mirror, so they decided to try to carry it up to heaven to see what it would make of the angels.”

“They… wait, what?” Ron said. “Okay, supposing that were even possible, it doesn’t seem like demons would be able to just saunter up to the pearly gates and say, ‘Hey, we’ve got a rather dodgy mirror here we want to use to make fun of all you angels. Let us in, yeah?’”

“Actually, you’re quite right,” Hermione said. “The demons lost their grip on the mirror long before they reached their destination, and it shattered into countless tiny pieces and shards of glass.”

“I guess, that’s that then,” Harry said.

“Oh, not at all,” Hermione said. “On the contrary, the demons were delighted with the outcome.”

“What? Seven years’ bad luck?” Ron said.

“No. The wind blew the bits of glass all over the world, and each one carried just the same charm as the whole mirror had. From time to time, a bit of glass would become stuck in someone’s eye, and from that time on, that person would see everything as not good enough and full of flaws, even the most wonderful things,” Hermione said.

Ron squinted for a moment.

“What if they kept the bad eye shut and looked at things with the one that didn’t have glass in it?” Ron asked.

Hermione blinked slowly.
“Well, I suppose if the person went around with one eye shut permanently for no apparent reason, then yes, it probably wouldn’t have the intended effect, but that’s pretty unlikely,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but what if the person lost an eye or something?” Ron said excitedly.

“Or what if they were a pirate?” Harry chimed in. “You know, with an eye patch and all.”

Hermione looked like she was about to scream when Ron broke in with, “And on top of all that, wouldn’t they notice they had glass in their eye? I mean, wouldn’t they go to a healer or something to get it out?”

“It wouldn’t be visible to anyone else because it was so tiny, and they couldn’t feel it after the first moment it was in their eye,” Hermione said.

“Okay, fine,” Ron said, seemingly placated.

“But even worse was if a shard of glass lodged in the person’s heart,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, ‘cause they’d be dead,” Ron said sagely.

“No. Instead, the person’s heart would turn into ice, cold and unfeeling, and they would never feel love or kindness or contentment or peace again,” Hermione said.

“Okay, as bad effects from a curse go, that’s really off the scale,” Harry said, giving a shudder.

“Yeah, I mean everyone gets a bit picky now and again, but a frozen heart is just overdoing it,” Ron said.

“So anyway, that’s the background to our story,” Hermione said. “Now, it so happened that there lived two children in a great city that’s probably meant to be Copenhagen in Denmark.”

“Bit of an abrupt shift, that,” Harry said with a laugh.

“I suppose so, but that’s how the story goes,” Hermione continued. “They both lived in attic apartments with their parents, just across an alleyway from one another, and the two roofs were so close together that the children could step from one to the other with no trouble at all.”

“That seems dangerous,” Ron said, frowning. “How high up are they?”

“Oh, probably a couple stories or so,” she said. “But the buildings were built extremely close in those days.”

“But what if someone was a sleepwalker?” Ron said.

Harry stared at him.

“A sleepwalker?” he said. “Where did you even dredge that up from? If I sat here for five hours I don’t think I’d ever come up with the idea that one of the kids could possibly sleepwalk out the window.”

“Seamus,” Ron said with a shrug. “I’ve caught him wandering around a couple times in the dormitory in the middle of the night. I actually thought he was awake once and went to ask him what he was doing, and he told me, and I quote, ‘The trees are full of Butterbeer, so I need to catch a train.’ Then he settled back into bed on his own and snored away. Creepy, that.”

Harry looked unnerved. That really was rather weird. He couldn’t help wondering what Sirius would
have done on the night he broke into Gryffindor Tower if Seamus had been taking a nighttime stroll when he came in. He was guessing it wouldn’t have ended very well.

“Yes, well, nobody in either family was a somnambulist, so that’s not really an issue,” Hermione said, and from her expression Harry could tell she was trying to figure out how she had lost control within the second sentence of the story.

“Somna-what?” Ron asked.

“It just means sleepwalker,” Hermione said rather apologetically.

“Blimey. You know a word for everything, don’t you? Like—“ Ron looked around the tent, then stared at his own shoe. “Like, you probably know what this thing’s called,” he said, pointing to the plastic bit on the end of his shoelace.

“Aglet,” Hermione said automatically, apparently missing Ron’s stunned face, then continued on. “In any case, the families of the two children had no garden of their own as they lived at the attic level, so they put flowerboxes up on the roof outside the windows and filled them with vegetables and flowers, particularly roses, and it was there that they played.”

“Nice,” Ron said. “So the kids aren’t just stepping over a dangerous alleyway, they’re climbing around on the roofs like a back garden, and probably running about and hopping around and jumping up and down as kids do. That just reeks of safety.”

“Well, the story says that their favorite thing to do was to sit next to the planters of rose and watch them in wonder,” Hermione said shortly, “and that doesn’t seem especially dangerous.”

“Because kids’ favorite games obviously include Staring at the Roses, and even if they did, the roof still isn’t the best spot for that, I’d wager,” Ron said with an eyeroll. “Honestly, sitting around goggling at potted plants for hours at a go. I’m getting steadily more worried about these two.”

“On the other hand, maybe that’s how Professor Sprout got started,” Harry said.

“Yeah, but she’d be running around pruning things or replanting mandrakes or something, not just getting into a staring contest with the closest daisy,” Ron said.

“Anyway,” said Hermione with a note of rising strain in her voice, “summer passed, and winter came. The plants became dormant, and the children stayed inside to watch the snow through the windows.”

“What, the parents want them to miss the joys of wandering around the icy, snow-covered rooftops? They’re deprived, I’m telling you,” Ron said, feigning indignation.

“At least they still have a variation of their favorite game to play. They’re still staring at things. They’ve just moved from roses to snow,” Harry said.

“They did still visit one another regularly, and especially the grandmother who lived with them,” Hermione said.

“Wait, which one’s gran is this?” Ron asked.

“You know, the story doesn’t really say,” Hermione said. “It appears she lives with the family of the little girl, Gerta, but—“

“Gerta?” Ron asked.
“Yes, that’s her name,” Hermione said.

“Seems a bit unfortunate, but not completely barmy,” Ron said. “Does the boy have a name too?"

“Yes, Kai,” Hermione said.

“Kai?” Harry said.

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“No, really, the poor kid’s name is Kai?” Ron said.

“What is so terrible about the name Kai?” Hermione said, putting her hands on her hips and looking a bit dangerous.

“Well, it sounds like a girl’s name, doesn’t it?” Ron said. “Back me up on this, Harry.”

“Sorry, but yeah, it does,” Harry agreed.

“Well, considering some of the versions spell it K-A-Y, I suppose I see your point a bit, but it’s pronounced Kai,” Hermione said, rhyming it with the word spy. “I’d guess it was a fairly normal Danish boy’s name at that point.”

“Eh, okay, I’ll give it a pass,” Ron said.

“Thank you for you generosity, O great one,” Hermione said a roll of her eyes, but continued. “Anyway, the grandmother lived with Gerta’s family, at least that could be implied, but the story does refer to her as being their grandmother. It’s possible that she was simply like an adoptive grandmother to Kai, but it’s also possible that the two children are cousins.”

“Bit vague, but fine,” Ron said.

“When winter came, it was freezing cold, and even inside the attic apartments the cold crept in. The windows would ice over, and Kai and Gerta would take pennies and put them on the hot stove to warm. Then they would hold them up to the windows, and when they took them away, they would have perfectly round little peep holes to gaze out to see the snow whirling about,” Hermione said.

“Aw, that’s kind of cute,” Ron said.

“Also, it lets them continue staring at random things, only now through holes,” Harry said.

“Okay, so less cute, more Peeping Tom maybe,” Ron said.

“Yes, I always rather liked that image. Thank you so much for destroying it. When the snow was particularly thick, the old grandmother would say, ‘The Snow Queen’s bees are swarming,’” Hermione said, giving the grandmother a creaky voice.

“Huh,” Harry said, looking through one of the windows and watching giant flakes that had clumped together whirl crazily in the wind, almost as though they had a mind of their own. “It really does look like white bees, doesn’t it?”

“Now that you mention it, yeah,” Ron said in agreement. “Granny has a right old sense of whimsy. I think I like the old girl.”

“I’m pleased you approve,” Hermione said, and Harry thought she probably really meant it. “The children asked her about the Snow Queen, of course, and I’m really rather surprised you didn’t.”
“I figured you’d get to it eventually, what with it being the title and all,” Ron said magnanimously.

“Thank you for the vote of confidence,” Hermione said. “The grandmother said that the Snow Queen appeared when the snow was flying the thickest, and sometimes she would peer into the homes of mortals at night. You could always know when she had been there because the next morning the windows would be covered in the most beautiful patterns of icy flowers made of frost.”

“So… she’s a fae again,” Ron said disapprovingly.

“She might be,” Hermione said. “The grandmother said she was very tall, and extremely beautiful, with skin and clothes as white as the snow itself and eyes as blue as a midnight winter sky. She said her husband, the grandfather, had told her he saw the Snow Queen once, beckoning to him on the other side of the window during a mighty blizzard, but he hadn’t gone out to her, and she had disappeared.”

“Wonder how much Fire Whiskey the old boy’d had,” Ron said. “Still, he’s not an idiot that one. You don’t mess with that sort of thing.”

“Quite,” Hermione agreed, and Harry was pretty sure he heard her mutter under her breath, “if only Hagrid would remember that.”

“So, what happened next?” Ron asked.

“Well, that night Kai had a dream about the Snow Queen, if it was a dream. Just like the grandfather, he saw her outside his window, motioning him to come outside, but he didn’t go, and in the morning fantastic ice flowers covered his window. From that, he knew it hadn’t been just a dream,” Hermione said.

“Okay,” Harry said. “So is that it?”

“We’re not even partway done yet,” Hermione said. “Winter eventually ended, and then spring came, and glorious summer with all the roses once more.”

“Nice to see some things don’t change, like hanging gardens that needed to be condemned by the Building Board,” Ron said.

“But something horrible happened one sunny day, just as the church bells were chiming,” Hermione said.

“Which kid fell to their death?” Ron asked.

“Neither,” Hermione said. “Instead, two pieces of the magic mirror, borne aloft on a breeze, found their way to the little garden.”

“I almost forgot about that thing,” Ron said.

“Gerta was quite frightened when little Kai first cried out ‘Oh, my eye! Something has got in it and hurts so!’ and then after a moment, ‘Oh, there is a pain in my heart as well!’” Hermione said.

“Whoa, he got hit with both of them? That’s hardly fair,” Harry said sympathetically.

“No, but it’s logical. Provided that the mirror’s shattering pattern was relatively uniform, which might well not be the case, the individual particles would most likely scatter in a similar direction, and if, as the story states, they were being carried on wind currents, it would make logical sense that the disbursement of the wreckage would flow in a similar airstream, so if one were to come across a
single particle, it makes sense that more particles would be likely to be found in the immediate vicinity of the first one,” Hermione said.

“Huh?” Ron said.

“Like if a box of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans spills on the floor, they tend to cluster together in a pile rather than space themselves out?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said, giving him a pleased smile, “something like that.”

“I miss those,” Ron said woefully. “Even the vomit ones.”

“In any case, Kai soon said, ‘No, I’m quite well again. It must have been nothing,’ and little Gerta was relieved until Kai began acting very oddly indeed. ‘Ugh! Look at that horrid rose! It has a great insect in it! And that one is the ugliest color I’ve ever seen! And this one smells so terrible!’ and with that he pulled up all the roses and threw them into the street,” Hermione said.

“Killing some poor passer-by in the process, most like,” Ron said. “By the way, he just ripped the roses out of the dirt with his bare hands? Didn’t the thorns get him?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe he put on gardener’s gloves or something first!” Hermione said. “The point is he looked at the same roses he’d found just lovely a moment before, and suddenly none of them was good enough for him. And it wasn’t just the roses. He began to make fun of the grandmother, imitating her behind her back, as well as all the teachers at the school. He had no time at all for Gerta, and when he did, he was cruel as often as not. He began to act most shockingly conceited.”

“Maybe that’s what’s wrong with Malfoy,” Harry said.

“No, I think it would take a whole mirror’s worth of glass to make someone as unpleasant as Malfoy,” Hermione said, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “Gerta was very frightened and sad at the loss of her playmate’s usual attitude, but most everyone else just said that was the way all boys act at his age and said it would pass.”

“They’ve got a point,” Ron said. “I’ve known a few blokes who go through an awkward stage when they’re highly insensitive and think nothing’s good enough for them. At least I never did that.”

Harry saw that Hermione seemed to be holding her tongue through an immense effort of will, but she managed it and moved on.

“Summer came to an end all too soon, and winter returned,” Hermione said.

“That was fast,” Harry said.

“Kai began to be friendly with a number of boys who stood about the village square and dared each other to do stupid and silly things. As he was one of the youngest, he was always on the lookout to be the most daring of them all. One day, the boys were taking it in turns to tie their sleds to the horse-drawn sleighs that would circle the village center and hitch a ride on the back of them before untying their sleds again,” she said.

“Sounds like a good way to get run over,” Harry said.

“Actually, I was just thinking it sounded rather brilliant,” Ron said. “Be fun, that.”

“I should have known,” Hermione mumbled before continuing. “There was one very fast sleigh, all
in white with white horses and a driver muffled in a white fur robe with the collar turned up high, and a white fur hat. All the boys dared each other to try to catch it, but no one wanted to since it went at such a break neck speed. Kai, however, took the dare.”

“I think I know where this is going,” Ron said.

“Probably,” Hermione agreed. “He did indeed manage to attach his sled, and the sleigh took him on a dizzying ride around the square at great speed, but when Kai tried to untie his sled, it was impossible. The sleigh took off into the countryside, pulling the terrified boy behind it, unable to leap off. When they were far, far from the town, much further than Kai had ever been in his life, the sleigh stopped, and the driver got out.”

“The Snow Queen?” Harry asked.

“You got it in one, yes,” Hermione said. “She invited him into her sleigh and tucked her robe around him. Then she gave him a kiss on the forehead, cold as ice. Though Kai found fault with everything, even he could see nothing at all about the Snow Queen except perfect beauty, and he at once began to forget his life from before, for that was part of the magic of the Snow Queen’s kiss.”

Harry frowned.

“Okay, aside from the fact that the Snow Queen is obviously a lot prettier, that almost sounds like a Dementor,” Harry said.

“Oh!” Hermione said, looking excited. “It really does, doesn’t it! I think that’s the first time we’ve heard of a Muggle story that references Dementors specifically. That’s very interesting. What do you think, Ron? Doesn’t it sound a bit like it?”

“Uh, actually I was just thinking she sounded kind of fit,” Ron said, looking guilty.

“Oh,” Hermione said, looking disappointed. “Well, anyway, the Snow Queen kissed him a second time, then said, ‘If I were to kiss you again, it would be the death of you,’ and certainly Kai looked nearly as pale as the Queen now and his skin was as cold as ice. She continued driving, with the great snow bees flying thickly in their wake, until at last they came to her palace, for she intended to keep him there as an amusement.”

“At least this one gets fairies right,” Ron said approving. “Child abduction is kind of their thing.”

“Yes, it is a bit more realistic,” Hermione agreed. “Poor little Gerta, though, was heartbroken. The boys in the square told Kai’s parents what had happened, but no sign could be found of the sleigh or Kai, and it was assumed that Kai was dead. Gerta, though, felt that she would know if that were true, and she did not believe it.”

“Aw, that’s sad,” Ron said. “Kai runs off with a fae queen and poor Gerta gets left behind with staring through frosty windows at random things all alone.”

“Not that Kai was all that nice before he left, really,” Harry pointed out.

“True, but Gerta decided she was going to take matters into her own hands. Many people thought that Kai might have drowned in the river, so Gerta took the very best thing she owned, her red shoes, and went to the riverbank,” Hermione said.

“Hold it, time out!” Ron said. “Her red shoes? Weren’t red shoes the reason the girl in that other story by this nutter wound up having her feet chopped off and dying?”
“Yes, actually,” Hermione said.

“Please tell me she’s not about to chop off her feet and throw them in the river,” Ron said, looking ill.

“No!” Hermione said, looking horror struck. “No, she just throws the shoes in, saying the river can have her shoes if it will give Kai back.”

“Oh, good,” Ron said. “That would have been a bit too much.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, going green. “I’d like to keep that chicken and ham pie down, thank you very much.”

“Well, the river pushed her shoes back to the bank, and the waves seemed to be shaking in a way that meant that they didn’t have Kai, but to be sure Gerta decided to get into a boat and row out into the middle of the river and offer the shoes again there, just in case she hadn’t tossed them in properly,” Hermione said.

“What’s the river going to do with shoes?” Ron asked.

“Hey, rivers run, don’t they? They must have feet, right?” Harry said, smiling, but the other two looked at him with patent disbelief.

“Mate,” Ron said, putting a hand on his shoulder, “it was a good try, but please, never pun again. I can handle starvation, being lost, and constant mortal peril, but bad puns are one thing too many.”

“Besides, the whole point is that the shoes were a sacrifice,” Hermione said. “There really is something very ritualistic about the whole thing, but the main thing is she was willing to give up the best thing she owned to have Kai back. So she threw her shoes again in the middle of the river, but before the river could return them—“

“—or possibly before the giant squid living in the river could put them back in the boat like it did Creevy’s kid brother,” Ron added.

“—the boat slipped away, and Gerta found herself being carried very quickly down the river. That’s how her journey to find Kai began,” Hermione said.

“But she’s got no idea where he is,” Ron said. “How’s she planning on finding him?”

“I suppose it’s a little like our Horcrux hunt,” Hermione said tentatively. “We don’t know, but we’re hoping we’ll find what we’re looking for.”

“Yeah, hoping hers takes a bit less time than out epic quest,” Ron grumbled.

Harry frowned, but he supposed he couldn’t really argue Ron’s point. They were becoming pretty aimless.

“Gerta’s boat came to rest at last outside of a cottage surrounded by a stone wall and a lovely garden,” Hermione said quickly, obviously hoping Harry hadn’t heard Ron’s comment, though he certainly had. “A little old woman came out and asked her what she was doing there, and Gerta told her all about Kai and asked if she had seen him. ‘No,’ the old woman replied, ‘but if you come inside, I’ll give you dinner before you go on your way.’”

“She needs to run, right now,” Ron said, looking panicked.
“Why?” Hermione asked.

“A cottage in the middle of nowhere with an old woman in it who wants to give her dinner? This is the witch from that creepy story that’s put me off gingerbread for life, isn’t it?” Ron asked.

“Bit of a leap there, mate,” Harry said, trying not to sound a little sour after Ron’s earlier remark.

“Actually, it’s not too far off in some respects,” Hermione said, looking impressed. “The old woman is indeed a witch, though usually she’s referred to as an enchantress or sorceress in the translations.”

“See?” Ron said, smiling smugly.

“But she doesn’t want to harm Gerta, at least not like that,” Hermione added. “She did give Gerta dinner, including a bowl full of the most wonderfully delicious cherries. Then she sat with her by the fire and brushed her hair, and each time the brush passed through her golden tresses, it seemed to take away a little more of her memory until soon Gerta forgot all about Kai and why she was there but was perfectly content to live with the old woman as her granddaughter.”

“Memory charm,” Ron said at once. “Obvious one, there.”

“I agree that it certainly seems to have something of the flavour of some variation of a memory charm,” Hermione said, then paused. “Though of course that’s not usually how they’re done, the general effect, particularly having it center specifically on removing memories of one person and transplant a desire to live elsewhere, is entirely possible.”

She was quiet for a moment, and Harry knew she was thinking of her parents. It must have been horrible, he thought, the moments leading up to the spell when she realized they would be thinking about her for possibly the last time ever. Ron for once seemed to have realized what was happening as well, and he gave her a sad smile.

“Yeah,” he said, looking wistful. “I think I’d give up my memories of Percy at any rate if it meant a big dinner like that, or even a good-sized bowl of cherries.”

Ron, Harry thought, was occasionally deeply dim. However, Hermione’s expression of disbelief went unnoticed by Ron, and she continued on.

“Gerta went to sleep, and the witch went outside into her garden. It was a truly wonderful place with almost every kind of flower imaginable, but the witch knew Gerta and Kai had loved roses very much, and this caused her worry. She cast a spell that made the roses sink under the earth so that they couldn’t remind her of Kai,” Hermione said.

“Huh,” Harry said. “You know, I think there’s two spells going on here.”

“What do you mean?” Ron asked.

“It’s not just a memory charm. Remember the bit where she’s brushing the girl’s hair? What if she was gathering memories like in a Pensieve?” Harry said.

“Oh!” Hermione said, looking excited again. “Yes, it really could be! She could be extracting the memories like Dumbledore showed you in those vials last year, and then once they’re clinging to the brush, she removes Gerta’s ability to remember they were ever there! That really would work perfectly, and it would explain how she knew about the connection to the roses, which seems unlikely to have come up in casual conversation.”

“I suppose so,” Ron said grudgingly. “So she sank the roses because they might trigger her memory.
What’s she planning on doing? Keeping the kid from ever seeing a rose again?

“Well, actually, yes,” Hermione said. “While she doesn’t harm Gerta, she does basically keep her in the cottage and the garden. Apparently the witch was really lonely and wanted to have someone about for company.”

“Golly, I can’t possibly imagine why she’s so alone if her idea of company is kidnap and memory modification,” Ron said sarcastically.

“To be fair, she was probably ostracized from the rest of the people because she was a witch to begin with, so that most likely was very isolating, but still, it’s not a healthy friendship by any definition,” Hermione said in agreement.

“Sound pretty boring, too, just wandering around a cottage and the garden,” Harry said.

“You’d think so, but the flowers were all enchanted to tell stories,” Hermione said.

“Kind of like a library that you don’t have to actually read,” Ron said.

“Sort of, yes,” Hermione said. “It’s never really clear if Gerta can read, but she’s entertained by all the different stories the flowers tell, so she was happy, though she could never quite shake the feeling that she was forgetting something.”

“Yeah, like her entire life,” Ron said.

“One day, the witch went into town, but she left her hat at home. Gerta found it, and painted on the straw bonnet were all sorts of flowers, including great scarlet ones that seemed the most beautiful of all,” Hermione said.

“Wild guess. They were roses?” Harry asked.

“Indeed they were, and Gerta stared at them until suddenly they brought back all her memories of her life before and of Kai and her search for him, and she ran out of the house and into the garden,” Hermione said.

“Why the garden?” Ron asked. “Why not just out the front door?”

“Well, she’d had an idea,” Hermione said. “She went to the garden, weeping, and her tears woke up the buried rosebushes which at once sprang from the ground. She asked them if they had seen Kai, and the roses said that no, they had been in the dirt where dead people are, and Kai was not there, so he must still be alive.”

Harry and Ron exchanged looks.

“The roses told her that, did they?” Ron asked. “Talking roses?”

“Remember, the garden was enchanted to tell Gerta stories whenever she asked, so it’s not really such a stretch,” Hermione explained.

“Yeah, but, because the witch sank them underground they automatically knew everybody who was dead?” Ron asked.

“In this story, yes, that’s exactly the case,” Hermione said defiantly.

“All right,” Ron said. “What’s her next move? Asking the daffodils?”
“No,” Hermione said, “the tiger-lily.”

“Wait, that was supposed to be a joke,” Ron said, looking surprised.

“But she did. She went to each of the flowers and asked them in turn if they had any news about Kai, and each one told her a story in turn. The tiger-lily’s was about a woman who burned herself to death on her husband’s funeral pyre.”

“Oh, that’s charming,” Ron said, grimacing.

“And then the convolvulus told a story about a maiden in a castle waiting for her knight to return,” Hermione continued, “and the snowdrops told a story about three children sitting on a swing and blowing bubbles with a bubble pipe, and the hyacinths told a story about three beautiful sisters who all died, and the ranunculus went on about a beautiful garden by a cottage where a grandmother had just visited with her granddaughter and was already missing her.”

“They do natter on, don’t they,” Harry said.

“A bit,” Hermione said.

“What’s a convolvus and a ranunculus, anyway?” Ron said.

“Flowers,” Hermione provided helpfully.

“I got that bit, thanks,” Ron said sarcastically. “I mean what do they look like. I know what a snowdrop and a hyacinth and a tiger-lily are, but why throw in the other ones? Why not go with, I don’t know, violets or carnations or tulips of flutterby-bushes or something more common?”

“Muggles don’t actually have flutterby-bushes,” Hermione said. “They have butterfly bushes, though, which are a bit the same except they don’t, well, flutter.”

“Do they fly, then?” Ron asked, looking confused.

“No,” Hermione said with a barely tolerant sigh. “Muggles are not in possession of flying shrubbery.”

“Well, do you get butter from them at least?” Ron asked.

“They draw butterflies, Ronald,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” he said, looking appeased. “Well, I guess that does make some sense.”

“As for convolvulus and ranunculus, convolvulus means ‘bonds’ in the language of flowers, and it’s basically a morning glory. Since that one was talking about the return of the lady’s knight, it might be a reference to a bond between them,” Hermione explained. “Ranunculus means ‘ingratitude,’ which might be a reference to the possible ingratitude of the granddaughter leaving her grandmother. There are a lot of different flowers in that family, but the one I always think of when I hear the story is a buttercup.”

“What is it with you lot and butter?” Ron asked. “Also, how do you know the meaning of all these flowers off the top of your head?”

Hermione shrugged. “When I get bored, I read. We’ve been cooped up for so long now, and I’m so sick of looking at snow that the other day I pulled out a flower dictionary to pass the time.”

Harry?

“I sleep,” Harry said.

“See, you’re not supposed to do constructive things when you’re bored,” Ron said. “That defeats the whole purpose of being bored, which is obviously to do nothing.”

“Or to lapse into unconsciousness,” Harry agreed.

“So, anyway, the talkative flowers tell Gerta nothing useful at all, which rather begs the question of why they’re in here to begin with,” Ron said.

“All critics think that each of the flower stories was a fragment of a full fledged story that Andersen wanted to write, but he never got past the snippets we get in ‘The Snow Queen,’” Hermione said.

“Yeah, okay, but none of them knew about Kai, right? So why did she keep up with it after the first couple that I can barely even pronounce when it’s obvious they didn’t know anything?” Ron asked.

“Because Anderson wanted to put them in there, I suppose,” Hermione said. “Gerta apparently thought one of them might know something, and the narcissus was the last, but despite saying it had something very important to say, it only told a story about a maiden whose clothes were so spotlessly white that they resembled a narcissus.”

“Is it my imagination or did that just become an advert for laundry powder?” Ron asked.

“It does sound a bit like it,” Hermione admitted.

“Personally, I was thinking of Malfoy’s mum,” Harry said.

Ron did an immediate and highly accurate imitation of Narcissa Malfoy’s condescending sneer that made Harry and Hermione fall into fits of giggles.

“Considering the flower’s meaning is ‘egotism,’ I’d say whoever named her did a first rate job,” Hermione said. “However, getting back to the story, Gerta came to the conclusion that none of the flowers could help her, so she ran out of the garden gate and into the forest, where she was surprised to see autumn had arrived, for the garden was always a mix of summer and spring.”

“What about the witch?” Harry asked.

“Actually, we don’t ever see her again. I suppose Gerta wasn’t too chuffed about being all but held captive like that,” Hermione said.

“Still, as these stories go for witches, at least she didn’t try to kill anyone or turn them into swans or lock her in a tower. Okay, the last one is a bit close, I grant you. Hey, maybe that’s what happened to her! Maybe the witch was so upset when she came home to find Gerta gone that she decided to build a tower for the next one, and that’s how we get Rampo,” Ron said.

“Aside from the fact the story of ‘Rapunzel’ is a lot older than ‘The Snow Queen,’ I’d say you actually have quite an interesting premise there,” Hermione said. “Perhaps at any rate there are enough examples to suggest that the trope of elderly witches imprisoning young girls in various ways is common enough to be some sort of symbolic attempt to regain youth and beauty by refusing to relinquish it in the form of their surrogate daughters.”

“Or they’re just lonely,” Ron said. “Six of one.”
“Half a dozen of the other,” Hermione finished for him. “After Gerta realized how much time had passed, she ran through the forest for as long as she could. She had no food or water with her, and having thrown her pretty red shoes into the river, she was barefoot as well.”

“Good old Andersen,” Ron said. “Knew he wouldn’t let me down on the foot thing.”

“After a while, she stopped to rest beneath a tree, and who should stop before her but a great black raven, who cawed down at her most politely and asked why she was all alone in the world,” Hermione said.

“Another talking animal,” Ron said with a sigh. “Muggles do realize animals don’t actually talk, right?”

“On this one, you’re a bit wrong, actually,” Hermione said. “Ravens actually can be trained to talk, rather like parrots. Granted, they don’t understand what they are saying at all, but they can speak a bit.”

“But that’s not what this raven is doing though, right?” Ron asked.

“Well, no, this raven is actually talking with a full sense of what the words mean,” Hermione said.

“Okay, so it’s barmy, but that’s fairly normal with these things,” Ron said. “So does Gerta talk to the freak of nature?”

“She did indeed, thinking that in his comings and going over the wide countryside, he might have spotted Kai,” Hermione said.

“Sensible,” Harry said, nodding his approval.

“Yes, perfectly sensible to ask the talking raven to direct her towards her missing friend,” Ron said with a smirk.

“Well, sensible to a point, I suppose,” Harry said with a shrug. “Had he?”

“The raven said he thought he might have,” Hermione said, “and Gerta was so thrilled she hugged and kissed him in joy.”

“Birds don’t really seem all that huggable to me,” Ron said. “You were around Fawkes, Harry. Did he seem the type to enjoy cuddling?”

“Not especially,” Harry said, “though he was pretty affectionate, I suppose. I miss him.”

“Yes, we could do with a bit of phoenix song,” Hermione said glumly. “In any case, the raven told Gerta that he had a sweetheart who was a tame raven who lived in a castle not far away.”

“Not the Tower of London by any chance?” Harry asked with a grin.

“What tower?” Ron asked.

“Oh, it’s an old prison in the middle of London, and there’s a legend that says if the ravens ever leave the tower, the Crown will fall and Britain with it,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, one of my old teachers at the Muggle school I went to before Hogwarts told us that story,” Harry said.

“Seems a flimsy thing to pin an empire on: a bunch of ruddy birds not flying away,” Ron said. “You
lot really are odd.”

“But no, it’s not the Tower, just a typical castle where the tame raven lives. There was a princess there, said the raven, who was so clever that she read every newspaper in all the world and then forgot them all again,” Hermione said.

“Odd way of measuring intelligence,” Harry said, “forgetting everything you learned.”

“By that standard, I’m brilliant at Potions,” Ron said.

“Finally, she was quite bored with being a princess, and she decided she would marry. However, she said she would only marry someone who spoke clearly and sensibly in her presence. She wanted someone who didn’t just look the part of being a king, but who could really be one,” Hermione said.

“As plans for wedded bliss go in these things, that’s actually far from the worst one I’ve heard,” Ron said.

“An advertisement went out in all the newspapers explaining the princess’s plan,” Hermione said.

“This kid’s got a thing for newspapers,” Ron said with grin.

“The article, which was headed by her initials and surrounded in a border of little hearts, said that all eligible young men who wished to be considered for marriage with her should stand outside the palace and wait to be called in to speak with her,” Hermione said.

“Bit twee, that, the hearts and such,” Ron said. “Reminds me of how you decorated your second year class schedule for Lockhart’s classes.”

Harry snorted in laughter as Hermione turned bright red.

“I was twelve years old,” she said with dignity. “I believe everyone is entitled to be a bit saccharine over someone they fancy at least once. Isn’t that so, Won-Won?”

Now it was Ron’s turn to cringe, though Harry was still immensely enjoying himself.

“As I was saying,” Hermione continued, “the men came from miles around, and soon there was a line around the castle so long that they waited for three days. During that time, no food or water was given to them, though the cleverest had thought to bring their own, and that brought down the number a bit.”

“Well, it would weed out a few of the biggest idiots, I suppose,” Harry said.

“What about the ones who got in?” Ron asked.

“They had to go one by one up a flight of immense white marble stairs, into a great room lined with soldiers and courtiers and ladies in waiting, all in the finest clothes of gold and silver shoes, staring at the next suitor imperiously. At last he would reach the elaborate and rich throne room where the princess sat upon a single pearl the size of a spinning wheel,” Hermione said.

“That does not sound comfortable,” Ron said. “Impressive, though. Then what?”

“The princess would say good morning or good afternoon or good evening to him and listen to how he responded. Every one of her suitors had been struck dumb by the elegance and majesty of the castle, and they could only mutter back the same words at best, and most only made some odd wheezing noises, as often as not running from the room in fright. Once outside, they found they
could speak freely again, but none of them met the princess’s expectations,” Hermione said.

“It’s a bit like being called into McGonagall’s office,” Ron said. “I feel sorry for the poor blighters. It’s not easy to find your tongue in a situation like that.”

“That was just the point,” Hermione said. “If they were so overwhelmed just by the palace, they’d never be able to manage being king there.”

“Again, there’s a bit of sense in there someplace,” Ron admitted. “Maybe the princess does have a brain. But where does Kai come in?”

“The raven said that there was one boy who arrived on the third day after almost everyone had given up. He had shining eyes like Gerta’s, and beautiful hair, and he behaved beautifully and was brave and very clever. At once, Gerta said, ‘Oh, it must be Kai! It sounds just like him!’” Hermione said.

“Wasn’t Kai acting rather like a berk before he ran away?” Ron asked.

“Well, yes,” Hermione said. “So ‘beautifully behaved’ doesn’t really seem to fit,” he said.

“We’ll see,” Hermione said. “He had walked straight up to the castle with a knapsack on his back, or so the raven said, though Gerta corrected him and said that it must have been his little sled that he was last seen with. The raven admitted he had not seen him closely, so that could well be.”

“It’s not him,” Ron said to Harry without a shred of doubt.

“No,” Harry agreed, “but keep going anyway.”

“It’s a rather heavy-handed bit of foreshadowing, I admit,” Hermione said, “but the raven said the boy walked right up the steps, addressing the soldiers and courtiers and all the others quite politely and without the slightest sign of fear, and when he was admitted to the throne room, he greeted the princess heartily and they talked together for quite a while. She found herself impressed by him, so they were wed, and now they lived together in the castle and ruled wisely and well.”

“Is it just me or did Anderson write yet another story inside of this story?” Ron asked.

“It’s not just you,” Hermione said. “This really is one of his more complicated ones, and that’s saying something. Little Gerta said she must go to the palace and see Kai and tell him how much he was missed, but the raven said he would have to speak to his sweetheart to see if it could be possible since her clothes were all ragged and she had no shoes on her feet. He flew off to see what could be done.”

“This raven is a good fellow to know,” Harry said.

“Not long after, he returned with a soft roll in his beak, a present to Gerta from his lady friend. He had told her all about Gerta’s troubles, and she was so moved she sent her food from the kitchens and assured her she would find a way to let her in by the back staircase used by the servants,” Hermione said.

“Wish we had a bread-fetching raven,” Ron said sulkily. “That’d be handy.”

“I think St. Paul the Hermit got the last one of those,” Hermione said with a grin.

“Huh?” Ron asked.
“There’s a legend that there was a raven that used to deliver bread every day to a hermit who lived in the desert,” Hermione said, “rather like an owl does with letters and parcels.”

“Yeah, but owls make sense,” Ron said with a wave of his hand.

“I really was intending to bring Pig, by the way,” Hermione said apologetically, “but I never thought to put him in my bag for the wedding. Maybe he might have been useful.”

“Nah,” Ron said, waving a hand dismissively. “It’s probably for the best. He’d just spend his time zooming around the tent and coughing up pellets, probably hooting like mad if Death Eaters came close. Anyway, did Gerta go to the castle?”

“Yes, and the lady raven was waiting at the back door. It was the middle of the night now, and Gerta was very nervous as she was guided down the corridors by the two ravens in the dark. Suddenly, she had the feelings she was being followed, and she turned around to see shimmering images of lords and ladies and horses and great dogs running swiftly towards her, then passing her. ‘Those are only dreams, going to fetch the great folk to a night of hunting,’ the raven said,” Hermione explained.

“Ghosts?” Ron said, looking at Harry.

“Sounds like it,” Harry agreed. “Actually, it almost sounds like the Headless Hunt. Nobody’s head rolled off in all this, did it?”

“No,” Hermione said, “but it is the sort of thing someone from the magical world might tell a Muggle to keep them from being too frightened of something obviously magical. When they finally got to the royal bedchamber, Gerta’s heart was beating fit to burst. In the center of the room from the floor to the ceiling stood a great replica of a palm tree, and swinging from it were two beds made to look like lilies. One was white, and upon it the princess lay, and the other, which was red, was the resting place of her husband.”

“That is one weird decorating scheme,” Ron said. “Lilies hanging off a giant palm tree? That wasn’t in any copy of Mum’s *Witch Weekly* as style of the moment.”

“I think it’s meant to represent the innocence of the characters, but I admit, it’s odd and makes no botanical sense at all,” Hermione said. “Professor Sprout would go into fits.”

“So Gerta sees the prince, and?” Ron prompted her.

“And she thinks it’s Kai for a split second, but when she gasps and he wakes up, she realizes at once that it isn’t,” Hermione said.

“Called it,” Ron said, nodding to Harry.

“Gerta began to cry, and the prince and princess comforted her and asked her to explain her story, and she told them everything,” Hermione said.

“You know, that’s a remarkably compassionate response to being roused out of a sound sleep by someone you’ve never met before leaning over you while looking for someone else,” Harry said.

“Yeah,” Ron said, “I didn’t take it that well when Sirius did it to me. Granted, he was holding a bloody great knife at the time and trying to kill somebody as opposed to, you know, looking for his childhood playmate who ran away.”

“Actually, he sort of was looking for his childhood playmate who ran away,” Harry said with a frown.
“Huh,” Ron said, then shrugged. “Okay, well, Gerta didn’t have a knife at any rate.”

“No,” Hermione said, “but the prince and princess were very kind and sympathetic towards her, and while they told the ravens they should never do anything like that again, they also offered them permanent positions as palace pets.”

“Permanent positions as palace pets?” Ron said.

“Yes,” Hermione said, “with a daily allotment of broken pastries from the kitchen.”

“Palace pets with permanent positions and pastries,” Ron said. “Were they practically peripatetically pickled with pure pleasure?”

Hermione grinned.

“Perhaps,” she said mischievously. “In any case, the prince and princess obviously didn’t know where Kai was, but they let Gerta stay with them for several days, and they said they would be content to have her live with them in the palace forever. But when at last she said she simply must continue her quest to find Kai, they gave her a beautiful dress of silk and velvet and a pair of lovely shoes as well as a coach of solid gold with the royal insignia on it and a driver and footmen and soldiers along with all sorts of food and candy, wishing her luck in her travels.”

“Blimey,” Ron said, looking impressed. “Okay, they’re a bit of alright, I guess. Generous at any rate. Also, I notice old Hans got her a pair of shoes again, obsessed thing that he is.”

“Little golden slippers,” Hermione said, “along with a coat and muff and gloves, for she was heading north and the days were growing very cold.”

“So off Gerta goes, riding away in her coach,” Harry said. “I’m guessing this doesn’t end well.”

“You’d be right,” Hermione said. “The ravens, now newly married, accompanied her in the coach, and they rode off with their whole retinue into the forest. However, it wasn’t long before they reached a wild, dangerous country filled with bands of robbers.”

“I’m guessing a solid gold coach probably wasn’t going to pass without comment,” Ron said.

“Quite,” Hermione said. “Out of nowhere, the coach and its escort were beset by an ambush. The ravens flew away, but the driver, footmen, and soldiers were all killed.”

“Whoa, okay, wasn’t quite expecting that much violence all at once,” Ron said, looking surprised.

“It’s a bit of a digression in tone from the rest of the text, I grant you, but the concept of armed marauders overtaking a royal coach for the purposes of kidnap and theft actually wouldn’t have been too far-fetched in some of the more remote areas of Europe during the setting of the story,” Hermione said.

“Did you actually use the word ‘marauders’ in a sentence that didn’t involve Harry’s dad and friends?” Ron asked.

“I suppose so,” Hermione said. “It’s an appropriate term under the circumstances, though I admit the connotation of the word is a bit charged in our personal environment, so it may not have been the best choice in retrospect.”

Ron just stared her for a moment before blurting out, “Did you actually read the entire dictionary at some point?”
Hermione blinked.

“What an odd thing to ask,” she said, and Harry noticed that was not a denial. “The robbers pulled Gerta from the coach believing they had taken the princess and intending to hold her for ransom, but they were disappointed when they realized she was only dressed finely but not the princess at all. At once they decided the best thing to do would be to kill her, but there was another little girl, a robber’s daughter, and she threw a fit and carried on, biting her mother and screaming loudly, saying she wanted to have someone to play with, and she made such a fuss that the robbers gave in and made a present of Gerta to her.”

“Well, that’s… I want to use the word ‘lucky,’ but I’m not quite sure about that,” Harry said.

“Yeah, it’s nice to get saved and all, but she seems a bit frightening,” Ron said.

“The robbers rode off with the coach, and the robber girl got in beside Gerta. ‘You shall give me your coat and dress and muff and shoes, and you shall sleep beside me at night and we shall play together, and so long as I am not displeased with you, no one will kill you,’ the girl said,” Hermione explained.

“Forget the ‘a bit.’ She’s plain terrifying,” Ron said, his mouth dropping open. “And what’s with her taking her clothes and making her sleep next to her?”

“Oh, it probably isn’t supposed to be read as a lesbian metaphor directly, though the subconscious subtext is difficult to ignore. Siblings and friends often slept in the same bed back then, and the robber girl gives Gerta another set of clothing in place of the dress and things because of course they were all highly valuable, and whatever else she is, she’s a robber after all,” Hermione said.

“Okay,” Ron said, still looking distinctly uncomfortable. “Well, fine. So what happens then?”

“Eventually the carriage pulled up to the destroyed home the gang used as a base, and the robber girl pulled Gerta toward her own bed where she introduced her to her pets,” Hermione said.

“Now that’s a bit more friendly,” Ron said, smiling. “Pajama party and puppies.”

“She had several dozen pigeons that roosted on the walls, which were sleeping when they came in, but she grabbed several of them and shook them fiercely because she liked to see them flap their wings. ‘Kiss it!’ she ordered Gerta, who complied by kissing the pigeons,” Hermione said.

“Okay, less like a pajama party, more like a scene out of St. Mungo’s closed ward,” Harry said. “Those things are basically just filthy flying rats.”

“That remains to be seen. She also had a reindeer named Bac who wore a copper ring around his neck, and him she loved most of all,” Hermione said.

“A pet reindeer? How far north are they?” Ron asked.

“A fair way,” Hermione said.

“It doesn’t fly by any chance, does it?” Ron asked.

“No, it’s not one of Father Christmas’s reindeer,” Hermione said, “though the robber girl did say they had to tether him with a rope so we wouldn’t escape. She would play with him every night by tickling his neck with her knife, which frightened him and made her laugh.”

Ron and Harry stared at each other in silence for a while.
“Anybody else picturing Bellatrix as a kid?” Ron asked, voice trembling a little.

“Considering the robber girl is described as having dark hair and eyes, it’s not that far from an accurate representation, perhaps,” Hermione said with a shrug. “Still, she had Gerta explain her story, and she listened closely to her as she talked of Kai and her struggles and her desire to find her friend. When Gerta had finished, she nodded and said that if she was telling the truth, she would help her.”

“I’m not sure I’m thrilled with that prospect,” Ron said.

“Just at that moment, two of the pigeons cooed loudly that they had seen little Kai in their wanderings,” Hermione said.

“There’s a bit of luck,” Harry said.

“I hope they turn out to be a bit more accurate than the raven,” Ron chimed in.

“They saw Kai being carried away in the sleigh of the Snow Queen, who had stopped and blown on the nest full of pigeons that they had been born in, and all but those two had died from the bitter cold of her breath,” Hermione said.

“Oh, now I feel a bit bad about the whole filthy-flying-rats comment,” Harry said. “That’s just cruel.”

“It terrified little Gerta too, of course,” Hermione said. “The pigeons said they believed she had gone to Lapland, where it is always cold, and the reindeer, who came from there, said that he too had heard of the Snow Queen and believed her palace was near the North Pole on the island of Spitzbergen, but her summer home was in Lapland.”

“So the reindeer did come from the North Pole!” Ron said triumphantly.

“Well, not exactly. Spitzbergen, or Spitsbergen as it’s spelled now, is a real island that’s north of Norway, and a lot of it is made up of national parks now,” Hermione said. “In reality it’s still quite a ways to the North Pole from there, though.”

“Whatever,” Ron said. “I still think ‘On Dasher, on Dancer, on Bac, on Blitzen,’ has a nice ring to it.”

“Clement Moore?” Hermione said, looking at him curiously. “You’ve been reading Muggle Christmas poetry?”

“Oh, come on, everybody knows that one,” Ron said waving his hand. “Even the Malfoys probably made an exception for it.”

“It’s weird the things that cross cultures,” Harry said. “When did you stop believing in Father Christmas, anyway?”

“Stop believing?” Ron said, looking confused. “I don’t get it. He’s a Gryffindor. Muggleborn, if I remember correctly. Right?”

“Yes, he is,” Hermione said, nodding and taking in Harry’s stunned expression. “Oh, I was more than a little surprised, too.”

“Seriously?” Harry asked, eyes enormous.
“Apparently so,” Hermione said. “He doesn’t get out much anymore, though, as he’s getting on a bit, although I think he carried on correspondence with Dumbledore. Anyway, back to the story. The robber girl said she would sleep on the idea to see what she could plan, and that if Gerta woke her or annoyed her, there would be no need to plan for she always slept with her knife in case of emergencies and she would kill Gerta herself before anyone else could.”

Ron looked thoughtful for a moment.

“I’m feeling oddly sorry for the robber girl,” he said slowly.

“You did catch that she just threatened to knife Gerta,” Harry said with a laugh.

“Yeah, but still, can’t really be much of a happy life, can it? Sleeping with a knife to stay safe as a kid, living with a gang that kills people for fun. When she said she wanted Gerta for a playmate, she really wasn’t kidding, was she? She sounds lonely,” he said, looking uncomfortable.

“She also sounds homicidal and slightly psychopathic,” Harry said, “but yeah, probably a bit lonely as well. Not a great childhood, at any rate.”

“I suppose so,” Hermione said, considering. “I’d never really considered her that way before. Well, the next morning, Gerta woke to the robber girl saying she had a plan. The girl’s mother, who was an ugly old creature who also had a remarkably long beard that made her look like a goat, always started to drink about mid-morning and passed out soon after, so Gerta could make her escape then.”

“Yow,” Ron said. “This child really does have problems.”

“Yes, apparently,” Hermione said. “She said she would let Gerta ride on Bac, who would carry her back to Lapland where he had originally come from. She tied Gerta on so she wouldn’t fall off, and gave her a pair of her mother’s old gloves and long woolen leggings, though the robber girl kept the muff because it was pretty. Then she gave her some food for the journey and sent her on her way.”

“So she loses her friend and the pet reindeer because she did the right thing and helped the girl escape,” Ron said. “Okay, now I’m sad.”

“Well, so was Gerta, for she cried when she left, and it made the robber girl stamp her feet and say that she really should be happy instead, so she was alright with the situation, I suppose,” Hermione said, “but yes, it is a remarkably selfless thing to do, well, except for the muff. In any case, the reindeer took off at top speed, heading towards the northern lights to guide him home.”

“That’s a nice little image,” Harry said.

“Weirdly, in the story it says the lights made a noise like someone sneezing in order to call him onward, which I always found rather odd,” Hermione said.

“Sneezing northern lights,” Ron said, raising his eyebrow. “What was this Anderson fellow on again?”

“Oh, probably some variation of opium like half the people in the 1800s,” Hermione said. “Anyway, the reindeer ran onwards for days, and the food the robber girl had given Gerta had completely run out before at last they came to the home of a Lapland woman, which was a little mound that barely poked above the turf for it was underground.”

“Why would they live underground?” Ron asked.

“It’s warmer that way,” Hermione said.
“Then why isn’t the Slytherin Common Room toasty?” Ron asked. “When Harry and I went there second year, it was damp and cold.”

“Yes, well, I think the Slytherin dormitory is actually under the lake, which might explain it,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said. “I suppose that makes sense.”

“Gerta had gone unconscious by this time, and the reindeer told the Lapland woman his story first, which he considered far more important, and then added Gerta’s as an afterthought. Immediately, the woman took both the reindeer and the girl into her home, letting them warm up and giving them something to eat,” Hermione said.

“Wait, what was the reindeer’s story?” Ron asked.

“I suppose about his capture by the robbers and being the girl’s pet, then his escape with Gerta and running for several days to bring them their,” Hermione said.

“That beats talking flowers and ravens, memory erasure, a friend kidnapped by the Snow Queen, breaking and entering a castle, and an attack on an armed carriage by a bunch of thieves who killed a load of people?” Ron asked incredulously.

“Everyone tends to think their own story is the most important, I suppose,” Hermione said.

“Maybe,” Harry said, looking wistfully at the window in the tent and wondering if Ginny and Neville and Luna and the others at Hogwarts were having a more productive time of it than they were.

“They stayed with the Lapland woman only very briefly, for they still had far to go, and she gave them a message to give to a woman in Finland, which she wrote on the skin of a fish,” Hermione said.

“Nice stationery,” Ron said. “Still, she’s a decent sort. Mum would like her.”

“Once again, the reindeer and Gerta rode off together until they came to the hut of the Finnish woman, who took them in when she read the note on the fish skin, which she then ate,” Hermione said.

“I suppose that’s environmentally responsible, at any rate,” Harry said with a grimace.

“The reindeer begged the woman to help them, for she had the gift of being able to tie up the wind for sailors so that they might go as they pleased, even unleashing a hurricane if need be, but the woman said that was unnecessary,” Hermione said.

“Wait, is she a witch?” Ron asked.

“She very well might be, though it seems she specializes in some form of climate-based magic that Hogwarts has never really covered,” Hermione said. “It wasn’t an unheard of charm then, though, for women to try to control the wind by tying a series of knots to keep it from blowing or untying them to create a greater wind. I’m not really sure if the theory behind it is sound, and it may well be just a folk belief rather than genuine magic, but it’s fairly well documented.”

“Tying knots keeps the wind from blowing?” Ron said. “Seems a bit thin on reality.”

“While we point sticks at things instead and think nothing of it,” Hermione said.
“Well, yeah,” Ron said as though this were the most obvious thing in the world. “That’s only logical.”

“If you say so,” Hermione said. “At any rate, the Finnish woman said that Gerta already had power of her own, and she would need every bit of it because Kai was perfectly happy where he was in large part due to a splinter of glass in his eye and in his heart, which would need to be removed before he would consent to go home.”

“I almost forgot about that bit,” Ron said. “How’d she know that?”

“She just knew,” Hermione said. “She said that the Snow Queen’s gardens began only two miles away and that there was no time to lose. The reindeer must set Gerta down by the bushes with red berries that bordered the queen’s domain and wait there for her. At once, she put Gerta on the reindeer’s back and he ran at once, though she had left behind her gloves and her shoes.”

“Is this the second or the third time in this story the poor kid winds up shoeless?” Ron asked.

“I believe it’s the third,” Hermione said, “and she did suffer quite horribly from the bitter ice and snow with her bare feet.”

“Does anyone else suddenly feel like putting on an extra pair of socks?” Harry asked.

Ron and Hermione both raised their hands in agreement.

“By now, they had reached the bushes, and Gerta knew that she must go on alone,” Hermione said.

“Why?” Ron asked.

“I don’t know. That’s just the way these things are done, I suppose, and the poor reindeer really had done his bit already. Gerta saw the Snow Queen’s enormous palace far in the distance and began to walk towards it, barefoot in the freezing snow, when suddenly she was surrounded by enormous snowflakes that instead of falling from the sky swooped towards her, glowing like the aurora borealis but terrifyingly powerful.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Ron said. “The Snow Queen has attack-snowflakes.”

“Wonderful, now I’m thinking of dear old Fluffy,” Harry said.

“Whatever happened to him, anyway?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know, though knowing Hagrid he’s probably romping playfully somewhere while causing massive amounts of mayhem,” Hermione said.

“Forbidden Forest is my guess,” Harry said. “He’d fit right in with the skrewts.”

“Just as long as they don’t interbreed,” Ron said with a shudder. “Giant, three headed, stinging, flaming crabs that can wag their tails? Hagrid would have a dozen as pets.”

Hermione and Harry looked at each other in horror as they realized Ron was probably completely right.

“Well, going back to something marginally less likely to give me nightmares for the next three years running, the monstrous snowflakes began to take on the forms of animals as they came closer to Gerta: gigantic porcupines, hideous interwoven snakes, and bears with their fur standing all on end,” Hermione said.
“Wait, a bunch of glowing white animals are attacking her?” Harry said.

“Essentially, though they’re made of snow,” Hermione said.

“No, they’re not, though they might look like it,” Harry said seriously. “They’re patronuses.”

Hermione’s eyes grew wide at that while Ron nodded thoughtfully.

“It sure sounds like a bunch of them, but if only the Snow Queen is there, who’s making them all?” Ron asked. “Hey, is it possible for someone to conjure more than one patronus?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “Usually one’s enough to get just about any job done. Have you ever heard of it happening, Hermione?”

“No,” Hermione said, “but I suppose theoretically speaking if a person were able to center on more than one happy memory at a time, it might be possible, but it would take an extremely strong wizard. Even Merlin’s recorded as having only one patronus.”

“But if this Snow Queen is as strong as the story says, then maybe it is possible?” Ron asked.

“Maybe,” Hermione said. “Oh, now this is going to bother me! I wish I’d thought to bring Wulfric Murkington III’s Assessment of Patronus-Based Magic in Australia. He might mention something in the appendices, though they are a bit wordy even for my taste. Still, I probably could have gotten it into my bag if I’d only rearranged the medical supplies, but I was planning to do that the day after the wedding.”

“Hermione, I’m disappointed in you. How could you possibly miss packing good old Forkington?” Ron said, rolling his eyes.

“Murkington,” she corrected him automatically.

“Whatever,” Ron said, “I doubt it’s going to be that crucial to the fate of the world. So how does the Muggle girl surrounded by angry patronuses – wait, is it patroni?”

“Technically both are correct,” Hermione said.

“Okay, how does she escape? Or considering this is Anderson, does she not and get eaten starting with her sore feet?” Ron asked.

“The story says that she said the Lord’s Prayer, and when the steam came out of her mouth, it formed itself into angels armed with spears and lances who defeated the snow animals,” Hermione said.

“So… she conjured multiple patronuses too,” Ron said. “Can a Muggle do that?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said. “I’d say no, but then perhaps Gerta is actually a Muggleborn witch. If that’s the case, small children have been known to perform automatic magic under certain circumstances, including peril to life and limb, so it’s not entirely without precedent.”

“Like when Neville got dropped out the second floor window as a tyke and bounced away unhurt,” Ron said. “That kid’s family really does have issues.”

“Do you think so?” Hermione said sarcastically, wrinkling her nose in dislike.

“His grandmother might be better intentioned than the Dursleys, but if it weren’t for magic, I’m guessing they’d get along together pretty well,” Harry said. “She is one intimidating witch.”
“Or something that sounds extremely similar to that,” Ron muttered under his breath. Harry was grateful that Hermione feigned deafness.

“Well, you might also like to know that the angels patted Gerta’s hands and feet so that they became less cold,” Hermione said.

“About time,” Ron said, folding his arms indignantly.

“Then she ran towards the palace of the Snow Queen, which was all of ice,” Hermione said. “Meanwhile, Kai had been trying to solve a riddle.”

“All this time?” Harry asked.

“The Snow Queen had promised him the whole world and a new sled if he could solve it, but so far he could come up with nothing at all,” Hermione said.

“The whole world and a new sled?” Ron said. “If he got the whole world, wouldn’t he be legally entitled to pretty much all of the sleds in it?”

“I suppose so, but that was the wording of the agreement,” Hermione said. “Kai had indeed forgotten all about Gerta and the grandmother and his home, and everything at all before the Snow Queen. The shattered remains of the horrible mirror and worked their way deep inside his heart and his eye so that nothing he saw was pure or good anymore, except for the Snow Queen’s beauty. He played with pieces of ice to form a puzzle, and the answer to the puzzle would win him the world and the sled. The Snow Queen was not in residence at the time, for she had gone south to tip the mountaintops with snow, but if he had managed to solve the puzzle by the time she got back, he would win.”

“Wait, so if the Snow Queen wasn’t even there, who conjured the porcupines and snakes and bears and things?” Ron asked.

“Maybe it was some sort of guard alarm?” Hermione suggested. “I suppose it could be possible to trigger the spell remotely, though I admit it’s far-fetched.”

“This is really complicated,” Ron said. “Okay, so what was the kid trying to make out of the puzzle?”

“Eternity,” Hermione said.

“Uh… how?” Ron asked.

“He had to spell the word using the ice, but he couldn’t do it,” Hermione said. “He could make all sorts of other words and patterns and pictures that seemed very beautiful and important to him, but eternity was something he simply couldn’t grasp since his heart had turned to ice within him, and he had gone blue with cold though he felt nothing.”

“He’s blue?” Ron said.

“In the story, yes, he’s entirely blue and not moving at all,” Hermione said. “It isn’t really clear whether the Snow Queen is killing him or trying to turn him into some sort of creature like herself, heartless and built of ice.”

“But Gerta doesn’t let that happen,” Harry said.

“No, just then, Gerta ran into the great hall of the palace where Kai sat. The walls were made of
sheets of snow, and the windows and doors were icy wind, and the length of the hall was so great that Kai appeared only as a tiny dot on the other side. But Gerta knew him at once and ran to him, weeping for joy and calling his name,” Hermione said.

“And?” Ron and Harry said.

“And nothing,” Hermione said. “Kai just continued to stare at the ice, not moving or even looking at the girl who had traveled so far and through so much danger to save him.”

“Oh, come on!” Ron wailed. “Tell me that’s not the end of the story!”

“No, but Gerta was so hurt that she began to cry in earnest, and she wrapped her arms around him, begging him to remember,” Hermione said. “Her tears fell upon his eyes, and they washed away the splinter of mirror there, and they fell upon his chest and penetrated to his heart, removing the one that was there as well and melting the ice to flesh again.”

“This is like that turnip-head girl’s tears that cured blindness,” Ron said.

“Yes, I suppose you could draw a parallel between the healing properties of Rapunzel’s tears and Gerta’s ability to remove evil with hers,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “Granted, the first one is a slightly more pseudo-scientific explanation while Gerta is Anderson’s way of pitting faith and imagination and love against pure science and reason, so there are dissimilarities present as well, but the efficacy of emotion on suffering does seem to be an underlying theme for both tropes.”

“Oh huh,” Ron said. “Them tropes will get you every time. So what happened after Gerta couldn’t find a tissue?”

“Kai came back to himself, recognized her, and said over and over how cold and bleak it was there. She took his hand and they ran back across the hall and out of the palace, and melted into the ice on the floor behind them was the word ‘eternity,’ so Kai had won,” Hermione said.

“I think that’s probably some form of cheating, but I’ll let it pass,” Ron said.

“The two of them returned to the berry bush where the reindeer was waiting along with another reindeer, who gave them fresh milk, and they rode south again, stopping at the home of the Finnish woman, who gave them food, and the Lapland woman, who gave them new clothes and fixed Kai’s sled,” Hermione said. “The reindeer stayed in Lapland, for that had been his home before he was captured by the robber gang.”

“Did the poor kid finally get some shoes?” Ron asked.

“I’m going to assume yes,” Hermione said.

“Until Anderson has them spontaneously combust during a plague of locusts or something,” Ron said.

“Or while she’s walking over burning sand,” Harry added.

“Hey, why not both?” Ron said.

Hermione rolled her eyes but shrugged.

“Anyway, as they came to the edge of the forest, who should Gerta see but a horse that had once pulled her golden coach, and riding on it was the robber girl, who had decided to go forth and seek her fortune. They greeted each other as old friends, and the girl looked Kai up and down and asked if
he were really worth walking the whole world over to save, but Gerta only smiled and asked how the prince and princess were,” Hermione said.

“Tactful,” Ron said.

“It turned out that they had gone abroad, and the raven had since died and his wife was now a widow and wore a black crepe band on her leg in mourning,” Hermione said.

“That’s pointlessly depressing,” Ron said.

“You know, it really is,” Hermione said. “I never understood why that detail was in the story, but it always is. I suppose it’s to underscore the presence of death, but it doesn’t serve much of a purpose really. Anyway, the robber maid wanted to hear all about their journey, and Gerta and Kai told her all of their adventures. When they were through, the robber maid said ‘Schnipp-schnapp-schnurre-basselurre,’ and promised to visit them should she ever come to the town where they lived, then set off again.”

“Schnipp-schnapp-schnurre-basselurre?” Ron repeated in disbelief.

“It’s a nonsense phrase of some kind,” Hermione said. “Apparently it has something to do with a Danish nursery rhyme, but the robber maid uses it to sort of sum up her view of their adventures before moving on.”

“Well, at least she seems to be turning out okay,” Ron said. “Hopefully she doesn’t go kill somebody in the next town over or start raiding petrol stations or something.”

“One may hope,” Hermione said. “As Gerta and Kai traveled south, the spring began to arrive with its green leaves and flowers and birdsong, until finally they crossed the threshold of their old home at last. The grandmother stood at the stove, reading her Bible, and the clock ticked on the wall as it always had, and as they sat once more in the chairs where they had sat as children, they realized they were now grown-ups, though always children in heart. The dreary magnificence of the Snow Queen’s palace melted from their memories, replaced by the beautiful roses of their rooftop garden, and it was summer once more, within and without.”

“And that’s the end?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said, crossing her arms. “Well?”

“Okay, so when you say the memory of the palace melted away, do they not remember any of that?” Ron asked.

“I’m not sure,” Hermione said.

“Because if not, I can’t believe the grandmother isn’t going to whack them right over the head and want to know where they’ve been for the last year or so, and if they don’t have any kind of answer, they’re going to wind up in a right lot of trouble,” Ron said.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “I mean, wouldn’t the whole town think they’re dead?”

“And they just come waltzing in, hand-in-hand, mooning about over the roses and sitting in chairs that are too small, but nobody bothers to notice?” Ron said.

“Alright, well, I suppose it could just mean that the palace was replaced by the roses, which were better than anything the Snow Queen could offer,” Hermione said, casting around for an acceptable answer.
“Yes, their wonderful old deathtrap of a hanging garden on the roof,” Ron said. “I still say somebody is going to fall off that one of these days. There’s no way that would pass a building inspection.”

“It’s supposed to symbolize home and happiness and love being better than palaces and riches with no heart,” Hermione said. “I think we could all do with a bit of the former about now.”

“Well, we could sure do with less snow, at any rate,” Ron said.

“If you hadn’t noticed, the snow stopped about a quarter of an hour ago,” Hermione said.

Ron and Harry both stared at the ceiling and listened. They were stunned to realize she was right: the wind had stopped, and no pelting blasts of frozen snow were pattering on the canvas anymore.

“That really was a long one,” Ron said.

“Yes, we really should be getting to bed,” Hermione agreed. “Morning will be here soon.”

Harry nodded. It was nice to think of home, wherever that might be when all this was over, and the possibility that someday happiness would return, that they would see their friends and families again, that somewhere right now they might even be thinking of them, as well. Maybe by the time the roses were blooming in Professor Sprout’s greenhouses, this would all be nothing but a cold, bleak memory. He hoped so.

“Good night, then,” Hermione said as they all climbed into their bed, and the lights went out.

It was quiet for a moment, and Harry was nearly asleep when he heard Ron whisper something.

“You really did read the dictionary, didn’t you,” he said.

A long pause stretched out, and Harry thought Hermione might be about to throw a pillow at him when he heard her whisper back, “I was ten and it was the only book available at the time.”

Harry and Ron both laughed, and then, though Harry could never figure out how she did it, Hermione did indeed successfully chuck a pillow at both of them simultaneously before rolling over and going to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted to get this done by Christmas (which I promised at least one reader), but health issues got in the way. I hope the fact this one is enormous offsets the wait!
Ron’s constant preoccupation with the Wizarding Wireless Network was starting to drive Harry starkers. Perhaps it was because they had been out of contact with their families and friends for so long, but more and more Ron was tuning in almost compulsively, hoping that some small bit of news would show up that mentioned someone they knew. Harry understood in a way. He even found himself occasionally wondering about his aunt, uncle, and Dudley, curious how their experience being in hiding was progressing, and in spite of the miserable childhood he’d had, hoping that they hadn’t been caught. He shivered, wondering what sort of fate would await them under Voldemort’s tender mercies.

He was almost immediately distracted from that thought as Ron, for the fifteenth time that day, clicked on the radio and filled the tent with the scratchy, static-laced sounds yet again. At the moment, nothing more than one of the Weird Sisters’ songs was playing, and Ron kept the volume low.

“I don’t think we’re going to learn anything more tonight,” Harry said, trying not to let the song, a particularly loud one that seemed to involve musical saws, grate on his nerves any more than it was already doing.

“You can’t know that,” Ron said sharply. “Maybe there’ll be something important or a bulletin or something.”

“And tonight we’ll be playing a three hour uninterrupted tribute to Celestina Warbeck’s illustrious career as Britain’s favorite singing sensation of the last four decades,” came the announcer’s voice, droning in a way that suggested he was considering fleeing the recording booth before he died of boredom.

“Oh,” Ron said, looking glum. “Well, it was worth checking.”

“Yes, it was,” Hermione said, finishing the last of the dishes.

“Really?” Harry asked incredulously.

“Really,” Hermione said. “We could all do with a bit of news from the rest of the world by now. I think the isolation is starting to wear on us.”

The Horcrux, currently sitting on the kitchen table, seemed to give off a faint, sickly green glow as though it agreed and was enjoying it.

“But not tonight apparently, and my nerves won’t stand old Celestina’s warblings,” Ron admitted, turning off the wireless, though his hand rested on it wistfully.

“You know who I was just thinking about?” Hermione said, sitting down at the table with the other two.

“Considering I was honestly just wondering if the Dursleys were alright, it could be anybody,” Harry admitted.

“Seriously?” Ron said, grimacing. “Maybe we really have been out here too long.”

Hermione’s eyebrows were raised too, but she didn’t seem too shocked. “Actually, I was just wondering how Dobby is doing.”
“Good old Dobby,” Ron said, smiling in spite of himself. “I suppose he’s still at Hogwarts.”

“I’m not so sure,” Hermione said. “Since the whole school’s gone over to the Dark Arts, I don’t know that he’d want to stay there. They might not even allow him to since he’s a free elf. I doubt they want to use anyone who isn’t slave labor now.”

“That’s actually a fair point,” Harry said, frowning. “I haven’t checked the map for him lately, and even if I did, I’m not sure elves always show up on it.”

“Yeah,” Ron said. “There’s a lot about that map that I’m not sure I’ll ever understand.”

“I’ve actually tried to research how that map was made,” Hermione said, “and all I can say is that it really does seem to be one of the most extraordinary magical objects I’ve ever come across. When we see Remus next, we really should get him to explain some of the charms they used to put it together.”

“Yeah, or Wormtail,” Ron said, shuddering. “Something tells me Lupin was the brains in that bunch, though.”

“But you’re quite right, Harry,” Hermione said, switching focus. “House-elf magic is easily strong enough to conceal an elf who doesn’t want to be noticed. It’s usually part of their servitude, making themselves practically invisible so that the household appears to run itself, so it wouldn’t be a stretch at all to think they could do the same with an object meant to mark their presence.”

“So maybe he’s there, and maybe he isn’t,” Harry said. “I’m not sure which one to hope for.”

“I’m going with him being there,” Ron said. “I’d like to think the others have him around, just in case.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, thinking of Ginny, Neville, Luna, and all the others who were still at Hogwarts. “Yeah, I guess I hope he is.”

“At least he has a chance at making his own choices now,” Hermione said, sighing. “Not like all the other house-elves there.”

“Missing spew, are you?” Ron said with a grin at Harry.

“S.P.E.W.,” Hermione said, annoyance creeping into her voice as she corrected him automatically, then frowned. “I suppose when you come down to it, it is a rather unfortunate acronym, though.”

“You think?” Ron said sarcastically.

“Regardless, it’s still a serious problem, and making fun of the name isn’t helping any of those creatures toiling without pay or basic rights,” Hermione said, and Harry was quite pleased to see her spirits up a bit. It was almost like being back in Gryffindor Tower.

“Well, I wouldn’t wish Lucius Malfoy as a master on anyone. I’ll agree with you that far,” Ron said, stretching. “I feel like a story before bed. Any come to mind?”

Hermione seemed to think for a moment, then laughed.

“How about ‘The Elves and the Shoemaker’ since it’s almost what we’re talking about,” she said.

“There’s a story about elf rights?” Ron asked. “Your lot really are odd.”

“In a way, yes,” Hermione said. “It’s not a very long story, but it’s a good one. Once...”
“…upon a time,” Ron said, smiling as he settled back into his chair. “I like that bit.”

“Lovely,” Hermione said, bracing herself. “So glad the traditions of hundreds of years meet with your approval. In any case, once upon a time, there lived a very poor shoemaker and his wife in a little cottage.”

“Do they have kids they shove into a forest to starve or sell to witches for vegetables or try to get to spin straw into gold or something?” Ron asked.

“No, they don’t have any children at all,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said, looking crestfallen. “They should really get on that. Kids are dead useful for making money in some of these stories.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, though Harry noted she also blushed a bit, and continued.

“They had fallen on very hard times, and the shoemaker had only enough leather left to make a single pair of shoes. He carefully cut out the leather into the proper shape, and, exhausted from hunger, went to bed, intending to stitch the shoes together in the morning,” Hermione said.

“Why does he only have enough leather for one set of shoes?” Ron said.

“Because he’s poor, as I said,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t make sense. How’d he get into a spot where he can’t afford leather? It makes sense that shoes would be more expensive than the leather used to make them, so shouldn’t he turn a profit from each pair of shoes he sells?” Ron said reasonably.

Hermione blinked.

“Well, that does make sense,” Hermione said. “Perhaps he simply can’t find anyone to buy the shoes, or maybe the price of leather has risen sharply for some reason, like a lack of cow hides or something.”

“Lack of cow hides?” Ron said. “How do you run out of cows? Okay, maybe the cows all ran off or fell over a cliff into the ocean or had weird ugly spotty marks or something.”

“Or a bad bout of anthrax,” Hermione said. “Or perhaps the rate of hunger in the area is high enough that cows aren’t being slaughtered in the hopes that their milk will offset a dearth of crops, or there could have been a rash of thefts, or…”

“Okay, fine,” Ron said, “but I still say it’s not quite realistic.”

“The cobbler went to bed, and—“ Hermione said.

“Cobbler? What kind?” Ron asked, looking excited.

“What?” Hermione said, confused.

“Blackberry cobbler’s my favorite, but I’d not say no to apple or blueberry or peach or, well, anything at this point,” Ron said. “Except maybe gooseberry. I’m not fond of it, but even that’s possible at this point.”

“Not that sort of cobbler!” Hermione said. “For heaven’s sake, Ronald, does everything have to be about food all the time!”
Harry’s stomach chose that exact moment to growl at a truly Wagnerian volume. Harry grinned sheepishly.

“Thank you for your support,” Ron said, nodding towards Harry’s abdomen. “I think my point is made.”

“I meant cobbler as a synonym for shoemaker, obviously,” Hermione said, shaking her head. “Now if I can just get my Auntie Paulina’s raspberry cobbler out of my mind, I’ll return to the story.”

Harry was relatively sure he heard an answering call from Hermione’s stomach, and he briefly wondered if her Auntie Paulina served that cobbler warm with vanilla ice cream.

“The shoemaker awoke the next morning, ready to begin work on stitching the shoes, only to find an absolutely beautiful pair of shoes sitting on his workbench,” Hermione said.

“Was it the same ones he cut out?” Ron asked.

“The very same,” Hermione said.

“So his wife did it before he woke up?” Ron asked.

“No,” Hermione said.

“He sleep-cobbles?” Ron ventured.

“Sleep-cobbles?” Harry and Hermione said together in disbelief.

“Okay, so maybe I’m still stuck on that last story and the two kids who might have sleepwalked out of their second story garden and into the street,” Ron said. “Fine, who made the shoes?”

“Neither the shoemaker nor his wife knew, but a customer came in the shop and was so impressed with them that he paid a good deal of money for them, enough for the shoemaker to buy leather enough for two pairs of shoes this time,” Hermione said.

“See, now that’s how a business is supposed to work,” Ron said, nodding firmly. “Still, lucky coincidence they were in his size.”

“Oh, in the old days, most shoes were generally only made in one size to begin with,” Hermione said. “There wasn’t even really a right and a left. The person who wore them broke them in, and they eventually stretched to fit the foot and even became specific to which foot went in which over time.”

“So Hagrid would wear the same size shoe as Flitwick then?” Harry asked with a wince.

“I’m fairly sure in an unusual case of very large or small feet, an exception would be made,” Hermione said, “but most people probably put up with some pinching and blistering on a regular basis.”

“That’s why I prefer socks,” Ron said, looking down at his feet and watching his left big toe protruding from the gold and red striped socks his mother had knitted for him.

“In any case, the shoemaker, very curious, cut out the leather into pieces for two pairs of shoes. Then, wondering what might happen, he left the leather on the workbench once again. Sure enough, in the morning, two pairs of shoes were waiting for him,” Hermione said.

“I still say he sleep-cobbles,” Ron said to Harry.
“Once again, buyers came in, bought the shoes, and he was able to buy enough leather for four pairs of shoes this time. The exact same thing happened again when he cut out the leather and left it overnight, and soon he could buy enough leather for dozens of shoes at a time,” Hermione said.

“Shoes for everyone,” Ron said. “That’ll make old Anderson mad. He won’t have so much chance for foot-related injuries.”

“Finally, the shoemaker’s wife said that they needed to find out what was happening, and they came up with a plan. She and her husband pretended to go to bed, but they hid behind a curtain and waited to see the identity of the mysterious shoemaker,” Hermione said.

“As plans go, that’s not exactly the most complicated one ever,” Harry said.

“Sometimes the easiest plan is still the best,” Hermione said with a shrug, “and in this case, they found out what they wanted to know. In the middle of the night a pair of elves appeared in the shop, and they worked busily all night, sewing together the shoes the cobbler had cut from the leather earlier in the day. When they were all finished and the shoes were lined up in perfect, shining rows, they disappeared once again.”

“So a random duo of house-elves showed up and just decided to help out this bloke for no apparent reason?” Ron said, giving her a look of patent disbelief.

“Well, the shoemaker and his wife certainly didn’t actually own them, so I suppose we can assume the elves were in fact there voluntarily, yes,” Hermione said with a smile.

“That’s not how it works,” Ron said, shaking his head vehemently. “House-elves are inherited down a family line, and that’s the only way to get one, let alone a pair.”

“But think about it, Ronald,” Hermione said, a slight strain in her voice. “It couldn’t always have been that way! A whole race of magical beings couldn’t have been always forced to work for someone else. At some point, they had to have all been free, and then something must have happened, a spell or enchantment or something, that bound them to the families they served, but that’s not a natural state.”

“So you’re saying at some point elves might have just wandered about, doing good deeds randomly for people they decided they liked on their own, and then somebody took it into their head that they wanted to keep the elves for themselves and that’s how this all started?” Ron said.

“Very probably, yes,” Hermione said, folding her arms.

“Blimey, Harry, remind me never to do anybody a good turn for no reason,” he said.

“I don’t know,” Harry said slowly. “There’s another option there, too.”

“What’s that?” Hermione said, frowning at him.

“Maybe the elves’ master sent them to work there instead of them just popping in on a coincidence,” Harry said.

“Hmm,” Hermione said, tipping her head to one side and thinking. “Yes, that’s certainly a possibility in this case, I suppose. I did miss that. There could have been a witch or wizard who decided to help the shoemaker and his wife via their house-elves, I suppose, though the story doesn’t provide any explanation of that.”

“What were the elves wearing?” Ron asked. “That should clear it up.”
“Oh, I forgot to mention. They were naked,” Hermione said.

Harry and Ron looked at each other and grimaced.

“What?” Hermione said.

“Well, they do normally wear at least something! Not clothes of course, but at the minimum they’ve got their bits and pieces covered up,” Ron said.

“I admit there were moments I really hoped Dobby was wearing pants under that tea towel,” Harry said.

“Yeah, it’s sort of disturbing that these two don’t,” Ron said. “Their family isn’t doing right by them there.”

“They’re not exactly doing right by them by owning them either,” Hermione pointed out.

“Yeah, but… whatever,” Ron said. “Okay, so either the house-elves are sent by a particularly creepy family, or they’re nudists, but the shoemaker and his wife finally know what’s going on. Now what?”

“They discussed it the next day, and they weren’t quite sure what to do. The shoemaker still cut out dozens and dozens of shoes each night, and each morning they were beautiful shoes again, and in a little while, they had all the money they could ever need for the rest of their lives,” Hermione said.

“It’s interesting he’s still working,” Harry said suddenly.

“Yes, the elves don’t do everything for him. They work together,” Hermione said.

“Except they don’t pay them,” Ron said.

“No, they don’t, but they weren’t compelling them to be there, either, so there’s that,” Hermione said. “Eventually, the wife got the idea that they should thank the two little men by making them a nice suit of clothes each and leaving them on the work bench for them instead of the shoe parts, and they would hide again and see what happened.”

“That won’t end well,” Ron said with a knowing look.

“Oh, but it did! The elves were thrilled when they saw the clothes, and danced and sang for joy as they put them on, then disappeared and never returned again,” Hermione said.

“So they freed them,” Harry said. “Now that’s a bit sticky.”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked.

“Only someone who actually owns a house-elf can free them,” Ron said immediately, exactly as if he’d just spotted the answer on a test.

“Right, which is why I couldn’t free Dobby directly,” Harry said. “I had to trick Malfoy into giving Dobby my sock. It could be my sock, but it had to come from Malfoy if it was going to work.”

“Yes, but…” Hermione said, and a look of horror spread across her face.

“What?” Ron asked, looking terrified.

“I just realized,” Hermione said, raising a hand to her mouth. “All those elf hats I left in the Common
Room! None of them actually worked since it’s the school that owns them, so I can’t free them no matter what I do! And here I thought I was letting them go free by the dozens!

“Yeah,” Ron said, stealing a glance at Harry. “Uh… I guess that’s right.”

“But then the real mystery is what happened to all those hats?” Hermione said. “They didn’t just vanish into thin air.”

“Dobby,” Harry admitted. “He picked them up.”

“He told you that?” Hermione said sadly.

“Well, not so much volunteered the information as I saw him walking around with a hat stretched to roughly the size of a sequoia from all the others under it,” Harry said, trying to suppress a laugh at the memory.

“Oh,” Hermione said, looking hurt. “I suppose… I suppose it is rather an obvious flaw I should have realized. I must have looked ridiculous.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, as usual completely oblivious to the fact he was making things worse with his bluntness, “but then the elves were angry at you for trying to trick them into freeing themselves by hiding them, so they just stopped coming up to Gryffindor Tower to clean, except Dobby. After that it’s not like they ever saw the whole array of them. Well, other than on Dobby’s head, I suppose.”

“Wait, they were angry?” Hermione said, shocked. “Why didn’t you tell me that?”

“Would you have listened?” Ron asked.

“Yes! Or, well, maybe no. I don’t know,” she said.

“It’s not their choice to be free if you make them do it,” Harry said.

Hermione looked uncomfortable.

“I thought this was going to be a wonderful, empowering story of elf-human cooperation,” Hermione said. “Instead I find out I’m part of the ingrained system of oppression and privilege. I feel like I need a bath.”

Ron cleared his throat abruptly and turned a bit pink.

“I think it’s safe to say the shoemaker and his wife were pretty nice people, though,” Harry said. “They certainly weren’t greedy, at any rate, and they didn’t take unfair advantage of the elves. I don’t think they literally owned them. The story is probably just a Muggle-level understanding of house-elves. They know clothes free them, but they’re not sure about the details.”

“Yeah, like the idiots in these things who give their kids fairy godmothers,” Ron said. “There’s a bit of truth in there somewhere, namely that fairies exist and can be really powerful, but it’s not quite right since they forget about the fact most of them are homicidal maniacs with a sense of whimsy.”

“That’s certainly possible. In certain areas of Great Britain, Muggles really did believe in elves, or brownies as they called them,” Hermione said. “There must have been some sort of precedent for them meeting them.”

“Wait, they call them brownies, but in the story they’re elves, right?” Ron asked.

“Yes, I’m not sure why it’s always translated that way, but it is, even though it’s not technically the
proper word. The Girl Guides still use it, though, for some of the younger girls in their group,” Hermione said. “It’s to encourage them to be helpful.”

“Okay, there’s something seriously warped about telling little girls that they’re helpful if they model themselves on a feudal slave relationship model, but I’ll let it pass,” Ron said.

“Feudal slave relationship model?” Hermione said slowly, blinking.

“Your words. Common Room, about two years ago. I do actually listen on occasion,” he said.

“I guess you do,” Hermione said looking impressed.

“So what happened to the shoemaker and his wife?” he asked.

“Oh, they lived happily and comfortably for the rest of their lives,” Hermione said. “For once, it ends well for everyone.”

“That’s nice,” Ron said, yawning. “Good that the elves aren’t running about starkers anymore, either. Could catch a nasty cold that way, or wind up in jail at the very least. Maybe both.”

Harry smiled, but he kept thinking of Dobby, and even of Kreacher and Winky. Hermione might be a tad fanatical about house-elf rights, but she had a point. It wasn’t fair. He couldn’t help wondering what the elves of Hogwarts were going through right now. If Lucius Malfoy had been a hard taskmaster, he didn’t even want to think of how Snape and a coterie of Death Eaters would treat them all.

“It is a nice story,” Harry said, “but I don’t really see the upper class purebloods deciding they have enough money and just letting their elves just go free like those two did.”

“No, I suppose they won’t,” Hermione said. “That’s why someone else has to do something.”

“Can we at least finish finding the Horcruxes first?” Ron almost begged. “Then maybe a nice holiday for a year or so before we try to storm the Ministry?”

“Again,” Harry added.

“One thing at a time,” Hermione said, and Harry noticed she was smiling broadly. After all, that had sounded rather a lot like Ron was at least considering it, which was actually a lot more than Harry had thought would ever happen.

As they turned in for bed, Harry wondered what the world would be like if they did manage to defeat Voldemort for good. It wouldn’t mean everything was perfect or that people would change, or even that the old prejudices would ever go away. Still, an hour later, as he heard Ron almost silently sneak out of bed and click the radio back on, the volume so low that Harry couldn’t possibly hear the words, it would have to be better than how things are now. At least, that was what he hoped.
“That could have gone better,” Ron said as he took off his trainers and emptied the water in them out the door flap of the tent.

“I don’t know,” Hermione said, coming in next and making her way directly to the kitchen sink where she squeezed what seemed to be several gallons of rainwater out of her hair. “We didn’t get caught, and I’ve still got three tins of tuna fish in my coat pocket.”

“I didn’t say it couldn’t have gone worse,” Ron said, “just that it could have gone better.”

Harry said nothing at all. He hung his coat on the rack by the door and took off his soggy shoes. It had been raining in the south of England for a week, which was a welcome break from the earlier bout of early sleet, but the constant downpour was starting to be too much for the old tent. Drips were forming constantly, and as soon as they used a spell to fix one, another took its place. Today, they managed to infiltrate a local market and nearly made off with a rather large amount of food when a guard dog had started barking. They had wound up racing through a tangle of streets, pursued by an old store keeper who reminded them all unpleasantly of Filch, screaming at the top of his lungs for the police to arrest the “homicidal hooligans.”

“Tuna fish,” Ron said, staring at the three tins. “I was really hoping for at least a couple of those bags of crisps, and that ham-thing looked dead wonderful.”

“Spam?” Harry said. “Have you ever had any?”

“No,” Ron admitted.

“You might be happier that way. It’s a bit of an acquired taste,” Harry said.

“It’s food. I’m pretty sure I’ve acquired the taste,” Ron said gloomily as he sat on the old couch, ignoring the rain now soaking the cushions.

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” Hermione said. “And technically we’re not even beggars anymore but thieves on top of it all.”

They all looked uncomfortable, but no one protested when Harry got the forks out of a drawer and they tucked into tonight’s dinner, one tin each. It didn’t take long to get to the bottom, though they’d learn long ago that gulping food down made it seem smaller. By the time they were done, Harry was feeling a little better, but Hermione still looked troubled, and Ron was staring at the empty can as though it had made an offensive comment about his mother.

“We really need to come up with a better contingency plan for food,” Hermione said. “I wish I’d been able to get more rations in my bag before we left the Burrow, but it can’t be helped now. I’m wondering if we can risk something like a mail order catalogue or delivery service at a public location like a park or hotel lobby. There would be risks, of course, but that was already a close one tonight.”
“Be nice, that,” Harry said, thinking. “A great big order from Honeydukes.”

“I was focusing something a bit more nutritionally balanced, and we need to avoid any wizarding establishments I would think, but that’s the general idea,” Hermione said.

“Do you have anything at all left in that bag to eat?” Ron asked.

“Not much,” Hermione said, reaching over to pick up the tiny beaded bag and glancing through it. “I think there’s a jar or two of jam—I was saving that for Christmas—and some pickles, half a container of oatmeal, and a few tins of vegetables, all peas.”

“I’m trying to come up with something that would include all of those, and it’s actually working really well,” Ron said.

“Jam, pickles, oatmeal and peas?” Harry said, staring at him in horror.

“By ‘working’ I mean it’s killed my appetite completely,” Ron said with a shudder. “Problem mostly solved, at least for a bit.”

Hermione continued digging through her bag, apparently looking for something specific.

“Ah-ha!” she eventually cried in triumph, pulling out a small tin of mints. “I knew I had these in there somewhere. They’d fallen behind the bandages. Anyone care for one?”

“Why not?” Harry said, taking one as Ron did the same.

“What are these things? They’re not from Honeydukes,” Ron said.

“No, they’re Muggle sweets,” Hermione said. “They do pack rather a punch though.”

“I miss Ice Mice,” Ron said, sucking on them glumly. “These don’t squeak.”

“I’m sorry they’re not up to your expectations due to the lack of sound effects, your highness,” Hermione said archly, popping one in her own mouth. “More for the rest of us, then.”

“Speaking of more,” Ron said, ignoring the comment and continuing to roll the sweet around in his mouth despite the lack of squealing, “do you have any more stories? After that fiasco this afternoon, I’d rather not have that blighter chasing me through my dreams tonight if I have a choice. Your stories always provide interesting nightmare fuel.”

“My stories give you nightmares?” Hermione said, looking surprised.

“Once in a while, yeah,” Ron admitted sheepishly. “I had one the other night about that wolf in the grandmother’s nightdress, and then there was the one where the mermaid was stalking me with bloody feet, oh, and the one about the gigantic cornstalk.”

“I never told you a story about a gigantic cornstalk,” Hermione said, frowning.

“Think you’re mixing that up with the beanstalk, mate,” Harry said.

“Beanstalk, cornstalk, whatever it was, it was some gigantic vegetable crashing down on me and I was running for it,” Ron said, shrugging.

“Well, as it happens I know one story about sleep, and it has yet another bizarre vegetable in it,” Hermione said. “Actually, it’s the only one we’ve currently got, as well: peas.”
“Okay, then let’s have that one,” Ron said, sitting back in his chair and steepling his fingers together expectantly.

“Once upon a time,” Hermione said, Harry joining her on the last two words.

“Isn’t that usually my line?” Ron said, giving him a look of mock offense.

“True, but I wanted to try it at least once,” Harry said. “It looked like too much fun.”

“If the two of you are quite finished,” Hermione said in a rather tired voice.

“I think so,” Ron said. “Go on, then.”

“There lived a queen with an only son who was seeking for a bride,” Hermione said. “Though many beautiful and wealthy princesses had tried unsuccessfully to catch his interest, none of them met the rigid qualifications he put forward for his future wife.”

“What were those?” Ron asked.

“She had to be a true princess in every sense of the word,” Hermione said. “To him, and his mother as well, she had to be perfectly delicate and extremely sensitive; otherwise, he didn’t consider her a real princess.”

“Delicate and sensitive?” Harry asked. “He wants a girl who gets really upset about everything?”

“Not exactly,” Hermione said. “He and his mother believed that a real princess would have been raised in such refined, posh conditions that even the smallest physical discomfort would be highly painful to her.”

“You know, we’ve had some really weird ways of picking a bride before in these things,” Ron said. “Shoe size, looks pretty when she’s apparently dead, spins straw into gold, although I grant you that would have its advantages, but this bloke really just wants a girl who has an incredibly low pain threshold?”

“As odd as it sounds, yes,” Hermione said.

“I do not like this person,” Ron said firmly, folding his arms. “Then again, that’s a fairly common reaction for me.”

“It’s odd, but you’d be surprised. In the old days, proof of femininity among Muggles included things like swooning away when a girl had walked too far or shrieking with terror when she saw a mouse or over-reacting physically to just about anything startling,” Hermione explained. “A girl with too much nerve was seen as overly masculine. The prince’s opinion is sort of the extreme of that opinion, but that’s what it’s based on.”

“And his mum agreed with him?” Harry said.

“Apparently so, or at least that’s what the story says,” Hermione said.

“So did she go about screaming in pain when she bumped into a stray feather or something?” Ron asked.

“I’d guess not, but there you have it,” Hermione said. “Each of the princesses who sought to be the prince’s bride were asked to spend the night in the castle, alone in a great bedchamber, and each morning, the queen would greet her, speak to her briefly, and without fail, she would ushered out as
“I’m guessing there was something in the bedchamber other than a bed? Some kind of test?” Ron said.

“You’re right and wrong,” Hermione said. “There really was only a bed, but that was also the test.”

“Uh-huh,” Ron said, looking at Harry. “This is one of those double entendre thingies, isn’t it?”

“Search me,” Harry said.

“Actually, it’s not for once,” Hermione said somewhat mysteriously. “One night, in the middle of horrible tempest, there was a knock at the castle door. When the guards went to open it, there stood a young girl, completely drenched. She said she was a princess who had lost her way in the storm, but she hardly looked it with her dress ruined from the rain and hair streaming with water. Still, to see if this might at long last be the true princess her son had long searched for, the queen invited her in and prepared the guest bedchamber for the test, though she held but little hope that this girl would pass.”

“Okay, fine, some girl shows up, and I’m guessing she’s not a princess at all because where’s her guards and knights and coaches and things. So what’s the test?” Ron asked.

“You see, the queen had the bed made up so that there was a single dried pea under the mattress. Well, to be fair, some of the versions say it was three peas, but since the name of the story is ‘The Princess and the Pea,’ I think one is more likely actually.”

“A dried pea?” Harry asked. “Why? Was she expecting her to look under the mattress and automatically clean the room up before she went to sleep or something?”

“Oh, nothing so mundane as that. The test was whether the princess would be able to feel the pea through the mattress, proving how delicate she was,” Hermione said.

“Through a mattress? One pea? How thin is the mattress? Like, a blanket?” Ron asked, staring at her.

“Oh, it gets much worse,” Hermione said. “Then the queen had twenty more mattresses heaped on top of the pea, and then twenty feather beds atop that, as well as blankets and quilts and fur throws and pillows, so that when at last the girl was conducted to the room, she had to climb a ladder to reach the top of the bed and lie down.”

“Twenty mattresses and twenty feather beds?” Harry said, laughing. “That doesn’t even sound comfortable anymore. You’d just sink in like getting sucked into quicksand and never be able to get out again.”

“Yeah,” Ron said fervently, “and wouldn’t the whole thing be swaying back and forth like a tower of jelly? If I were her, I’d take one look at the giant, tottering pile of a bed and run back out into the storm and away from these nutters.”

“That does seem more reasonable, but she must have really been tired and beaten from the storm because instead she climbed the tall ladder and got into bed,” Hermione said.

“Must have been one bloody bad storm,” Ron said, shaking his head. “So what happened to her?”

“The next morning, the queen arrived early to ask her how she slept, as usual. The princess replied, ‘Oh, terribly! There was something small and hard in the middle of the bed, and it kept me awake all night! I feel black and blue all over!’ and indeed she had dark circles under her eyes and looked
“Haggard?” Ron said.

“Yes, it means she looked dreadful,” Hermione explained.

“I know that, but come on, ‘haggard’? You really do have practically obsolete words down to an art form, you know that?” Ron said.

“I shall take that as a compliment,” Hermione said, though she didn’t sound entirely convinced.

“Regardless, the princess had proven her royal delicacy by being able to feel a single dried pea through all the mattresses and feather beds, and the prince and his mother immediately proposed that she become his wife, for there could be no more delicate maiden in all the world.”

“She did say no, right?” Ron said.

“No, she agreed,” Hermione said. “They were married at once, and the dried pea was put into a museum as a curiosity for the local peasants to wonder at with great admiration. The end.”

Harry and Ron looked at each other as Hermione regarded them expectantly. After almost a minute of silence, Ron took a deep breath.

“Okay, here’s my theory,” Ron said. “She’s actually the maid.”

“The what? There wasn’t a maid in the story,” Hermione said.

“It’s a castle. They have to have maids, or a scullery girl or a milkmaid or something,” Ron said firmly.

“Well, I suppose they would, but—” Hermione began, but Ron continued on.

“Anyway, the maids and things would know all about the stupid scheme to figure out who a real princess is with the pea because somebody had to be carrying those mattresses and feather beds and things up to the bedchamber every time some new girl was given the test. One of them caught a bit of a clue and waited until there was a bad storm, then came running in with an apparently ruined gown that was really just some average clothes torn to shreds for effect, and in she gets. All she has to do is stay up all night on Mount Mattress, making sure she still looks like a right wreck the next morning, and say how terrible she slept from the ridiculous dried pea, and voila! Princess,” Ron said, all in a rush.

Hermione and Harry now had a chance to stare at each other in silence.

“Wouldn’t somebody have recognized her?” Harry said.

“These people never recognize each other,” Ron said with a wave of his hand. “Remember Ashywearer? Wash her face and her own step-sisters don’t know her; dirty her up again and the love her life can’t tell her from his Aunt Beulah.”

“You know, he does have a point,” Harry said to Hermione. “It would make a lot more sense.”

“It would also underscore the tone of parody present in Andersen’s story,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “The whole tale is meant to lampoon the idiocy of some of the marriage customs of the upper classes, making them really look completely ridiculous. Add to that the idea that women of the nobility were in fact mostly prized for their ability to bear heirs to throne and that the remarkable focus on physical delicacy to the point of actual illness would be a direct detriment to successful
childbirth, and it really is completely nonsensical. If it actually is a member of the lower class who managed to achieve princess status via marriage through using her wits, the point of the story would indeed remain intact and would actually be underscored.”

“So . . . yes?” Ron said.

“I think there’s no reason to discount your theory,” Hermione said with a shrug. “If it works for you, go for it.”

“Thanks,” Ron said. “Hey, wait, did you say this was by that Andersen fellow again?”

“At least one of the versions is,” Hermione said.

“Nobody’s feet got maimed,” Ron said, smiling. “That’s a first.”

“No, just some poor girl winds up black and blue from sleeping on a pea,” Harry said.

“Oh yeah,” Ron said, looking crestfallen. “Well, it’s still an improvement.”

“I suppose so,” Hermione said.

Harry looked at the Horcrux, which was currently sitting on the kitchen counter. It was such a small thing, not much larger than a walnut, and yet it had the ability to change the fate of so many people.

“I guess sometimes small things really do make the biggest differences,” Hermione said, following his gaze.

“Yeah,” Ron said, oblivious to their thoughts. “Like that sweet. That thing is so strong I think it nearly burned a hole in my tongue.”

“Oh, sorry,” Hermione said, snapping back to herself. “They do take a bit of getting used to.”

“No, I liked it,” Ron said. “Got another?”

“I suppose so,” she said, reaching back into bag, taking out one more, and giving it to him. “Harry?”

“No, thanks,” he said. “Think I’m going to turn in. I’m knackered.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Ron said, rising and stretching, but he caught Harry’s eye just as Hermione turned into the kitchen to put the used forks in the sink. As her back was turned, he drew out his wand and quickly cast a silent spell that sent the mint zooming through the air and directly under the cushions of the sofa Hermione used as a bed each night. By the time she’d turned around, he was lumbering over to his own bed, and Harry was trying to hide his smile.

The next morning, after Hermione had made her bed, she put the mint back in Ron’s hand.

“Slept like a baby,” she said with a grin. “I’m definitely not a princess.”

As she walked out the door of the tent to begin taking down the protection spells so they could move on, Harry definitely heard Ron mumble to himself, “Thank bloody goodness for that.”
“You know what I really miss?” Ron said as he stared up at the ceiling of the tent glumly.

“Yes,” Hermione answered without stopping her knitting and giving him an annoyed look. “So far today you’ve mentioned steak and kidney pie, apple tart, Fizzing Whizbees, strawberry ice cream, sultanas, marmalade, and cheddar. As none of us have a way of getting any of those, just shut it, will you?”

Silently, from his spot on what had become his designated chair, Harry agreed with her. It wasn’t like the rest of them were any less hungry.

“No, it’s not food,” Ron said, looking at the pair of them. “I miss Quidditch.”

“Quidditch?” Harry said, then snorted in laughter.

“What?” Ron asked.

“It’s just… I love Quidditch more than most people, and I haven’t even thought about it in at least a month, not even a dream,” Harry said.

“Seriously?” Ron said, blatantly shocked. “That’s just wrong, mate.”

“Well, don’t look at me,” Hermione said, going back to knitting a dark grey sock to replace one Harry had worn to a collection of holes. “I’m with Harry on this one. There are more important things going on than what team’s just caught the Quaffle.”

“Yeah, okay, you’re not obsessed with Quidditch, but how much do you miss the Hogwarts library?” Ron said.

Hermione looked up abruptly with an expression just as guilty as if she’d been caught stealing.

“But the books in the library would at least be useful in an emergency! There are really all sorts of things we could look up in them to help us in the search, so it’s not entirely frivolous,” Hermione said defensively.

“Uh-huh, and I suppose I could throw a pair of Bludgers at old No Nose and knock him silly, so it’s not entirely frivolous to think about Quidditch either,” Ron said with a decisive nod.

Harry stared at him.

“You do realize I’m now picturing that Bludger that Dobby enchanted in second year trailing around after Volde—,“ Harry began.

“No!” Ron yelled at him, and Harry stopped. Ron’s mood had entirely changed to one of nervous fear. “Please, just don’t say the name right now, all right? You know how much it bothers me.”
“Oh, fine,” Harry said, though secretly he thought Dumbledore’s idea that fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself had a lot of merit to it. “Anyway, maybe Dobby can save us all with another Bludger. Just hit You-Know-Who in the nose and that should fix things.”

“I miss Dobby, too,” Ron said. “He’s a good bloke. A little weird, yeah, but he’s loyal as the day is long.”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “I miss Professor McGonagall.”

“Yeah,” Ron agreed. “I don’t miss all her homework, mind, but she’s like Gryffindor Tower incarnate or something.”

“I know what you mean,” Harry said. “It’s like if she’s there, nothing too terrible can happen, kind of like with Dumbledore. I miss Nearly Headless Nick.”

“I wonder how the ghosts are taking the changes at Hogwarts,” Ron said darkly. “I can’t imagine even Snape bullying around the Bloody Baron.”

“Not that he’d need to as they’re from the same house,” Hermione said, “but at this point I’m so homesick for Hogwarts that I’d take kindly to running into Moaning Myrtle.”

“You really are homesick then,” Ron said, then added with a wistful expression, “do you think things will ever go back to the way they were?”

“No,” Harry said immediately.

“No need to be so optimistic there, mate,” Ron said with a forced grin.

“He’s right though,” Hermione said quietly. “Too much has happened for us to ever go back to the way things used to be before all this began. But that doesn’t mean that the world has to be a terrible place forever. Maybe it can even be better somehow.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Ron said.

Hermione sighed deeply and said, “Nor would I. But it’s a nice thought.”

“Do you think if Fudge had believed Dumbledore and Harry from the beginning that maybe this wouldn’t have happened?” Ron asked, and Harry noticed that Ron really seemed to believe Hermione would be able to answer the question.

“I don’t know,” Hermione said carefully. “Maybe. Dumbledore thought so.”

“I think Fudge knew we were telling the truth, but he didn’t want to know that he knew, if that makes sense,” Harry said.

“An ostrich with its head in the sand, which just makes matters worse,” Hermione said, nodding in agreement. “Typical. He really was a horrible Minister of Magic.”

“There’ve been worse,” Ron said. “Gunderman Poddingport, for example.”

“Who?” Harry and Hermione said together, and Harry turned to Hermione in surprise.

“I’d have thought you’d know every Minister of Magic in history,” Harry said.

“So did I, but not that one,” Hermione said. “I’ve never heard of him.”
“You do realize my universe is unraveling over that revelation, right?” Harry said.

“Nah, that’s really not that unusual,” Ron said. “He did so little that most of the history books skip him because he’s boring. The main thing he’s known for is sitting around and eating bonbons while the goblin forces attacked a Muggle village in the Cotswolds during the sixteenth century.”

“And you know this how?” Hermione asked, still seeming a little affronted that Ron knew more than she did on a topic that was pretty much directly out of a textbook.

“My ten-times great-grandfather Ronaldus was one of the wizards who went in to clean up the mess and do Memory Charms on the Muggles,” Ron said. “I’m sort of named after him, so I paid a bit more attention to that story than the rest of the family did when my Great-Aunt Tessie went on about it one Christmas after pudding.”

“I miss pudding,” Hermione said forlornly, then grimaced. “Wonderful. Now I’m doing it.”

“Okay, so you miss something superficial, useless, and fun. That proves you’re human,” Harry said.

“I suppose so,” Hermione said with a sheepish grin.

“Say, do you know any stories about completely terrible or stupid kings?” Ron said.

“Have I ever actually told a story about a king who wasn’t either terrible or stupid in some way?” Hermione asked.

Ron and Harry both squinted slightly as they mentally ran through lists of fairy tales.

“The father in Pajamabelle’s story wasn’t all that bad,” Ron finally said. “He didn’t marry an evil sorceress or offer up his daughter in exchange for salad or threaten to kill anybody for not being able to spin straw into gold anyway.”

“That’s a fair point,” Hermione said, tipping her head to one side. “While his choice of guest list to his daughter’s christening might have been a poor decision, it was at least understandable and logical.”

Ron beamed as though he’d gotten five points for Gryffindor from Snape.

“But I do know one story about an emperor who was really just completely hopeless,” Hermione said.

“Then let’s hear it and immediately picture Fudge in the leading role,” Ron said.

“You might regret that decision,” Hermione said mysteriously, “but we may as well have a story before bed. Once upon…”

“… a time,” Ron finished, and Harry noted that Hermione had actually paused slightly to let him say the rest of the opening on his own.

“Quite,” Hermione said primly, but Harry suspected she wasn’t really angry at all, particularly since the corners of her mouth were playing into a smile. “In a far off country there lived an emperor who was completely obsessed with clothes.”

“Clothes?” Ron repeated, sounding confused. “Seriously?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “More than war or laws or anything else, he loved wearing the very finest clothes in all the empire and showing them off at grand parties, which was the only reason balls and
“Parades were held.”

“Fudge always did seem rather fond of that lime green bowler hat,” Harry said.

“It made him stand out,” Ron said. “I suppose being Minister of Magic wasn’t enough to insure he had everyone’s attention all the time. He needed to wear a hat the color of rancid citrus fruit to draw everybody’s eye.”

“That or he was color-blind,” Harry said. “That thing was atrocious.”

“Agreed,” Hermione said, shuddering, “but in this case the emperor completely ignored the empire, the army, and the people in favor of his wardrobe. The great capital city was overrun with criminals and thieves, and the borders were threatened with invading forces, yet all the emperor thought of were fashionable trousers and waistcoats.”

“You’re sure he’s not a girl?” Ron said, grinning, then at Hermione’s withering look, Harry could tell he immediately regretted his choice of words.

“Despite the cultural expectation that females tend to be preoccupied with fashion and the transient qualities of beauty, though goodness knows men refuse to notice a female’s existence unless she conforms to the current and often ridiculously impossible concepts of attractiveness so females do have legitimate reasons for their concern, there are plenty of males who are at least as concerned about their own appearance, as increases over the last thirty years in cosmetic charms for men shows to great effect,” Hermione said coldly.

“Um, okay,” Ron said, smiling hopefully. “So he’s not a girl. Go on, the empire’s falling to ruin and Emperor Pretty Britches is still out shopping. What happens?”

“Emperor Pretty Britches?” Hermione said, giving Ron a look of deepest exasperation. Harry also noticed that Ron had succeeded in completely distracting her from his faux pas. “Oh, fine then. Two charlatans arrived in town, claiming to be the world’s most wonderful tailors and offering their services to the emperor himself to create for him the best suit of clothing anyone had ever seen.”

“I’m guessing that he jumped at that one,” Harry said.

“Like a trout for particularly plump bait,” Hermione said. “He had the two men brought before him and asked them what was so special about their skills.”

“Which was?” Harry asked.

“They said that the cloth they wove was incomparable to any other fabric in richness and quality and vibrancy of color, but more than that, only the wise could see it. If someone was unfit for his or her office or was foolish, then the fabric would be invisible to that person, showing his or her shameful inadequacy,” Hermione said, unable to suppress a smile.

Ron and Harry looked at each other.

“So there’s really no fabric at all, right?” Ron said.

“You’ve figured it out,” Hermione said.

“Okay, but let’s say I was thick enough to believe these two. If the fabric is invisible to anyone who’s stupid or in a job that they aren’t qualified for, wouldn’t the wearer basically be walking about naked in front of a bunch of incompetent idiots?” Ron said.
“That’s the general idea, yes,” Hermione said.

“And that’s a selling point?” Ron said, wrincling his nose.

“When you put it that way, it does seem like something of a drawback,” Hermione said, frowning, “but then I never said the emperor was all that bright to begin with.”

“Or all that averse to parading around naked apparently,” Harry added.

“In any case, he hired the two men to make him a supremely wonderful suit of clothes, and at once they locked themselves away with a great loom and began banging it back and forth so that the noise carried throughout the palace. Every day or so they would call for more golden or silver thread or other very costly supplies, none of which was used at all but popped directly into their bags,” Hermione said.

“Why is this reminding me of the one about the girl who could spin straw into gold?” Ron asked.

“Oh, locked room, highly impressive task based on a lie, someone claiming to be able to do something impossible involving fiber arts, though in that case it was the father making the brag and not the poor girl,” Hermione said, counting the similarities off on her fingers.

“What is it with Muggles and this apparent obsession with stuff that makes cloth? Throw in the one who wound up in a coma from a spinning wheel splinter, and you’ve got some seriously strange issues there,” Ron said.

Hermione tilted her head to one side, considering.

“Well, if the production of textiles is related to the concept of human superiority over animal species as well as the product of a more domesticated civilization, then perhaps the inherent desire to attribute magical abilities to the production of woven or knit materials deals with the subconscious realization of the nearly-magical change wrought by the textile industry upon human history,” Hermione said, shrugging.

“Oh,” Ron said, then as Hermione took a moment to put her knitting needles back into her beaded evening bag, he whispered to Harry, “How much of that did you get?”

“I got lost somewhere around ‘human superiority over animal species,’” he whispered back.

“Uh-huh, me too,” Ron said. “That and ‘wrought.’ Did she really read the whole dictionary? And if so, is she trying to use all of it?”

Harry stifled a laugh as Hermione brought her attention back to them.

“So, as I was saying before the two of you apparently thought I’d gone temporarily deaf, the whole castle was a-buzz with gossip about the cloth that would be visible only to the wise and worthy, and all wondered aloud if their neighbors would see nothing at all while wondering silently if they themselves would be able to see it at all,” Hermione said.

“And nobody even considered the possibility that the weavers might not be telling the truth,” Harry said.

“Possibly they did,” Hermione said, “but think of how it would sound. People could assume the doubters were only saying that because they knew they wouldn’t be able to see the cloth and wanted some excuse.”
“I suppose,” Ron said. “The con men are basically using everybody’s own insecurities against them.”

“Exactly,” Hermione said, beaming at him. “After a while, the emperor’s self-doubt did indeed begin to surface, and he worried that he was either a fool or unfit for his office, or possibly both.”

“Which in his case was completely justified,” Harry said.

“Entirely,” Hermione said, “but he wasn’t completely stupid. He had a minister who was very wise, and the emperor asked him to go and check on the weavers to see how the suit of clothes was progressing and to bring back details on their work.”

“Now that is smart,” Ron said. “What happened?”

“The minister went to the locked room and demanded entrance in the name of the emperor, and when the door was opened, the two supposed weavers appeared delighted to show him the fruits of their labor, which were obviously hanging from the loom at that moment,” Hermione said.

“So, nothing,” Ron said.

“Right again. The minister stared at the completely vacant loom and began to panic while the men went on about the vibrant embroidery and the intricate patterns they were creating in honor of the emperor, and the minister thought that it must be he was a fool or unfit, but of course he didn’t want to admit this,” Hermione said.

“I can’t help feeling sorry for the poor fellow,” Harry said. “He probably really was a good minister, but part of him didn’t think he was good enough.”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “Still, he went back to the emperor and lied left and right, reciting every detail about the fabric that the charlatans had told him exactly as if he’d really seen it, and the emperor made note of each one, just in case he shouldn’t be able to see it himself.”

“This is not going to end well,” Ron said.

“The emperor wasn’t entirely convinced, though,” Hermione said.

“He really is a bit brighter than I thought,” Harry said.

“He must have been, for he sent his best general in to look at the fabric again a few days later, and once again the general saw nothing at all but came back with a glowing report on the weavers’ work,” Hermione said.

“Do you think there’s a chance these two just couldn’t stand the incompetent emperor and wanted him to get a dose of public humiliation?” Ron said.

“You know, that really is possible,” Hermione said slowly. “The story does explicitly state that the two of them were concerned about others thinking they were fools, but there could be a subtext of revenge in there as well, particularly with the general as the story also mentions that the emperor was very lax about his military duties.”

Ron looked a little proud of himself, and even Harry had to admit Ron’s ability to come up with interesting points about the stories was definitely impressive at times. Hermione was giving him a rather complimentary appraising look as well, which Harry knew was probably Ron’s motivation in the first place.
“Finally, the day dawned for the unveiling of the suit of clothes, which consisted of a set of trousers, a mantle with a great train, and a coat with long sleeves, or so the two men informed him as they carefully held up absolutely nothing for him to inspect,” Hermione said.

“And I’m going to guess the emperor said how great their work was,” Harry said.

“Oh yes, he complimented them to the sky and back on their work, all the while inwardly shuddering at the proof of his inadequacy,” Hermione said. “Of course, all the other members of the court were present too, and they too said that it was the finest, richest, and most splendid suit of clothes they had ever seen, not wanting to be thought fools.”

“This is really snowballing,” Ron said. “Then what?”

“To celebrate this phenomenal achievement, a parade was arranged, and the tailors themselves helped the emperor into his new suit of clothes, which they said was so finely made that it was as light as a breeze and could barely be felt on the skin at all,” Hermione said.

“Because he’s starkers,” Ron said. “Was he at least wearing pants?”

“Possibly. Underclothes in their current form, at least for men, were in existence for the upper classes by about the 1200s, so assuming this is set after that, there’s a chance,” Hermione said.

“Okay,” Ron said. “But I’m guessing that’s not exactly how the story goes?”

“No,” Hermione said. “The story states that the emperor goes out in the procession completely naked, and the common people, having heard tales of the cloth that appeared invisible to fools, all cheered and cried out how wonderful the clothes were. Each one was afraid of what others would think if they pointed out the obvious.”

“And what happened to the tailors?” Ron asked.

“I believe they fled pretty much as soon as they were given their extremely large fee,” Hermione said.

“So nobody said anything?” Harry asked.

“Not quite. At long last, one little boy who was too young to know better called out repeatedly, ‘The emperor is naked!’ laughing all the while despite his parents trying to quiet him so the others wouldn’t think their son a fool,” Hermione said.

“Did anyone listen?” Ron asked.

“It depends on the version of the story,” Hermione said. “In one, the boy’s comments are completely ignored and the emperor continues to parade naked through the town while the people pretend they can see the non-existent clothes, proving once and for all how foolish they all are, which is a fairly bleak ending really.”

“I hope he doesn’t wear that to the next battle,” Harry said. “What’s the other ending?”

“In that one, the people start to realize that the boy is telling the truth, and they all begin to laugh until at last the emperor realizes what a dreadful mistake he’s made and runs back to the castle in disgrace, a humbler but wiser man,” Hermione said.

“I’ve had nightmares like that,” Ron said, “showing up for Herbology and forgetting my robes.”
“Everyone gets those,” Hermione said. “For me it’s usually Potions. What about you, Harry?”

“You have nightmares about showing up for class naked?” Harry said, looking at the two of them as though they’d grown extra heads.

“Well, yes, doesn’t—doesn’t everybody?” Hermione said, sounding rather disturbed.

“No,” Harry said simply. “At least I don’t.”

Ron and Hermione looked at each other and then immediately away again.

“Thanks, mate,” Ron said. “I feel like a right pervert now.”

Hermione turned a very deep shade of red, cleared her throat, and continued gamely on.

“The two tailors were never caught in either version, though, and while perhaps no one lived happily ever after in this one, the little boy who spoke the truth was actually the wisest of them all,” Hermione said.

“Okay, but what I want to know is what nutter came up with this one?” Ron asked.

“Oh, right, I forgot to mention. This is another of Andersen’s,” Hermione said.

“Wait, did the tailors make him socks or shoes or anything?” Ron asked.

“It’s not mentioned specifically,” Hermione said.

“Then either this is the first time Andersen hasn’t thrown foot mutilation into one of his stories, or we can assume that the emperor was walking barefoot down a cobblestone road, probably bruising his toes and bleeding all over the place like that poor mermaid girl,” Ron said.

“Whichever you prefer,” Hermione said, looking a bit ill.

“I’m just trying to get the image of Fudge walking down Diagon Alley starkers out of my head,” Harry said, and the other two shuddered.

“In my head, he’s still wearing the bowler hat, though,” Ron said. “It won’t come off. Do you suppose he bathes with that thing on?”

“No idea,” Harry said, then frowned.

“What?” Hermione asked.

“No, it’s just I’m wondering what my Invisibility Cloak looked like when it was being woven. Wouldn’t it have seemed to be, well, nothing at all?” Harry asked.

Hermione raised her eyebrows and said, “I suppose it would have at that.”

“So whoever actually ordered it made in the first place had to trust that the weaver really was making something and not just putting one over on him,” Harry said.

“When you put it that way, I can see where it would parallel the story somewhat, except of course that the cloak itself isn’t just invisible but makes the wearer invisible too, which is obvious proof to everyone,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but what if the emperor thought he wasn’t getting invisible clothes but clothes that made him
invisible,” Ron said.

“I suppose the story could have been a bit twisted in the telling,” Hermione said. “In that case, it would seem to be a tale of Muggle baiting, making the emperor believe he was getting something magical when in fact he was just being humiliated, and perhaps the comments on his stupidity and ineptitude are actually pureblood diatribes against Muggles.”

She looked quite disturbed at this, and Harry had to admit it made the rather funny story suddenly seem decidedly ominous and vindictive.

“Or it’s just a story about a stupid emperor who goes walking through town naked,” Ron said.

“Or that,” Hermione said, sighing. “Anyway, I think I’ll turn in. We should probably pack up early tomorrow and try to find another spot to set up the tent. Any ideas?”

Harry shook his head. Before coming to Hogwarts, he really hadn’t been much of anywhere aside from the infamous Hut-on-the-Rock, and that didn’t sound like a good place to spend a cold November night. Ron only shrugged.

“You pick,” he said. “Anywhere’s as good as anywhere else, I guess.”

“All right then,” she said. “I’ll sleep on it. Good night.”

After she had retired to her spot in the tent and could be heard breathing deeply, Ron turned to Harry and said, “Seriously, you’ve never had a nightmare about going to class naked?”

“Nope,” Harry said.

“Oh,” Ron said, looking crestfallen.

“No, it’s usually Madame Puddifoot’s instead,” Harry said.

Harry was laughing so hard that he never saw the Jelly-Legs Jinx coming, but it was strong enough that he was still weak-kneed the next morning.
Harry stared at the Horcrux, and somehow he felt it was staring back at him. At the moment it was sitting on the battered wooden crate that passed for their kitchen table, and the late afternoon light that seeped through the tent’s window made the necklace glint in a strangely sinister way. It really was an ugly locket, he thought, which was probably why Umbridge with her hideous taste had liked it so much. The sloping S engraved on it looked somehow smug, and the gold had an odd, sickly green tinge to it. The longer he looked at it, the more he hated it.

“How not going to be in the next issue of *Trendy Teen Witch Weekly*, is it?” Hermione said, and Harry looked up to see his friend was regarding him with a wry grin as though she knew what he was thinking.

“No,” Harry said, dragging his eyes away from the Horcrux. It was strange, the way it could draw his attention towards itself, almost as though it were alive. “At least I wouldn’t think so, since I’ve never actually looked in one. Hermione, what do girls even read in those things?”

“Usually they’re all articles on five hundred ways to apply eyeliner to attract boys’ attention, followed by articles on why all boys are horrid,” she said, putting a book back into her little beaded bag. “Occasionally they’re good for an ironic laugh or two. Parvati and Lavender used to be all but addicted to them.”

Harry was a little surprised to hear Hermione actually speak the dreaded L-word, and she seemed to be gauging Ron’s reaction. As he was still vacantly toying with an apple core, the remains of the lunch they had gotten from stumbling into an orchard of ripe trees, he seemed to have passed whatever test she’d been giving him, and she smiled with satisfaction.

“‘Mione, do you know any stories about food?” Ron asked.

“You mean other than ‘Hansel and Gretel’?” she asked.

“That was the one with the giant gingerbread house with cake and candy and the apple-walnut pancakes the witch gave them,” he said, sighing in bliss at the thought. “Right?”

“You remember the flavoring of the pancakes in a side note from a story I told weeks ago?” she said, staring at him. “With that sort of mental retention, why weren’t you getting all Os at Hogwarts?”

“Because I’m not interested in school stuff but I am interested in pancakes and gingerbread,” he said with a shrug. “Selective memory. Anyway, do you?”

“Well, technically, yes, I suppose,” Hermione said, suppressing a grin rather poorly in Harry’s opinion. “Actually, I know another one about gingerbread.”

“Really?” Ron said, perking up.

“You’re joking,” Harry said. “Is there a whole subset of Muggle gingerbread fairy stories or
“Well, I suppose it’s arguable whether it really is a fairy tale or not, though things don’t behave according to the usual rules of reality,” Hermione said. “I suppose it’s a bit more of a fable than a fairy tale, though the difference between the two genres is blurry.”

“Yes,” Ron said, and Harry noted that his selective memory also seemed to include selective hearing. “So, gingerbread?”

“Right,” Hermione said. “Once upon a time…”

“Oh, good,” Ron said, smiling. “I was worried that the fable-that-might-not-be-considered-a-fairy-tale would start differently than the others.”

“No, this one takes place in a nonspecific past as well,” Hermione said, giving him her usual look for interrupting her. Why she bothered Harry couldn’t begin to guess since it was obvious she was never going to get more than a few words out of her mouth for any story before one of the broke in. “As I was saying, once upon a time, in a land far away, there lived a farmer and his wife in a comfortable little home out in the countryside.”

“I’m starting to hate the countryside,” Ron said at once. “If I ever do get out of this bloody tent, I’m taking a flat in town over the busiest spot I can find. Maybe Fred and George will let me kip for a while on the third floor of Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes. They’ve got a posh little place up there now.”

“I rather like the country myself,” Hermione said, glancing out the window at the sunset, “though not in a ramshackle tent in a different spot every night for months at a time.”

“Okay, yeah, well, nature has its charms I guess,” Ron said, quickly amending his choice of future home. “Anyway, what are the farmers’ names?”

“They don’t have any in this story,” Hermione said.

“Seems like that was a pretty common problem during once upon a time,” Harry said. “Must have gotten confusing.”

“Yeah, we can’t have that,” Ron said. “Let’s see. They’re farmers, so I’ll call them… Mr. and Mrs. Cooper.”

“Cooper?” Hermione said, raising an eyebrow. “But that doesn’t have anything to do with farming. Coopers make barrels.”

“S’right,” Ron said, smiling broadly. “I suppose I could have called them Mr. and Mrs. Farmer, but what’s the fun in that? I like to be unpredictable once in a while, I do.”

Harry laughed, but Hermione looked at Ron as though he were on the verge of losing his marbles.

“All right then,” she said in an overly calm voice. “The two of them had no children.”

“Well, that’s a bit sad,” Ron said. “Wait, are they going to try to do something stupid to get a kid now?”

“No, actually,” Hermione said. “And the story also states that they’re quite elderly, so I was never really sure why that detail was put into the telling, but it always is. In any case, the wife was in the kitchen, and she had just finished making a gingerbread man decorated with icing sugar and raisins.”
for his eyes, the buttons on his waistcoat, and his hair, and a peppermint drop for a mouth.”

“Now I’m even getting hungry,” Harry said. He could very nearly smell the heavenly aroma of gingerbread coming from the oven.

“Indeed, so was the farmer’s wife, and when she was quite done with the last of the decorations, she looked at the gingerbread man and said, ‘Oh, you look so delicious that I could just eat you up!’” Hermione said, putting on an old woman’s crackling voice, and, oddly, an American Southern accent.

“Huh?” Ron said, frowning.

“I said, ‘Oh, you look so delicious—,’” Hermione began in the same voice, but Ron waved at her stop. “What’s wrong?”

“What’s up with the accent?” Ron asked.

“Oh, this story comes from America, though there are much older variants of it that trace their roots back to England, Ireland, Wales, and even Russia. I just thought it might be fun to use the accent for her,” Hermione said, looking vaguely embarrassed.

“Well, skip that bit, all right? I can’t understand a word they say at the best of times,” Ron said. “That and they say y’all a lot. It’s just a weird sounding word. Y’all.”

“If you don’t like it, then fine, I won’t do it,” Hermione said, sounding offended over Ron’s dismissal of her accent skills.

“Also, why’s she talking to a gingerbread man?” Harry asked, trying to distract her.

“I suppose she might have been a bit lonely. Perhaps that’s why the story notes she had no children,” said Hermione.

“Maybe. Or maybe she’s a bit mad. It’s not like the gingerbread is going to talk back to her,” Ron said.

“Oh, but it did!” Hermione said.

“Wait, what?” Harry and Ron both said.

“Yes, the gingerbread man jumped up from the baking sheet and began to run around the kitchen, laughing and saying, ‘No, no, I won’t be eaten!’” Hermione said.

“That’s flat out creepy, that is,” Ron said, shuddering. “Food should not talk back to you. Well, okay, Ice Mice chatter at you and Chocolate Frogs croak and I suppose there are a few other sweets that do something of the sort, but on the whole, I like my food to sit there quietly and not protest being eaten.”

“Yeah, I think I’d feel guilty about that,” Harry said.

“The little old woman, though she was very surprised—“ Hermione began.

“Or hallucinating,” Ron suggested.

“No, you’ll see it’s not just her,” Hermione said. “The old woman leapt up and began to chase the gingerbread man in circles around the kitchen table, but she couldn’t catch him, and he ran out the door, singing, ‘Run, run, as fast as you can! You can’t catch me! I’m the gingerbread man!’”
Hermione sang in what Harry thought was really a rather catchy little tune.

“Now he’s just rubbing it in,” Ron said. “So where does a gingerbread man on the lam go?”

“He ran out to the farmyard, and there was the little old man, chopping wood. The little old man said, ‘Oh, I am so hungry! Come here, gingerbread man, I want to eat you!’” Hermione said.

“No reaction at all to the fact that a gingerbread man has gained the power to walk and apparently talk and compose music?” Ron said.

“No, but it does prove that the old woman wasn’t hallucinating since he saw the same thing,” Hermione said.

“Maybe,” Ron said, “or maybe there’s something in the water. By the way, it’s not a great idea to meet a sentient creature and immediately declare your intention of eating it. That just usually doesn’t go down well.”

“And it didn’t in this case either,” Hermione said, “for the gingerbread man said, ‘I’ve run away from a little old woman, and I’ll run away from you, I will!’”

“Well, he has a pretty good self-preservation instinct going for him,” Ron said.

“Along with some fairly high self-esteem,” Harry agreed.

“Then the gingerbread man sang again, ‘Run, run, as fast as you can, you can’t catch me! I’m the gingerbread man!’” Hermione said. “Soon, the little old man was chasing the gingerbread man around the chopping block, and his wife, who had finally caught up to the errant biscuit, joined in the chase, but neither could catch the gingerbread man. He ran away laughing.”

“’Errant biscuit’ really isn’t a phrase you hear all that often,” Ron remarked, giving Hermione an amused look.

“Yeah, and also that’s one fast little gingerbread man,” Harry said.

“Or possibly one very slow old woman,” Ron said. “It took her a whole verse and more for her to go from the kitchen to the chopping block.”

“You know, that’s a good point,” Hermione said, squinting a bit into the middle distance. “Logically, the chopping block where the old man was working would have been fairly close to the kitchen in order to facilitate easy hauling of kindling and logs to the fireplace and stove, both of which would have undoubtedly been wood-fueled during the time period. Assuming a slight gap of space to allow for safety concerns over using an ax near a possibly blind doorway as well as avoiding tracking in woodchips in the dooryard, it’s reasonable to assume that the old man wouldn’t be more than perhaps fifteen to twenty paces at most from the entrance to the kitchen. If the old woman were to have followed directly behind the gingerbread man, she really should have arrived there much more quickly than she does, allowing for the biscuit’s explanation and song. It’s a bit of a plot hole. Oh, now that’s going to bother me.”

Harry stared at her and wondered just how bored Hermione was becoming on their seemingly endless trek if she was turning a fairy tale into essentially a math equation. Then again, with her brain, the tedium really must be particularly painful.

“Shoes,” Ron said suddenly.

“What?” Hermione asked.
“Maybe she was in her stocking feet in the kitchen, and she stopped to put on her shoes before going out the door since there were likely splinters about from the wood being split,” Ron said. “That’d slow her down.”

Harry blinked slowly.

“That is a completely logical reason for falling behind in a race to catch up with escaping baked goods,” Hermione said. “I’m actually quite impressed.”

“Same here,” Harry said. “Well done!”

Harry thought Ron looked about as pleased with himself as a human being could without actually starting to levitate from a swelled head, but then Ron really had earned it.

“At any rate, the gingerbread man ran away through the barn and out into the fields where a group of mowers were working,” Hermione said.

“Mowers?” Ron asked. “What’s a mower?”

“Oh, they’re people who chop down the wheat or rye or barley or whatever it is the farmer is growing, usually using something that looks a big knife on a stick,” Hermione said.

“Like the Grim Reaper?” Harry asked.

“Precisely,” Hermione said. “That particular image is meant to highlight the Grim Reaper’s role as harvester of souls, hence the mowing tool.”

“So the gingerbread man is running for his life into a field full of armed Grim Reapers?” Ron asked, looking a little disturbed.

“No, just regular Muggles,” Hermione said.

“Carrying big, sharp knives,” Harry pointed out.

“Well, when you put it that way, you do have a point,” Hermione admitted. “As he came nearer, the mowers all said in chorus, ‘Oh, we are so hungry! Come here, little gingerbread man, and let us eat you!’”

“All of them?” Ron said. “How big is this biscuit? Actual human size?”

“No,” Hermione said, “usually the illustrations show him as maybe a bit below average knee height, so a good-sized biscuit, but not enormous.”

“And how many mowers are there?” Ron asked.

“Oh, maybe seven or eight,” Hermione said with a shrug.

“Even if they do catch him, they aren’t going to get much of a snack,” Harry said.

“No, but once again, the gingerbread boy said, ‘I’ve run away from a little old woman, I’ve run away from a little old man, and I can run away from you, I can!’”

“Yep, good self-confidence,” Ron said. “Then did he sing?”

“Certainly,” Hermione said, nodding. “‘Run, run, as fast as you can. You can’t catch me! I’m the gingerbread man!’ Then the mowers, the old man, and the old woman chased him up and down the
rows of crops, but none of them could catch him, and he ran away laughing.”

“Wait, the old man and woman are still trying to get him?” Ron said.

“And here I thought you’d mention that the mowers had no reaction to the running, singing, and apparently poetic gingerbread man,” Harry said.

“Nah, if the first two don’t bother to make a big deal of it, then I suppose the rest of them won’t either,” Ron said. “Maybe this happens all the time in their strange little world. But I think we’re back to the gingerbread man being rather freakishly fast again, aren’t we?”

“Possibly,” Hermione said. “As you’ve both pointed out, there really isn’t a precedent for the typical maximum velocity of living biscuits, so it’s probably best not to dissect that part too closely.”

“Okay. I’m sure I can find something else to obsess about in this story,” Ron said magnanimously, and Hermione outright giggled. Harry restrained himself from rolling his eyes.

“After the gingerbread man did indeed outrun the mowers along with the farmer and his wife, he came to a group of threshers,” Hermione said.

“Fine, I’ll ask the obvious question this time,” Harry said. “What are threshers?”

“Oh, they’ve generally all been replaced today by machines, as have mowers really, but they used to separate the seeds out of wheat or other crops, usually by hitting the stalks against the floor with a big stick,” Hermione said.

“Well, at least he didn’t run to a group of Muggles who were holding giant knives again, although big sticks really aren’t much better,” Ron said. “Why exactly are they beating up wheat, by the by?”

“It removes the inedible chaff from the seed,” Hermione explained. “You have to get rid of the chaff before you can grind wheat into flour, for example.”

“So this story takes place in autumn, then,” Ron said, “what with the mowers and the threshers and all.”

“Not necessarily,” Hermione said. “Some kinds of wheat ripen earlier or later depending upon the variety. Winter wheat actually ripens in about June, but summer wheat is usually ready in the mid to late summer. Also, it’s never actually mentioned that the farmer grows wheat specifically. Given that this story has its roots in the United States, rye or corn along with barley are all possibilities. Rye would tend more towards autumn, along with corn, both the sweet and dry varieties, while barley is usually a spring crop again. I wouldn’t think it would be spelt or oats, both of which would ripen more towards spring again usually, depending on climate.”

“Uh-huh,” Ron said. “Exactly. I definitely needed to know that. I’m just going to picture autumn if that’s okay with you.”

“Perfectly,” Hermione said. “We’ll simply assume they grow rye then.”

“I’m glad that’s settled,” said Harry. “So, what happened to the gingerbread man?”

“As he approached the threshers, they all cried out, ‘Oh, we are so hungry! Come here, little gingerbread man, and let us eat you!’” Hermione said in a truly appalling accent she seemed to have picked up from a Western in spite of Ron’s earlier protests.

“Not terribly original dialogue in this,” Ron said.
“Well, this is a repetitive story that builds each time through. Go on and take a guess what the gingerbread man might say,” Hermione said.

“Stick it in your ear, because I’m out of here?” Ron said.

Harry laughed out loud while Hermione rubbed her forehead in frustration.

“Your mum must have had a horrid time telling you bedtime stories as a child,” Hermione said with a look of pity.

“Not really,” Ron replied. “After Fred and George, I was pretty easy. At least I never accidentally-on-purpose set the book on fire if it got too boring.”

“When you put it that way, you have a point,” Hermione said with an expression of mild horror.

“What the gingerbread man actually said was ‘I’ve run away from the mowers, I’ve run away from a little old man, I’ve run away from a little old woman, and I can run away from you, I can!’ Then he sang his little song, ‘Run, run, as fast as you can. You can’t catch me! I’m the gingerbread man!’”

“The poem at least sort works now with every other line rhyming,” Ron said.

“Yes, the a-b-c-b rhyme pattern does feel more regular,” Hermione said.

“The what?” Ron said.

“Oh, it’s a way of showing what lines rhyme in poetry. You start by giving the letter ‘a’ to the first line, and any other line in the poem that rhymes with that line gets an ‘a’ as well. If the next line doesn’t rhyme, it gets a ‘b,’ and so does anything else that rhymes with that line, on down through the alphabet. In a Shakespearean sonnet, for example, the rhyme pattern is a-b-a-b-c-d-c-d-e-f-e-f-g-g, so every other line rhymes except for the last two, which form their own couplet,” Hermione said. “It’s very easy.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, giving Harry a look that plainly screamed that he was drowning. “Easy. So, the gingerbread man runs away again?”

“Precisely, outrunning the threshers, the mowers, the old man, and the old woman, all of whom trailed behind him as he sped off,” Hermione said.

“It’s turning into a parade at this point,” Harry said.

“A bit, yes,” Hermione said, nodding. “Next, the gingerbread man came across a cow in a meadow, and the cow said, ‘Oh, I am so hungry!’”

“So eat the grass! You’re a cow standing in the middle of a meadow, for Merlin’s sake,” Ron said.

“You do realize you interrupted me,” Hermione said icily.

“Hermione, when don’t I in these things?” Ron said.

She sighed heavily and said, “All right, fair point, but still, the cow hadn’t finished speaking yet.”

“Well, I can honestly say I’ve never interrupted a talking cow before, so that’s new,” Ron said. “I’m guessing that the cow said something like ‘Come here, little gingerbread man, and let me eat you,’ yeah?”

“Congratulations, you’ve gotten the pattern of the story down cold,” Hermione said, though Harry noted her tone seemed a bit more annoyed than impressed, not that Ron appeared to notice. “It’s
what’s sometimes called a cumulative story or a chain tale.”

“Your lot do this a lot, do you?” Ron said.

“Oh, there’s a fair few, like ‘The Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly,’” Hermione said. “In that one, after swallowing the fly, the woman keeps swallowing larger and larger animals to try to catch the other ones inside her: a spider, a bird, a cat, a dog, a pig, a goat, a cow, all the way up to a horse, which is when she basically explodes.”

“Charming,” Ron said, though Harry noticed Ron had looked a bit ill ever since Hermione had mentioned swallowing a spider. “So I’m also going to guess that the gingerbread man said ‘I’ve run away from the threshers, I’ve run away from the mowers, I’ve run away from a little old man, and I’ve run away from a little old woman, and I can run away from you, I can!’ How close am I?”

Hermione looked significantly more impressed as she nodded. “Yes, that is indeed precisely what he said, and the cow took off running after the gingerbread man, pursued by the threshers, the mowers, the old man, and the old woman, but once again he left them all behind as he ran away laughing.”

“This is getting to be less of a parade and more of a very bizarre marathon,” Harry said.

“What’s a marathon?” Ron asked.

“A race Muggles run,” Harry said. “A really long one.”

“Yes, just over twenty-six miles,” Hermione said.

“Why would someone do that on purpose?” Ron asked, looking completely confused.

“I suppose to say you’ve done it,” Hermione said with a shrug. “It’s named in memory of a Greek city named Marathon that won a battle, and a runner had to run over twenty-six miles to get to Athens to report the result.”

“That’s fairly impressive,” Ron said.

“Then he dropped down dead from exhaustion,” Hermione added.

“That’s significantly less impressive,” Ron said. “And you people decided to do the same thing that killed this bloke why exactly?”

“Who knows?” Hermione said. “You’re right. It is a bit odd.”

“You realize I’m now picturing the gingerbread man in a little icing runner’s outfit, right?” Harry said.

Hermione giggled again at that, and Harry was much less annoyed this time. It really was nice to hear laughter. Ron smiled too.

“Okay, so he outran the cow. Now what?” Ron asked.

“Oh, next he found a pig,” Hermione said.

“Well, they do eat anything, so that at least is plausible,” Ron said. “So what happened?”

“The pig said, ‘Oh, I’m so hungry. Come here, little gingerbread man, and let me eat you!’” Hermione said, giving the pig a grunty voice that weirdly reminded Harry of Goyle, not that he ever spoke much.
“I am shocked and stunned by this development,” Ron said flatly. “And the gingerbread man replied?”

“I’ve run away from a cow, I’ve run away from the threshers, I’ve run away from the mowers, I’ve run away from a little old man, I’ve run away from a little old woman, and I can run away from you, I can!’ Precisely what you’d expect,” Hermione said.

“Uh huh. The pig didn’t catch the little fellow, did he?” Ron asked.

“No, the pig, the cow, the threshers, the mowers, the old man, and the old woman all chased him, but they couldn’t catch him while he sang ‘Run, run, as fast as you can! You can’t catch me! I’m the gingerbread man!’” Hermione said.

“Speaking of that, I’m getting worried about the Coopers,” Ron said, frowning. “That’s an awful lot of running for that old couple to be doing.”

“They must have been quite sprightly for their age,” Hermione said. “The gingerbread man ran on until he came to a river, and a fox was sitting beside it.”

“Golly, I wonder what could happen here,” Ron said. “Would the fox happen to be hungry by any chance and also have a sudden craving for gingerbread?”

“No, actually,” Hermione said.

“No?” Ron and Harry said together.

“No,” Hermione repeated. “The gingerbread man made that assumption too, and he sang out, ‘I’ve run away from a pig, I’ve run away from a cow, I’ve run away from the threshers, I’ve run away from the mowers, I’ve run away from a little old man, and I’ve run away from a little old woman, and I can run away from you, I can!’”

“Sow,” Ron said.

“I beg your pardon, what did you just call me?” Hermione said, looking furious. Harry instinctively reached for his wand and a protective sofa cushion.

“No, no, not you!” Ron said immediately. “The poem the gingerbread man is making up. The other sets of people chasing him rhyme, or sort of rhyme, except the last one:threshers and mowers, man and woman and can, and then there’s cow and . . . pig. It louses up the pattern, but sow would work just fine.”

Hermione gave him an appraising look.

“You know, that’s true. Even though technically threshers and mowers is only a syllabic rhyme, which means the ending syllable is identical but not stressed, and man and woman are more of an eye rhyme or visual rhyme since the vowel sounds look the same but sound a bit different, for all intents and purposes, the little poem he recites does have a definite rhyme scheme until this point, and it would make perfect sense to use the word ‘sow’ here. It fits in terms of the animal and the pattern, but I’ve never seen it used in the story,” Hermione said, her eyes getting the curious, faraway look they took on whenever she was pondering something that neither Harry nor Ron would understand half of. “I wonder if it’s meant to signal the change in the story by abruptly changing the gingerbread man’s form of communication.”

“Yes, that, exactly that,” Ron said. “So what does the fox say?”
Harry shuddered for some reason, but as he couldn’t think of a reason why, he put it up to the cold draughts that often blew through the tent.

“The fox said he wasn’t the least bit hungry and didn’t enjoy gingerbread even if he had been,” Hermione said.

“Huh. Okay, that really is a break from the usual pattern,” Ron said.

“No kidding. But there’s still a river there, right, with the threshers and mowers and old couple and cow and pig—” Harry began.

“Sow,” Ron corrected him.

“All right, and the sow, if you like, coming after him,” Harry said.

“You’ve spotted his trouble,” Hermione said, “and so had the fox, for he said, ‘With all of those people and animals pursuing you, you will need to cross the river, and I don’t think gingerbread will hold together well in water. I was just going to cross the river myself. If you like, you may jump on my back, and I will take you to the other bank.’”

“Uh-huh,” Ron said. “That’s not even the slightest bit suspicious.”

“It’s worth remembering that the gingerbread man really was born only that morning, so to speak, so he wasn’t all that familiar with the ways of the world, nor of the stereotype of foxes being particularly cunning, which really is a remarkably widespread trope,” Hermione said. “In addition, the crowd of angry pursuers were now close enough that he could hear them coming, so the gingerbread man said he was much obliged to the fox and jumped on his back. The fox, for his part, jumped into the water and began to paddle across.”

“Well, I guess if I were a gingerbread man and I had a half-starved pack of nutters after me, I might have made the same choice,” Ron admitted. “I sort of like him at this point.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “He’s a bit twee, but he’s growing on me.”

“A little ways across the river, the fox said to the gingerbread man, ‘The water is growing deeper. It would be safer if you jumped onto my shoulders,’” Hermione said, and Harry noticed she seemed to be looking the smallest bit guilty, but he said nothing. “So the gingerbread man hopped up onto the fox’s shoulders.”

“Okay, I wasn’t even aware a fox had shoulders, but so far he’s dry, right?” Ron said.

“Yes, and now I’m wondering about that too. Is there an actual clavicle bone or at least a scapula at that point in a fox’s skeleton, or is that term used only in bipedal animals with limbs that could be called arms? Now I’m curious,” Hermione said, looking rather put out, and Harry realized she probably hadn’t bothered to bring many books on nonmagical animals on their trip so she wouldn’t be able to research the problem.

“For this story, we’ll assume have shoulders,” Harry said, hoping to placate her.

“Yeah, maybe ask Seamus about it the next time you see him since that’s his Patronus,” Ron said. “Blimey, now I can only imagine the fox with an Irish accent.”

Harry wondered for a second where Seamus would be now: back at Hogwarts, he supposed, but what would that even be like with things the way they now stood? Not easy, of that he was certain. He was just starting to slip back into the grey malaise he had felt earlier while staring at the Horcrux
when to his disbelief he noticed Hermione had pulled out her little beaded bag.

“I know it’s in here somewhere,” Hermione said, and seconds later she produced a book entitled Field Wildlife of Great Britain and Ireland.

“Seriously, woman, was there nothing you didn’t pack?” Ron said.

“Double negative, and of course there was,” Hermione said, running her finger across a diagram that didn’t appear to want to hold still. “I left all Lockhart’s books back at the Burrow. Ah-ha! Yes, there’s no clavicle, but there is a scapula!”

“Great, glad that’s settled,” Ron said, rolling his eyes. “I’ll be able to sleep well tonight.”

“Me too,” Hermione said with a sigh and without the least trace of sarcasm.

“Can we get back to the gingerbread boy and his perilous brush with possible dampness?” Ron asked.

“Oh, right,” Hermione said, snapping the book shut and slipping it carefully into the piles of what Harry now decided were most likely copies every book on the face of the planet, minus Lockhart’s. “Yes, the gingerbread boy was on the fox’s shoulders, and after a few more strokes, the fox said to the gingerbread boy, ‘The water is growing deeper. It would be safer if you jumped onto my head.’”

“I’m sensing another pattern developing here,” Harry said.

“You’re not wrong,” Hermione said. “In some versions, he starts on the tail, then moves to the fox’s rump, then back, then shoulders, then head, but that always seemed like a bit of overkill to me.”

“Just a touch,” Ron said. “So good old Gingy jumps up on the fox’s head, then what?”

“The fox was at the very deepest part of the river now,” Hermione said.

“How wide is this river anyway?” Ron asked suddenly.

“Does it really matter?” Hermione said.

“Considering the fox and the gingerbread man have several miniature conversations while crossing it, it seems pretty enormous,” Ron said.

“Well, perhaps it’s the Mississippi,” Hermione said with a shrug. “It’s a broad river. That’s clear enough.”

“And are the old couple and the grim reapers and the threshers and the cow and the sow pursuing them in boats or anything?” Ron asked.

“You think there’s a cow and a pig rowing a boat?” Hermione said, looking at him incredulously.

“Bakery products can talk in this thing,” Ron said. “It’s not so far outside the range of possibility, is it?”

“When you put it that way, you do have a point,” Hermione said. “I suppose if you want to imagine them being pursued by a small flotilla of scavenged vessels filled with all the other people and creatures chasing the gingerbread man, you have leave to do so.”

“I thank you,” Ron said, bowing, then frowned. “In my head, the cow is paddling a washtub with a Beater’s club.”
“Maybe you’ve been out in the wilderness a bit too long,” Harry said, laughing.

“Haven’t we all, mate,” Ron said, suddenly looking tired. “Haven’t we all.”

“Well, um, the gingerbread man was riding on the fox’s head,” Hermione said quickly, and Harry knew she was hoping to distract them all again, “when once more the fox said to the gingerbread man, ‘The water is growing deeper. It would be safer if you jumped onto my snout.’”

“And he did?” Harry asked.

“He did,” Hermione said, “but that was a mistake, for no sooner had he stepped onto the fox’s snout than the fox opened his mouth and ate him up as the gingerbread boy called out, ‘I’m a quarter gone! I’m half gone! I’m three-quarters gone! I’m all gone!’”

“He took a mathematical inventory of how much of him was gone while he was being eaten?” Ron said, grimacing. “That’s both bizarre and a little disturbing. I mean, I’m sort of still in shock that the gingerbread man is dead, but to actually keep talking while a fox is gnawing on him?”

“Yeah, and exactly how could he say the ‘I’m all gone!’ bit?” Harry asked. “If he were really gone, wouldn’t his head be, you know, in the fox’s mouth being chewed?”

“Again, as Ron so astutely pointed out, the main character is a talking biscuit,” Hermione said. “That he’s talking at all should really be more of a problem than how he can talk while going through the early stages of digestion.”

“Is that the end of the story?” Ron asked.

“Usually it ends with a statement that the gingerbread man got eaten up because after all, that’s what gingerbread men are for,” Hermione said.

“Uh-huh,” Ron said, nodding. “Fine. Well, you’ve done the impossible with that one, Hermione.”

“Oh?” she said.

“Yeah,” Ron said. “That completely took away my appetite. I keep thinking of food I want, and then it immediately stands up and starts talking in my imagination. Forget being a vegetarian, I’m paranoid about eating apples and aubergines at this point.”

“I’m quite certain it’s a temporary condition,” Hermione said with a grin.

“Yeah,” Ron said ruffling his hair. “I suppose you’re right. I’m sure I’ll want breakfast in the morning. What’s that going to be again?”

“A punch in the nose if you don’t look out,” Hermione said. “You know we haven’t anything left. We’ll just have to scavenge again”

Harry sighed and added, “Well, maybe we’ll be in luck and run across a gingerbread man fleeing from a pack of farmhands and talking animals tomorrow morning.”

“Think I might prefer to let that one pass, actually,” Ron said, then he paused, drawing his eyebrows together into a frown. “No, you’re right. It was temporary. I’d eat it.”

All three of them laughed as they started to get ready for bed. The Horcrux still sat on the table, seeming almost to sulk over its inability to vanquish their spirits.
The Little R(ight Bunch of Nutters You Lot Are)ed Hen

Chapter Notes

For notes, please see the first chapter.

“I say we flip a Galleon for it,” Ron said, staring at the last remaining slice of the shepherd’s pie with an expression of such deep desire that Harry thought he might well stab anyone who got between him and it.

They’d had a small bit of luck today, not with the Horcrux, which was no nearer to being destroyed, and not with finding any of the other hidden bits of Voldemort’s soul, but they’d actually gotten a decent dinner for once. Hermione had gotten provisions in town that day, and while she wasn’t the best cook, certainly no match for Mrs. Weasley, she’d carefully followed the directions in a cookbook she’d stowed with the thousand or so other books in her little beaded bag. The result was a pie that, while a bit burned on the crust here and there, was easily their best meal in a week. The only problem was that, as they’d carved away at it, savoring it in small pieces, somehow the pie hadn’t come out quite even, and now there was an extra slice staring up at them from the pan, looking radiantly delicious.

“There’s three of us, you know,” Harry said, “and only two sides to a Galleon.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll do an elimination round,” Ron said. “First Hermione and me, and then the winner goes against you. That sounds fair, right?”

“No, actually,” Hermione said, folding her arms and looking remarkably cross.

Harry and Ron both turned to look at her. Harry had spent enough time with Hermione to realize that the gleam in her eye did not bode well.

“What’s wrong with it then?” asked Ron, looking ill-tempered in heartbeat.

“Has either of you perhaps forgotten to say something about the pie?” Hermione asked testily.

“Ehm, it was a little burnt, but I was trying to let that pass without comment,” Ron said, shrugging. “You shouldn’t feel too bad about it.”

“Bad about it!” Hermione cried, her eyes the size of Quaffles. “Are you mad! What about a bit of a thank you?”

“Oh, well, you’re welcome,” Ron said.

“What?” Hermione said, completely confused.

“I said you’re welcome,” Ron said.

“What precisely did you do in order to deserve thanks for this meal?” Hermione said, and Harry inched his chair back from the table a bit to be out of harm’s way.

“Well, obviously, you never would have been able to get the pie done if Harry and I hadn’t been out
“Ron,” Hermione said in an even, measured voice whose tightly controlled tones suggested she might be about to explode, “you and Harry took the day off and went to play an improvised round of Quidditch in the woods today.”

“Oh,” Ron said, deflating and looking rather guilty. “I forgot we told you we were going to do that.”

“Just how easy do you think it was to come up with this dinner?” she said.

“Fairly.” Ron said. “I mean, it’s only a pie, not an N.E.W.T. level examination or something. There’s a reason they say something is easy as pie, yeah?”

“I thought it was really good,” Harry said, smiling weakly and wishing not for the first or last time that the tent was larger so he could get well out of their way.

“Yes, it was,” Hermione said firmly. “And if it’s so easy, Ron, you try it next time.”

“That’s just silly,” Ron said.

“Why?” Hermione said, looking furious.

“Because you’re a girl and I’m not,” Ron said as though this should be obvious. “Everyone knows girls are better at this sort of thing.”

“I’d call you Medieval but wizarding society was far more egalitarian back then than Muggles were, so that’s not even accurate!” Hermione said as her face turned bright red.

“Ron, that one’s bang out of order,” Harry said, deciding he’d best step in or else things were going to get out of control.

“Mum always does the cooking,” Ron said mulishly.

“And your Mum spoils you rotten,” Hermione said.

“Leave my Mum out of this,” Ron said, now getting nearly as red in the face as she was.

“I’m not insulting your mother. I’m insulting you, you Neanderthal, and I’ll say as I like!” Hermione said, her voice rising much higher.

“Hold it!” Harry said, stepping between them as he noticed them both starting to reach for their wands. He didn’t want to deal with undoing hexes for half the night. “This is getting out of control. Just stop and breathe a second. Maybe it’s the Horcrux again.”

It was currently slung over the back of a chair about six feet away, but it somehow looked positively ecstatic at all the commotion. It seemed to glow with a dull greenish light that reminded Harry of the dank, fetid atmosphere in the Chamber of Secrets.

Ron sighed and tilted chair towards the wall, nearly falling over he was so far back.

“Okay, sorry. Maybe I took it a bit far,” Ron said with a sigh.

“A bit more than a bit,” Hermione said, still looking furious. “I feel like the little red hen.”

“The what?” Ron asked.
“The little red hen. It’s another Muggle story,” Hermione said.

“Is the little red hen Little Red Riding Hood’s pet chicken?” Ron asked.

“No,” Hermione said. “Not as far as I know.”

“Oh, too bad. That one was deliciously mental,” Ron said, looking glum.

“But how about you tell us this other one?” Harry asked, hoping it might break up the tension. Any distraction was welcome, even if it meant that the last slice of pie was going to be cold when whoever was going to eat it got the chance.

Hermione heaved a sigh herself, then nodded, probably seeing the wisdom of the suggestion.

“Once upon a time,” Hermione began, and while Ron didn’t chime in, he waved his fork in rhythm with the phrase they all knew so well by now, “there was a little red hen.”

“Named?” Ron asked.

“She’s not. She’s just a little red hen, that’s all,” Hermione said. “None of the characters have names in this one.”

“As it’s a chicken, I’ll let it go,” Ron said.

“Thank you,” Hermione said sarcastically. “This little red hen very much wanted some fresh bread, so she bought a bag of wheat seed.”

“Why wheat seed?” Ron asked.

“Because she needed to grow the wheat to make flour for the bread,” Hermione explained.

Harry noticed Hermione already seemed a little calmer, and he started to breathe more easily. Ron, on the other hand, only looked perplexed.

“Okay, I get that, but why not just buy a loaf of bread instead?” Ron said.

“Because, well, because—,” Hermione’s voice trailed off. “Perhaps there wasn’t a bakery about.”

“Just a shop that sells wheat seed?” Ron asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Apparently so,” Hermione said, giving him a look that almost dared him to contradict this, but he shrugged and accepted it, or at least he seemed to for a moment, though Harry could almost see the next question forming in his head before he even opened his mouth.

“Where did she get the money for the wheat seed?” Ron asked.

“I have no idea,” Hermione said, folding her arms. “She just had it. Maybe her wealthy bachelor rooster uncle left it to her, or maybe someone dropped a few Galleons in the farmyard, or maybe she pilfered the farmer’s savings that he kept in a sweets tin in the kitchen, or maybe it fell out of the air, or maybe she took to ruddy highway robbery, but regardless, she had the money to buy the seed, so she bought it. Is that all right, Ronald?”

“I suppose so,” Ron said, “though I’d rather like to hear the story of the highway robber hen. But wouldn’t a chicken rather eat the wheat seed raw than eat it in bread to begin with? Why doesn’t she just eat the seed?”
Harry mentally took it all back. Hermione was not calm anymore. In fact, she looked like the personification of a potion that was about to boil over.

“Because that’s not how the story goes,” Hermione said, her voice strained and her lips barely moving from tension.

“Okay, fine,” Ron said, appearing perfectly at ease. “So we have a little red hen who has somehow got money, possibly via criminal means, and who prefers to use it to buy wheat seed, not to eat it directly, but to make bread. Am I getting it so far?”

“Yes, perfectly,” Hermione said through her gritted teeth, and Harry saw her take a deep breath, collect herself and continue on with laudable control. “The little red hen went to the dog on the farm and asked, ‘Will you help me plant the wheat seed?’”

Hermione’s version of the little red hen’s voice was rather high pitched, but it sounded something like Mrs. Weasley, Harry thought.

“And how did the dog respond to the freakish talking hen with monetary assets and a penchant for farming?” Ron asked.

“He said, ‘No!’” Hermione replied, making it sound rather like a bark, actually quite a bit like Sirius’s, now that Harry thought of it.

“Sensible. Dogs don’t do well as farmers. Chickens rarely do either, actually,” Ron said.

“Then she asked the cat, ‘Will you help me plant the wheat seed?’ and the cat said, ‘No!’” Hermione continued, the cat’s voice coming out as whine that reminded Harry a little of Mrs. Norris.

“The hen asked a cat for help?” Ron said. “Don’t cats usually eat birds?”

“Well, this one didn’t,” Hermione said, “possibly because, like the dog, it was rather lazy.”

“Or it just didn’t want to take up wheat farming in all its spare time,” Ron said.

“Did she ask anyone else for help?” Harry piped in, thinking perhaps getting back to the plot might prevent another near hex attack.

“Yes,” Hermione said, directing her gaze at him abruptly as though she’d almost forgot he was he there. “She went to a rat and said, ‘Will you help me plant the wheat seed?’ and the rat replied, ‘No!’”

Harry was trying very hard not to picture Wormtail, or at least Scabbers, as the rat, but he was failing miserably. Hermione had given it a squeaky little voice that sounded nothing like Pettigrew, but still, having already pictured Sirius and Mrs. Norris, he supposed it was inevitable that the rat would show up as someone he knew as well.

“Wouldn’t a rat just rip into a bag of wheat seed and eat it all?” Ron asked.

Harry wondered if Hermione had possessed enough foresight to pack duct tape in her little beaded bag that one of them could slap over Ron’s mouth to shut him up. He really just did not know when to stop.

“Perhaps a regular rat might, but not this one,” Hermione said, her voice still very carefully controlled. “The little red hen replied, ‘Then I shall do it all myself,’ and so she did.”
“How did the hen plant the wheat seed?” Ron asked. “I mean, she doesn’t have hands, so she can’t use a shovel or something. Actually I’m a little confused how she carried the wheat seed home at all, but we’ll just gloss over that. I suppose she could scratch in the dirt with her feet and maybe peck at it or something, but that would take an awfully long time.”

“Yes, it would,” Hermione said, “which is rather the point. The little red hen worked very hard to plant her wheat seed, and she tended it carefully, making sure it was well watered and the weeds were pulled, and in time it grew into a beautiful, tall, waving field of wheat, and so help me, Ron, if you ask how she managed to water and weed, I will hex you with a Jelly-Legs Jinx the next time you’re not looking.”

“Fine, fine,” Ron said, then glanced at Harry and mouthed, “Touchy, isn’t she?”

“When the wheat was ready to be harvested, she went once again to the dog,” Hermione said, but Ron raised his hand. “Yes?”

“Is this winter wheat or summer wheat?” Ron asked.

“What on earth does that have to do with anything?” Hermione asked.

“In the last story, you mentioned winter wheat comes ripe in June, and summer wheat in more towards August. I’m just trying to picture everything properly,” Ron said.

“You remembered the ripening dates of wheat in ‘The Gingerbread Man’?” Hermione said, sounding, Harry thought, rather touched.

“Sure. I pay attention – more than you know,” Ron said, giving her a winning smile, and Harry saw her color slightly. He restrained himself from rolling his eyes.

“And what did she say to the dog?” Harry asked.

“Oh, right!” Hermione said, jolting back to reality. “Ehm, she said, ‘Will you help me cut the wheat?’ and the dog replied once again, ‘No!’”

“Can’t blame him,” Ron said. “I mean, okay, a hen could peck seed into the ground, and I guess a dog or cat or rat probably could too, but a dog’s paws just aren’t going to do well with those scythe thingies.”

“I suppose he could bite the wheat down,” Harry said, deciding he might as well jump in.

“True,” Ron conceded, “but as he’s not interested, I suppose it doesn’t matter.”

“Correct,” Hermione said. “Next the little red hen went to the cat and said, ‘Will you help me cut the wheat?’ and the cat replied once again, ‘No!’”

“Okay, that one might possibly have made sense,” Ron said. “Hermione, you’ve got a cat. Could Crookshanks use his claws to cut down wheat or not?”

Hermione pursed her lips in thought for a moment.

“I’m not sure,” she finally said. “He could certainly scratch at the wheat well enough, but I don’t suppose it would be particularly effective. Still, he’s quite determined when he makes up his mind about something, so at least if the cat was part-Kneazle, I’d say it’s possible, but not probable.”

“He’s part-Kneazle?” Ron said, looking surprised and Harry thought more than a little impressed.
“Seriously?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, smiling. “I suspected he might be after everything that happened with Sirius in third year, but I kept forgetting to ask Hagrid to confirm it for me until last autumn, and yes, he said Crookshanks is definitely at least half Kneazle."

“Okay, fine, I’ll look like a prat and ask. What’s a Kneazle?” Harry asked. Normally he knew most of the references to the wizarding world now, but he wasn’t familiar with this one.

“Oh, sorry,” Ron said. “They look like cats, but they’re really smart.”

“Yes, and they can tell when a person is trustworthy, and they’re usually very fond of their owners and can be quite aggressive with anyone else,” Hermione said. “Hagrid never talked about them in class because, well, they’re more or less…”

“Cuddly,” Ron provided. “Cute. Non-life threatening. Oh, and they aren’t poisonous and don’t breathe fire.”

“So obviously they’re not especially interesting to him,” Hermione said, laughing a little.

Harry and Ron both joined in. It was a lot easier to laugh about Hagrid’s penchant for Skrewts and Acromantulas when they didn’t have to face them every day. Still, Harry thought, a good old fashioned fight with a giant spider might burn off a bit of their pent up energy from their fruitless search for Horcruxes. With a shudder, he realized he really must be homesick for Hogwarts if he was thinking fondly of Aragog’s hideously huge family.

“What?” Ron asked. “You look like you just swallowed a Wrackspurt.”

“Can one swallow an imaginary animal?” Hermione asked innocently.

“Don’t tell Luna that,” Harry said, “not unless you want a twenty minute lecture.”

“I miss her,” Ron said, smiling. “She’s always good for a laugh. Have you seen her on the Maurauder’s Map lately?”

“You know, now that you mention it, no,” Harry said slowly. “I haven’t really been specifically looking for her, but then a lot of names are missing. I think some parents are pulling their kids out of school, so maybe Xenophilius brought her home.”

At least he hoped that was the case. Harry found the gaping holes in some of the classrooms more than a little troubling. While it was entirely possible that the missing students were back home and safe, it was also possible something horrible had happened. Silence fell over the three of them, and Harry knew they were all thinking the same thing.

“I’m sure that’s what it is,” Hermione said, sounding anything but sure.

“Rat,” Ron said.

“What?” Hermione asked.

“Rat,” Ron repeated. “We know the cat and the dog won’t help the red hen cut the wheat, but I’m guessing she asks the rat next.”

“Oh, right, I’d almost forgotten,” Hermione said. “Yes, the little red hen does indeed ask the rat to help her cut the wheat, and he refuses as well.”
“You didn’t say it right,” Ron said, a whine creeping into his voice.

“Oh, for pity’s sake,” Hermione said, rolling her eyes, but Harry knew what Ron was doing: defusing the situation, and remarkably well. “The little red hen asked the rat, ‘Will you help me cut the wheat?’ and the rat replied, ‘No!’”

“That’s more like it,” Ron said, sitting back further in his chair once again in satisfaction. “You’ve got to do these things properly or they don’t work, like saying the words in a spell in the right order.”

“You know, you really do have a point,” Hermione said. “I suppose that’s part of the charm of the story, really, the repetitive pattern of it. Anyway, the little red hen said, ‘Then I shall do it all myself,’ and so she did.”

“Too bad she couldn’t nab the reapers from that last story about the nutty gingerbread man,” Ron said.

“She could have hired reapers if she really wanted to, what with having pocket money to buy wheat seed in the first place,” Harry said.

“I suppose she could have, but she did do all the work herself, or so the story says,” Hermione said.

“So, after the little red hen pecked down an entire field of wheat on her own, which should probably take a few centuries or so, what happened?” Ron asked.

“The little red hen went to the dog and said, ‘Will you help me grind the wheat?’ and the dog said, ‘No!’” Hermione said.

“You know, I think she might need to realize these other animals have no interest at all in helping her out here,” Ron said. “She’s beating a dead Thestral at this point.”

“Ah, but she actually does have a reason, though, which will be revealed in time,” Hermione said mysteriously. “Next she went to the cat and said, ‘Will you help me grind the wheat?’ but the cat said ‘No!’ as well.”

“So far, so good,” Ron said.

“Finally she went to the rat and said, ‘Will you help me grind the wheat?’ but the rat too said ‘No!’ ‘Fine,’ said the little red hen. ‘Then I shall do it all myself,’ and so she did.”

Hermione looked expectantly at Ron.

“What?” he said.

“Aren’t you going to ask how a little red hen could grind wheat all by herself?” Hermione asked.

“She’s already got money, planted a field, and cut down the wheat by herself. Throwing some wheat on a millstone to grind it down really doesn’t seem all that out of the realm of possibility in comparison,” Ron said.

“When you put it that way, I suppose it isn’t the hardest thing she’s had to do, particularly if the mill happens to be operated via a waterwheel, which would make it self-propelling, of course, and that sort of Muggle technology would definitely have been available during that time,” Hermione said. “The actual difficulty would come with hauling the wheat to the mill, I suppose, though that’s never explicitly mentioned, and all the versions of the story seem to skip the step of preparing the wheat to be ground by removing the chaff first. On the whole, yes, you’re right. The little red hen really has
done much more difficult tasks than this in the story already.”

“I’m right,” Ron said, smiling and nodding. “I have no idea what you’ve just said, but I’m right, so
I’ll take it.”

Hermione heaved another long-suffering sigh, but pressed on.

“Once the wheat was ground into flour, the little red hen went to the dog and asked, ‘Will you help
me bake the bread?’ and the dog said, ‘No!’” Hermione said.

“I’d nearly forgot she wanted bread to begin with,” Harry said.

“Yeah, what was that, seven, eight months ago?” Ron said. “Wouldn’t she have starved to death by
now?”

“I’m fairly certain she’s eaten since then, Ron,” Hermione said, rubbing the bridge of her nose to
ease tension. “And wheat usually takes about five to six months to reach maturity.”

“Duly noted,” Ron said. “So the dog doesn’t like baking bread. How about the cat?”

“The little red hen asked the cat, ‘Will you help me bake the bread?’ and the cat said, ‘No!’ too,”
Hermione said.

“Uh-huh,” Ron said, leaning forward on his chair excitedly. “And the rat?”

“The little red hen asked the rat, ‘Will you help me bake the bread?’ and the rat said, ‘No!’ as well,”
Hermione said.

Ron looked crestfallen. “Oh,” he said.

“What?” Hermione asked.

“No, I just thought for some reason that it would go differently this time,” Ron said. “Still, imagine a
dog, a cat, and a rat all kneading bread dough. That’d be a right old mess, fur and hair in the bread
and all. I think I’d rather have a stray feather or two in it myself than that.”

Harry and Hermione both grimaced.

“You do have a point,” Hermione said, looking rather ill before she continued. “The little red hen
replied, ‘Then I shall do it all myself,’ and so she did.”

“I miss Mum’s bread,” Ron said wistfully. “That’s a good smell in the morning, fresh bread and all
that. And bacon, and eggs frying up, and maybe some sausages in the pan. Best alarm clock ever.”

“It is a good smell,” Hermione agreed.

“I usually did the sausages and bacon for the Dursleys,” Harry said. “They never had a good word to
say about them, but they ate them fast enough. I never made bread, though.”

“It’s very time consuming, especially when you can just go to a shop and get a loaf ready made for
very little money, but I suppose there’s something satisfying about it, rather like making a
complicated potion,” Hermione said. “I may have to get your mum to show me how to make it when
this is all over and done.”

“She’d like that,” Ron said. “She’s fond of you, you know.”
“Well, I like her quite a bit as well,” Hermione said, rather embarrassed.

Harry thought he might just choke on the unspoken theory that they would make a lovely pair of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, so he broke in and said, “The bread’s made. Then what?”

“Oh, well,” Hermione said, looking a bit ruffled but plodding on. “Yes, the little red hen did indeed make a lovely loaf of bread, piping hot from the oven.”

“Just one?” Ron said. “From all that wheat?”

“Well, she made at least one to start with. The wheat won’t go bad all in a minute, you know. She probably kept the rest for later,” Hermione said.

“I suppose that’s fair,” Ron said.

“Or maybe she left some of the wheat for seed for the next year,” Hermione said, drifting into her own thoughts. “If she reserved a good portion of the wheat seed, she could actually go into the business of agriculture herself, suggesting that the story is on some level a fable on the importance of independent determination of one’s destiny as well as the facilitating of a previous farm laborer, namely the hen, with the endowment of land rights and her own form of industry, made even more impressive under the strictures of the culture and era by her female gender. That could suggest a latent criticism of the farm system of the time period, in which a few families owned the land worked by many others, but in this case the hen achieves self-sufficiency through her efforts. It’s really quite an uplifting theme, really.”

“Uh-huh,” Ron said, “or maybe she just didn’t plant all that much wheat to start with since she’s a hen.”

“Also a possibility,” Hermione said. “Anyway, the dog, the cat, and the rat, smelling the tantalizing aroma of the bread wafting from the kitchen window, had all wandered over to the little red hen and were standing at the door. ‘Will you help me eat the bread?’ asked the little red hen. ‘Yes!’ cried the dog, the cat, and the rat together.”

“Aw, that’s nice,” Ron said.

“‘No!’ cried the little red hen,” Hermione said.

“Wait, what?” Ron said.

“The little red hen said, ‘I planted the seed, I cut the wheat, I ground the wheat into flour, and I baked the bread all by myself, and I shall eat it all by myself as well!’ And so she did, enjoying it very much,” Hermione said. “The end.”

Ron frowned.

“That seems rather mean,” he said. “She’s going to eat the whole loaf of bread on her own?”

“Well, they didn’t do anything to help her, but they were perfectly willing to eat what she’d worked for so hard without so much as a thank you,” Hermione said. “Some versions of the story do have the little red hen relent and give them some of the bread if they promise to help her next time, but that sort of undermines the point of the story, really.”

“I suppose so,” Ron said, still sounding dissatisfied. “So what does this have to do with the shepherd’s pie again?”
“Well, let’s think for a second about exactly how that pie got here,” Hermione said, feigning innocence. “Let’s see. While you and Harry were playing Quidditch, I rationed out a tiny portion of the Polyjuice Potion I brewed back at the Burrow. Then I used the Invisibility Cloak and went into town. I did a summoning charm to get a bit of hair from the dustbin in the alley in back of a women’s beauty parlor and used it to look like one of the locals. After I transformed, which still hurts quite badly, you just don’t get used to that, I went into a shop and bought the ingredients for shepherd’s pie with some of the Muggle money I packed last July, then ran back to the tent, getting here about a minute before the potion wore off. After that, I baked the pie and had it ready and hot when you got in.”

Harry and Ron exchanged slightly guilty looks.

“At least you didn’t eat it all yourself like the hen,” Harry said.

“Yeah, you’ve earned the last piece,” Ron said. “Take it.”

“Oh, forget it,” Hermione said, sighing. “Let’s just split it three ways and have done with it. I won’t enjoy it all by myself anyway.”

“Really?” Harry and Ron said together.

“Yes, really,” she said, smiling. “But I get to have a day off tomorrow, right?”

“Too right you should,” Ron said, picking up his fork and taking a bite of the crust. “You know, ‘Mione, this really is a good pie.”

Harry saw her blush a little as she mumbled a thank you and took a bite herself, then Harry followed suit. Somehow in the end, the slice came out even, and they all felt a bit fuller.

“It’s getting late,” Hermione said, checking the clock on the wall that said it was nearly midnight. “If we want an early start again tomorrow to head for the Cornish coastline, we really should all get to bed.”

“I suppose, but it’s so nice to be full that I don’t want to miss it by being asleep,” Ron said, patting his stomach fondly.


They both wished her a good night, and in a few minutes it was obvious she was asleep behind the little curtained alcove that served as her bedroom.

“When we get out of this,” Ron said, turning to Harry, “I’m buying her a whole crate of Mrs. Torpington’s Magically Delicious Meat Pies, sticking a bow on it, and giving them to her for Christmas, possibly every year for the rest of our lives.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Harry said, and the pair of them sat there a long while in companionable silence, for once not feeling hunger pangs, the tent a quiet eye in the storm that surrounded them.
They were getting absolutely nowhere. Harry was sure of it now, and he was just as sure that the fact he had no idea of how to find the next Horcrux was beginning to dawn on the other two inhabitants of the tent. Ron was becoming ever more cross, and Hermione had taken to lapsing into silent thought for hours at a time. Harry was hoping she might puzzle out the location of the next bit of Voldemort’s soul. Of the three of them, she was easily the most likely to be able to solve the riddle, but the furrows in her brow told him that even if that was what she was attempting to do, she hadn’t been successful.

He suspected they should try shifting their focus to destroying the Horcrux they already had, but he honestly had about as little an idea of how to do that as how to find the other missing ones. He’d thought that possibly they might try looking up Norbert in Romania. Dragon fire at least wouldn’t do the ugly locket any good. He was just about to ask Hermione if she thought it was worth trying when Ron heaved a sigh. Here it comes, thought Harry. He’s about to tell me that I have no idea what I’m doing.

“Is today Tuesday or Wednesday?” Ron asked, looking from one of them to the other.

“Actually, it’s Thursday,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said, settling back against a cushion. “They’re starting to run together. Are there any apples left?”

“No,” Hermione said.

“Bread?”

“No.”

“Chips?”

“No.”

“Walnuts?”

“No.”

“Filet mignon?”

“No,” Hermione began to reply automatically, then stopped. “We’ve never had any filet mignon out here, Ron.”

“I know,” he said, “but if I’m going to hear ‘no’ to every single thing I ask about anyway, then why not at least list off something really good?”
“Oh. Well then, your logic is irrefutable,” Hermione said. “For the record, we also don’t have any chocolate, bacon, pot roast, crepes, or fried chicken.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, abruptly grabbing her little beaded bag from a nearby table.

“Do not open that!” Hermione yelled so loudly that Harry nearly fell off his chair. She swiped the bag out of Ron’s hand and clutched it defensively.

“Okay, okay!” Ron said, looking taken aback. “It’s just a purse, Hermione, not Merlin’s wand. Why can’t we poke around in it as well as you?”

“Because it happens to be my purse,” Hermione said, setting her jaw with steely resolve, “and my private property is in there that I don’t necessarily want the pair of you pawing about. Besides, it’s all organized and you’ll only put things out of order so I won’t be able to find important items when we need them.”

“Or you’re hiding a giant bar of Honeyduke’s in there,” Ron said suspiciously.

“I am not!” Hermione said, looking livid.

“He’s only joking,” Harry said, hoping he was right. Sometimes it was very hard to tell if Ron was being serious, particularly about food. “We know you’re not hoarding sweets.”

“I should hope so,” Hermione said, relinquishing her death grip on the bag a tiny bit. “The very last of the tinned food went a week ago Tuesday. Even the mints are gone.”

“Fine, I believe you, but what else have you got in there? Well, aside from half of the library, a bevy of potions ingredients, and a few changes of clothes, obviously?” Ron asked.

“I think you’re getting far too curious for your own good,” Hermione said.

“So?” Ron said.

“Haven’t you ever heard the old saying ‘curiosity killed the cat’?” Hermione asked.

“No,” Ron said, wrinkling his nose in disgust. “That’s a stupid saying. And also, sad.”

“Wait, doesn’t the other half go, ‘but satisfaction brought it back’?” Harry said.

“Well, yes,” Hermione admitted, “though that bit is usually forgot. Still, too much curiosity can lead to finding out things you don’t want to learn.”

“I don’t suppose there would happen to be a story about that, now would there?” Ron asked.

Harry watched as Hermione seemed to flip through a mental catalogue of all the stories she knew, and he could nearly see the light bulb flip on over her head when she hit upon the right one.

“Technically it’s not precisely about curiosity being bad, at least that shouldn’t really be taken an as the story’s moral, but I think the tale of ‘Bluebeard’ should suffice,” Hermione said, assuming her usual cross-legged position as storyteller.

“Bluebeard?” Ron asked, perking up. “Is he a pirate?

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“Okay, then in my head, he’s now a former pirate,” Ron said, smiling. “So, go on. Once…”

“…upon a time,” Hermione finished for him, and Harry realized that they’d actually switched places for that go, “there lived a very wealthy aristocrat who owned a fine castle, beautiful grounds, and all the comforts one could ask for.”

“Sounds good,” Ron said.

“At this point I’d settle for a decent bathroom,” Harry said. “I miss the Prefect’s Bathroom at Hogwarts.”

“Yeah, I’ve got to admit, that thing was amazing,” Ron said, a dreamy smile on his face. “Hot water, bubbles in every color of the rainbow, and that flirty mermaid.”

Hermione frowned for a moment before shrugging and adding, “Oh, I suppose I miss that bit too. Not the mermaid, though, but the scented foam. I could never decide whether I liked the lilac tap or the rose one best.”

Harry nodded, remembering the bubbles the size of Quaffles. When Cedric had first given him the password to even things up during the Triwizard Tournament, he’d thought he might never get the chance to swim laps in that gorgeous marble tub again. However, since he’d been made Quidditch captain in sixth year, he’d had access to the bath on his own merits, this time without the pressure of that shrieking egg or Moaning Myrtle and her prying eyes. At least he thought Myrtle had deserted the bathroom. Actually, hoped might be a better word. Just as he was beginning to get a queasy feeling from pondering whether or not Myrtle really had floated back to her own toilet, he noticed Ron’s eyes looking rather glazed. Harry realized what Hermione had just been talking about, put two and two together as to the mental pictures Ron was drawing, and said very loudly, “So what’s the pill in all the jam?”

“Huh!” Ron said, snapping back to himself. “Um, yeah, it’s too good.”

“You’re quite right, for this man had a very ugly beard that was a dark, forbidding shade of blue. That’s why everyone called him Bluebeard,” Hermione said. “He was feared for his terrifying, inhuman looks, and all the people who lived nearby were frightened to talk to him.”

“Why didn’t he just shave?” Ron asked.

Hermione blinked at him.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I suppose that would have solved the problem, though it might have been highly unusual for a grown man not to have a beard in some cultures during various times in history. It may have made him look rather effeminate.”

“Effeminate?” Ron asked.

“Feminine,” Hermione explained. “It might emasculate him.”

“Emasculate?” Ron asked.

“Feminize,” Hermione said.

“Wait, effeminate and emasculate mean the same thing?” Ron said.

“Effectively, yes,” Hermione said. “One’s an adjective and the other’s a verb, though, at least in this usage.”
“Uh-huh. That makes absolutely no sense anyway,” Ron said. “Stick an e on the front of masculine and feminine and they really should be opposites, shouldn’t they?”

“I never exactly understood that either,” Hermione admitted.

“Yes, but what’s up with Bluebeard?” Harry said, trying to draw them back to the story.

“Oh, well, he’d been married several times, but no one knew what had happened to his previous wives,” Hermione said.

“How many times?” Ron asked.

“About six or seven. No one was quite sure,” Hermione said. “He kept pretty much to himself.”

“Six or seven?” Harry said. “I wouldn’t exactly call that keeping to himself. And nobody’s noticed what’s happened to all the former Mrs. Bluebeards?”

“Yeah, that’s a rather large collection,” Ron said. “Did they die or just get divorced?”

“Divorce would have been almost unheard of back then, so they most likely died,” Hermione said.

“Poor guy. That’s rotten luck,” Ron said.

“Hmm,” Hermione said, but left the comment at that before resuming the story. “Bluebeard wanted to marry again, so he tried to court a pair of sisters from a neighboring town, hoping one of them would accept him.”

“After a half a dozen of so wives, you’d think this bloke would give up and just enjoy bachelorhood,” Ron said. “But do the two sisters know about each other? I mean, that he’s flirting about with both of them?”

“Yes, they both know,” Hermione said.

“At least he’s being above board with it,” Ron said. “Playing one off the other would be a pretty stupid idea.”

“Yes, but the problem was both sisters rejected him, terrified of his blue beard,” Hermione said.

“That’s a bit sad,” Ron said. “Could he just dye it?”

“No, Ronald, he could not just dye it. That’s the point! He is strange and other worldly and somewhat supernatural in appearance and it’s highly off-putting to everyone around him,” Hermione said.

“This is one of these things where I’m supposed to just go with it, right?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“Well, I’ll try,” he said uncertainly, “but it seems to be a new level of stupid for these things. A blue beard, I ask you!”

Hermione sighed heavily, and Harry just scratched his head and attempted to look as though he didn’t completely agree with Ron.

“After Bluebeard had been turned down by the sisters, he gave one last attempt at persuading them by hosting a lavish party at his home in their honor. Very few people had ever been inside his castle
before, and he invited everyone in the town, high born and low, to attend. There were piles of food, roasts and fowls and fish, and vegetables and fruits arranged beautifully on silver platters, along with a countless assortment of tarts and cakes, biscuits and puddings of all kinds. The silver glowed in the warm firelight, rich tapestries in jewel bright colors hung from the walls, the marble floors glistened with intricate mosaics, and in short, there was not a single comfort that money could buy missing from the celebration,” Hermione said.

Harry glanced over at Ron, and the look of unadulterated longing written across his face was certainly not the result of pondering Bluebeard’s floor mosaics.

“That sounds incredible,” Ron managed to say without quite drooling, though it was a near miss. “Sweet Merlin, I miss the feasts in the Great Hall.”

“Me too,” Hermione said to Harry’s surprise, sounding nostalgic. “Oh, those morning kippers!”

“And here I thought you’d be too upset over Elf rights to enjoy that,” Harry said.

“It does bother me, but refusing to eat what the Elves have worked so hard on just insults them,” Hermione said primly. “It’s more effective to lobby on behalf of better treatment.”

“Uh-huh,” Ron said, grinning. “Also, the kippers were really, really good.”

“Oh, fine, yes, they were,” Hermione admitted in a huff.

“I miss the treacle tart,” Harry admitted.

“What is it with you and treacle tart, mate?” Ron asked. “I don’t get the appeal.”

“I don’t know. I just like it,” Harry said with a shrug. “Your mum’s is even better than the one at Hogwarts.”

“Weird,” Ron said, and Harry thought it was rather rich of Ron to be criticizing anybody else’s enthusiasm for food. “Anyway, did Bluebeard’s smorgasbord get the job done?”

“Actually, yes,” Hermione said. “While the elder daughter still refused him, the younger one decided that it would be silly of her to turn down a suitor who was obviously wealthy and treated his guests with such hospitality.”

“She does have a bit of a point, but I’m not sure how good an idea it is to marry someone just because they can throw a good party,” Harry said.

“True,” Ron said, then got a dreamy look on his face and added, “but the food does sound amazing.”

“Well, it’s possible the two sisters were actually peasants and might well have been starving, so being able to eat regularly without fear of starving probably would be a very persuasive argument, particularly in a time period when there was much less emphasis placed on romantic feeling in marriage and more on the ability to provide for a family,” Hermione said.

“I guess that does make sense,” Harry said. “So then what?”

“Within a week, Bluebeard and the younger sister were married. All went very well for about a month, and then Bluebeard had to leave the castle for several days to conduct some business in a distant city,” Hermione said.

“Probably going back to his pirate ship to pillage a bit for old time’s sake,” Ron said.
“Whatever his business might be, he gave the keys to the castle to his new bride and told her to amuse herself however she fancied and to invite her sister and any friends she wished to keep her company in his absence. She could use any of the fine dishes or food in the larder, and she could have as much money as she liked to do with as she pleased,” Hermione said.

“That seems pretty generous,” Harry said.

“Not really,” Ron replied, and Harry and Hermione looked at him in surprise.

“Why not?” Harry asked.

“Well, if they’re married, doesn’t all of that belong to her now as much as it belongs to him? Or it should, at least. She shouldn’t have to get special permission just to eat the food and use the silverware in her own house,” Ron said.

“That’s an excellent point,” Hermione said, beaming at him. “Of course, during the era of this story, Muggle society didn’t see things with as broadminded a view as you just did, so it would have been regarded as a special treat for a wife to have so much freedom back then.”

“Mum would have a fit if Dad told her how to run her kitchen,” Ron said, nodding. “He’d be sleeping in the broom shed for a month if he tried that, and for good reason.”

Hermione nodded in agreement, and Harry had to admit that Ron had just scored more points with her than a Seeker catching a Snitch. He felt like applauding.

“However, amidst all of this, Bluebeard did give one warning to his new bride,” Hermione said. “He told her what every key was for, but one in particular he pointed out to her. ‘This unlocks a storeroom on the lowest level. Under no circumstances are you to open that door or you will risk my greatest displeasure. Any other door is open to you, save that one,’” Hermione said in what Harry thought was a rather too spooky voice.

“Okay, so how long is he gone before she heads directly to the forbidden storeroom like a Niffler after a Galleon?” Ron asked.

“Not long at all,” Hermione said. “How did you guess?”

“Eh, women can never resist doing something they’re told not to do,” Ron said casually, and Harry watched as the scoreboard in the Great Ron and Hermione Quidditch Match of Love suddenly plunged into the negative digits for his side.

“Really?” Hermione said in a freezing cold tone.

“Ehm, well, not everyone?” Ron backpedaled, giving a weak smile as though he’d just realized what he’d said.

“Mm-hmm,” Hermione said, fixing him with a look McGonagall would have envied and continuing onward. “The bride did give a feast, inviting all and sundry to another party, and musicians played, food was cooked, and games of all sorts amused the guests. But in spite of all the distractions, her mind was fixed on the forbidden key. Even before the partygoers went home, she had descended the winding stairs towards the lowest level of the castle.”

“Didn’t they wonder where she’d gone?” Harry asked.

“They were probably far too busy dancing and eating to notice,” Hermione said.
“By the by, does the girl have a name in this?” Ron asked. “It’s getting a bit annoying to keep calling her the bride.”

“No, she doesn’t, although her sister is called Anne,” Hermione said, still sounding rather chilly towards him.

“Bit odd, that, since the other one hasn’t done much, at least yet,” Ron said.

“I suppose so,” she said, then took a breath to continue.

“Calisto,” Ron said suddenly.

“What?” Hermione said.

“I’ve decided to call her Calisto. It bothers me less that way,” Ron said, folding his arms decidedly.

“Why Calisto?” Harry asked.

“Why not?” Ron said with a shrug.

“Regardless of the status of her nomenclature, the bride stood outside the door of what must be the storeroom, glancing between the great iron lock and the forbidden key in her hand. Finally, she put the key in the lock, turned it, and swung the door open,” Hermione said.

“And?” Harry asked, more than a little curious himself.

“The light in the room was very dim, and she had to hold aloft the lantern she had brought with her to see at all, but when she did, she recoiled in such horror that she dropped the ring of keys on the floor with a deafening clatter,” Hermione said.

“Why?” Harry asked.

“Because the corpses of all of Bluebeard’s previous wives were hanging on meathooks on the walls, and the floor was covered in their dried blood,” Hermione said in her most terrifying voice.

“Now that’s just outright disturbing.” Ron said, shuddering. “I figured he might have offed them, what with the way these stories usually go, but the meat hook thing and the blood on the floor puts this very near the top of the list of deeply unpleasant images.”

“I’ve got to agree there,” Harry said. “Even if he did kill them, why keep all the bodies in the storeroom instead of getting rid of them?”

“Trophy room?” Ron said, looking sick.

“Probably,” Hermione said. “In any case, the girl picked up the keys and fled from the room, locking the door behind her. She ran up the stairs to find that quite a bit of time had passed and the guests had all gone home. Terrified, she—“

“Got the police,” Ron said.

“No,” Hermione said.

“Ran home to her mum and dad and sister who actually has a name and told them what happened?” Ron asked.

“No,” Hermione said.
“Left the country on the first available transportation, yes?” Ron suggested with a look of disbelief. “A broom, a train, a donkey, something!”

“No, she looked at the keys and realized that the forbidden key was stained with blood,” Hermione said.

“All right, that’s bad luck, but shouldn’t she possibly be thinking of, oh, I don’t know, running for it while her dear husband is safely away and she might be able to escape?” Ron said.

“True, but she thought she might be able to conceal that she’d ever been in the secret room and fool him into believing she knew nothing about the fate of the other wives,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, because that’ll end well,” Harry said.

“Just like for wives one through six or seven,” Ron said.

“The implication is he killed them for looking in the storeroom, so if she didn’t let on that she knew, she thought she might be safe,” Hermione said.

“What about the first one?” Ron asked. “She couldn’t have gone poking about in the storeroom and found a previous wife’s corpse hanging about in there if there weren’t any before her, so he can’t just be murdering them to protect his secret. He didn’t have a secret yet with that one.”

Hermione pondered this for a moment before she said, “I admit, it’s a plot hole, and a rather large one at that, unless of course the room really was empty for the first wife and he was testing her obedience and simply not following his rules was enough for him to kill her. But whatever the reasoning was behind it, the current wife chose to stay and try to remove the blood stain from the keys. It’s possible that she thought if he realized she’d been in the room, he would track her down anywhere, while if she was able to remove the evidence, she might be safe.”

“So how’d that work out for her?” Ron asked.

“Not well, actually,” Hermione said.

“Thought not,” Ron said smugly to Harry.

“She tried everything she could think of to remove the blood from the key: water, soap, rubbing it in sand. Nothing worked, and if anything the stain became larger and more vividly red against the metal of the key,” Hermione said.

“Sounds like there’s some sort of spell on it,” Ron said.

“It’s a bit like the Permanent Sticking Charm some of the things at Sirius’s house used to have so we couldn’t pry them off the wall. Remember the Black Family Tree and Walpurga?” Harry asked.

“Oh, that dreadful old woman!” Hermione said, suddenly quite animated. “She was absolutely horrid! I don’t know how Sirius managed with her in real life when just her portrait was so completely vile.”

“Eh, she kind of liked me a bit,” Ron said, and Hermione and Harry both stared at him. “What? I am a pureblood after all, and that’s what she was so mad for.”

“Yeah, but you’re a blood traitor if ever there was one,” Harry said, remembering what Sirius had told him.
“And proud of it,” Ron said with a grin, “but somebody had to be able to get the old lady to stuff it, so I convinced her that I wasn’t so bad and sure enough she’d nod off or give me a ‘such a nice, sweet, dear pureblood boy in terrible company’ and chat a bit, and it kept her from blowing everyone’s eardrums inside out with her shrieking.”

“How could you possibly stand her?” Hermione said, gaping at him.

“She was fairly awful, I grant you, but she had seen her husband and one son die before her, and the one still alive hated her, and she died while he was still in Azkaban so there was no chance to sort things out. Bit of a lonely life, really,” Ron said with a shrug. “If you could befriend Kreacher after what he did to Sirius, it’s not that odd.”

Harry was completely stunned, and Hermione was blushing with what he was fairly sure was shame that she hadn’t managed to be kind to the portrait. Personally, he thought they were both daft, Ron for pitying Mrs. Black and Hermione for feeling guilty about falling short of complete compassion for every living thing, even if the portrait wasn’t technically alive.

“Well, that’s… admirable,” Hermione said.

“Insane, I think you mean,” Harry said, rolling his eyes at Ron.

“Whatever,” Ron said, looking uncomfortable. “So what went on next with Calisto and the key?”

“That would make a fair name for a rock band,” Harry said.

“Yeah, not bad,” Ron agreed, half-closing his eyes as though he were trying to picture it on a marquee. “I might need to patent that. Oh, go on, Hermione.”

“Thank you,” she said, and Harry honestly couldn’t tell if she was just being polite or still feeling rather ashamed from her overly formal tone. “By this time, all the party goers had long ago left, save for her sister Anne, when suddenly Bluebeard arrived home early.”

“I bet he never went anywhere and was just lurking about, waiting for this whole thing to happen,” Ron said.

“You’re probably right,” Hermione said. “As soon as he saw her, he asked for the keys, but she claimed that she’d lost them.”

“That didn’t work for me when Flitwick wanted the essay on Repelling Spells, and I’m guessing it didn’t work any better for her,” Ron said.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “‘Bluebeard ordered her to return with the keys, and she did, but she’d taken the key to the storeroom off. Once again he ordered her to return with the key, and—”

“And she threw it out the window like any sane person would do?” Ron said.

“No,” Hermione said.

“Of course not,” he said. “She comes back with the blood-dipped key, right?”

“I’m afraid so, and Bluebeard, seeing the blood on the key, knew immediately what had happened. ‘Having disobeyed me and opened the forbidden door, you must pay the penalty with your death!’” Hermione said this last sentence in such a forbidding tone that Harry’s flesh crawled.

“About what I thought,” Ron said, completely unfazed.
“However, she begged him to give her but a quarter of an hour to say her prayers before he killed her, and Bluebeard agreed, leaving her and her sister alone so that the wife could make her peace before her death,” Hermione said.

“He’s rather polite for a serial killer,” Harry said.

“In some versions he says he gives her only half a quarter of an hour instead, but yes, it’s an odd situation,” Hermione said.

“Half a quarter of an hour? So seven minutes and thirty seconds exactly?” Ron asked.

“Apparently so,” Hermione said.

“That’s just odd. The poor kid probably spent half the time figuring out what a half a quarter of an hour even meant,” Harry said.

“He could have said a tenth of a quarter of a half of an hour, just to really confuse her,” Ron said.

“Forty-five seconds,” Hermione answered immediately, and as Ron and Harry both opened their mouths to wonder for the millionth time how fast her brain worked, she continued on, unperturbed. “The wife sent her sister Anne to the top of a tower to see if their two brothers were on their way, for they had promised her they would attend the party but had not yet come, and she hoped they were merely very late.”

“That’d be awfully late considering all the guests except her sister have left,” Ron said. “Even Fred and George wouldn’t be that tardy.”

“True, but that’s what she hoped. She told Anne that if she saw their horses in the distance, she should wave her scarf to signal to them to make haste,” Hermione said. “Anne ran to the top of the tower, and her sister cried out to her from the window, ‘Do you see our brothers?’ but Anne responded that she saw nothing but the sun and the grass and a bit of dust blowing in the wind far off.”

“That doesn’t sound too promising,” Harry said.

“The dust might,” Ron said. “It could be horses’ hooves kicking it up from a distance maybe.”

“That’s a possibility,” Hermione said. “At that moment, Bluebeard called up to his wife, ‘Come down at once!’ but she begged, ‘Pray you, give me but a moment longer!’”

“He’s making her walk down to her own execution? It seems like he could at least trouble himself to walk up the stairs if he’s going to kill her,” Ron said.

“The wife used her time to call up again to her sister, ‘Are our brothers in sight?’ but Anne replied, ‘I see a great movement of dust, but that is all.’”

“I’m telling you, it’s the brothers,” Ron said.

“The wife thought exactly the same thing, for she called, ‘Is the dust from our brothers’ horses?’ but Anne replied, ‘Nay, it’s a great flock of sheep!’” Hermione said.

“Sheep?” Ron said, looking disappointed. “I don’t think a big flock of sheep is going to save this girl.”

“It’d be interesting if they did, though,” Harry said. “A castled stormed by a group of irate Leicester
Longwools would make a pretty good story.”

“Yeah, maybe Bluebeard is allergic to wool,” Ron said brightly.

“The sheep do not rescue the girl,” Hermione said, obviously trying to remain calm. “The idiocy in these stories does have a limit, and that’s it.”


“Once again Bluebeard called up, ‘Come at once or I shall break down the door and fetch you to your death myself!’ and the wife answered, ‘But one moment more!’” Hermione said.

“This is getting pretty disturbing, really,” Ron said, looking uncomfortable. “This bloke’s a nutcase.”

“I agree,” Hermione said. “The wife called one last time to her sister ‘Can you see our brothers now?’ and Anne replied, ‘Yes! I see them, but they are a long way off!’”

“About time. There’s fashionably late, but this is ridiculous,” Harry said, sounding relieved. “Wait, how far off are they?”

“Well, if they’d only just come into view from an elevated vantage point, they could be several miles away,” Hermione said.

“No, they couldn’t,” Ron said.

“What do you mean ‘no, they couldn’t,’” Hermione said, an edge of annoyance in her voice.

“The party took place during the day, she found the key, looked in the hidden room, everybody left, and then she spent hours trying to get the blood off the key before Bluebeard came home,” Ron said. “Shouldn’t this be happening in the middle of the night?”

Harry watched as Hermione squinted, trying to figure this out.

“The sister did say she saw the sun and the grass in the first answer,” she said slowly, “so it can’t be the middle of the night. Granted, night must have passed in the interim. Now, if she said she saw the sun because it was just starting to dawn, then her view of the surrounding countryside might have been relatively impaired due to low levels of light. Her realization that she was merely seeing sheep would also make sense as the sun would be higher in the sky at that point, and then she was finally able to see the brothers on their way because the sun was higher. So no, Ronald, it couldn’t be the middle of the night due to the sister specifically mentioning the sun, but the relatively weak light of the first part of sunrise would explain the difficulty in seeing objects and people that the sister has.”

“Or she needs specs,” Ron said.

“Or that,” Hermione said with a shrug. “At this point Bluebeard bellowed, making the castle shake to its very foundations in the hidden room, and Anne and the wife shivered in fear at his anger. They heard him begin to climb the stairs to the room where the wife was, his great booted feet making a methodical thud on each tread.”

“Bit of a drama queen, isn’t he?” Ron said.

“Then he tore the door from the hinges, and the wife threw herself at his feet, begging for mercy. ‘I will have none of that!’ he yelled, ‘You must die! Commend thyself to God!’” Hermione said.

“This really is disturbing,” Harry said, grimacing.
At that moment, the two brothers raced through the door, swords aloft, and struck Bluebeard’s head off,” Hermione said.

“Okay, exactly how did that happen? There wasn’t any time for them to get there, dismount their horses, figure out what was happening, run up the stairs, and kill him,” Ron said.

“It really doesn’t make much sense, and most scholars think there’s some sort of gap here with a missing event of some kind that would bridge the distance but was lost in retellings, but that’s what happens,” Hermione said.

“Or they Apparated,” Harry said suddenly.

“Hmm,” Hermione said. “Yes, that would work. They could have seen the sister’s signal that something was wrong, then Apparated directly into the castle, saving a good deal of time.”

“So the castle is definitely not Hogwarts, then,” Ron said. “You can’t Apparate or Disapparate on Hogwarts grounds.”

“By George, I think he’s got it,” Hermione said with a look of mock surprise.


“It’s just a Muggle expression, although now that you’ve said that, I can’t get the mental image of the brothers as Fred and George out of my head,” Hermione said. “I think you might really be on to something there, though, Harry. If the brothers are wizards, it would stand to reason that the rest of the family might be as well, and so might Bluebeard, which means the key really could be enchanted with a Permanent Sticking Charm or some other spell.”

“Maybe,” Harry said.

“So Bluebeard loses his noggin. Now what?” Ron asked.

“Oh, as his sole beneficiary, the wife inherited all of her husband’s estate,” she said. “First she had the other wives given a decent burial.”

“I should say so,” Ron said. “You don’t want that mess next to your larder.”

“Then she gave money to her sister for her dowry, and used some more to buy captains’ commissions for her brothers,” Hermione said.

“Does it make it less of a misogynistic horror if the dowry is given by a sister to another sister so no men are involved?” Ron asked.

“Only moderately,” Hermione said.

“It’s a bit scary their army lets them just buy the ability to be in charge without any background,” Harry said.

“Granted, they’ve got at least one beheading to their credit though, so there’s that,” Ron pointed.

“Fair enough,” Harry said, “and what happened to the wife?”

“She married a kind and good man who helped her forget all about the horrors she had experienced, and I suppose they all lived happily every after,” Hermione said. “So, what did you think?”

“Let’s see: a room full of corpses on meat hooks, an attempted beheading, a real beheading, and a
freakishly bloody key,” Ron said, counting them off on his fingers. “What do I think? I think your lot are mental, that’s what I think.”

“I’m not so sure,” Harry said.

“You don’t think this was mental?” Ron asked.

“Oh, it’s plenty mental,” Harry said, “but I think it might not have been written by Muggles.”

“The Apparition is a good point, if that’s what it is,” Hermione said, “so there could well be some involvement from wizards.”

“Yeah, but where else?” Ron asked. “And if it really was Apparition and the bride’s family are all wizards, why wouldn’t the sisters just Apparate themselves out of there?”

“Because they’re Squibs,” Harry said. “That’s why the one girl was desperate enough to take even Bluebeard as a husband.”

Hermione and Ron looked at each other.

“You know, that would make sense,” Hermione said.

“And then there’s Bluebeard,” Harry said. “Isn’t it possible that he’s a Metamorphmagus and that’s why his beard is a different color?”

“That would explain his outsider status as well since Metamorphmagi aren’t regarded as being particularly acceptable in pureblood society, usually labeled as freakish aberrations,” Hermione said. “Just like they hate anyone with less magical ability than themselves, they hate anyone who has a power they don’t and pretend it means that group is somehow lesser. If that’s the case, then the story is actually an indictment against them, suggesting they’re unstable and unfit to marry into wizarding families, even at the level of Squibs. Oh, that is foul!”

Harry thought of Tonks, wondering how she was getting on, and remembered how cool he had thought it would be to be able to change his appearance at will. It turned out there were some definite drawbacks to it as well, though.

“So there are two morals to the story. Don’t marry someone with blue hair, and don’t go about unlocking secret rooms,” Ron said. “Of course, if Calisto hadn’t done either of those things, she never would have gotten the money and no one would have known about the dead wives, so that sort of undoes it a bit.”

“It does rather, doesn’t it?” Hermione said, deflating a little. “Well, in any case, it’s far past midnight again, and we need to move in the morning, preferably before sun-up. I’m going to try to get a few hours of sleep. Night.”

The boys wished her goodnight as she retired to the nook that served as her bedroom. Ron seemed to be counting in his head for about a minute, then he moved swiftly to the other side of the room and picked up Hermione’s beaded bag.

“Ron, no,” Harry said, looking aghast.

“I just want to see what she’s got in here,” he whispered to him. “It’s not like I’m going to nick anything, even if I do find food.”

“But that’s not yours,” Harry whispered back. “She said not to.”
“What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her, or me for that matter,” Ron said.

He pulled on the strings of the bag and peered inside, and within a second there was an ear-shattering wailing that filled the tent. Ron dropped it like a hot potato, but Hermione was already standing next to him, anger practically making her hair crackle.

“Um, hi?” he said looking a bit ill.

“I did not do that,” Harry said, pointing in alarm at the bag. “Really, that was not me.”

“I’m aware of that, Harry,” she said, picking up her purse, her lips an extremely thin line. “As for you, Ronald, you’re doing the dishes for the next month.”

“Sorry,” Ron mumbled.

“No, you’re not,” Hermione said. “You’re only sorry you got caught.”

“I really… oh,” he said as the curtain over her bed swished shut. “Well, that was stupid of me.”

“You might say that,” Harry said, then, double-checking that Hermione wasn’t listening, he added, “So, what’s in there? You got a quick look.”

“She’s got her laundry hanging out on a line,” Ron said, then added, “including her knickers. That’s probably what set her off.”

“I don’t think there’s any probably about it,” Harry said. “None of us has got much privacy out here.”

“Yeah, mate, I know,” Ron said with a sigh. “I fumbled that Quaffle spectacularly.”

Harry nodded and headed to bed himself, leaving Ron to sit up for a while alone. They really were starting to step on one another’s toes the longer the journey lasted, and it was no help at all that he had no idea where they were going or how long it would take. That night he dreamed of Ginny in Gryffindor Tower again, and this time the lurking figure of Snape stood over her, a sword outstretched, and his beard as dark blue as the ocean on a moonless night. He hoped her other brothers were indeed keeping an eye out for her in the very dangerous place that Hogwarts had undoubtedly become.
Harry sighed and stretched. It had been another long day. Hermione had come up with the idea of tracking down places associated with Salazar Slytherin’s life, and they had spent today in a mostly vacant field in Lincolnshire that had apparently been the site of his wedding. Harry still had trouble believing Slytherin had ever actually gotten married, but Hermione had managed to find a tiny annotation in one of the particularly ancient books she was lugging about with them that mentioned the detail.

“We know he had descendents, after all, so it’s reasonable to assume he was married,” Hermione had said logically. “From what you’ve said the Gaunts were fanatical about making sure everyone knew that he was a direct ancestor of theirs. Apparently he chose a pureblood bride and set about increasing the population of witches and wizards with what he felt was the proper ancestry: his.”

She had grimaced at these words, but the three of them had carefully combed over the field, looking for anything that might be a Horcrux. Their search had yielded four opened crisp bags, two empty beer bottles, several cigarette packets, a broken umbrella, a few quid of Muggle money in coins, a dirty nappy, and three manky gloves.

“I don’t think any of this lot have a bit of You-Know-Who’s soul in them,” Ron had said, nudging the umbrella with his trainer. “Granted, the Portkey to the World Cup was a boot, but still.”

“No,” Harry had agreed. “Dumbledore said that he would probably use things that were important historically, stuff related to the founders.”

“Then unless that’s the nappy of Slytherin’s first born, I think we’ve dropped the Quaffle on this one,” Ron had said.

“At least it was worth a try,” Hermione had said defensively before Vanishing the rubbish. “I suppose we can give ourselves credit for cleaning up the area.”

“Yeah, and we’ve picked up enough Muggle money to buy a decent dinner the next time one of us uses Polyjuice to slip into a town,” Harry had said, “so there’s that too.”

Ron was all for that, so he agreed to turn into a random middle-aged Muggle man who had left a comb sitting on a park bench in Sussex, complete with a few hairs still in the teeth, and hurried off to a nearby take-away spot. He’d returned victoriously about half an hour later with burgers and chips, still piping hot, which had made really rather a jolly meal. Now they were sitting about, rather contentedly patting their full stomachs and idly watching as Ron’s face began to change back to his usual appearance.

“So are there any other spots with a connection to Slytherin?” Ron asked as he idly examined his hands, the left one of which was now his own and the right still the one that belonged to the Muggle.
“His birthplace, obviously, which shouldn’t far away, and then there’s the spot where his home was with his wife, and possibly his children’s homes, and there’s his burial site, and perhaps a few other places. Unfortunately I don’t know where any of those are, though,” Hermione said. “At least not yet. I have some more research to do.”

“Oh good,” Ron said, a bitter edge in his voice. “Just think of all the old, worn-out gloves we can find at all those spots. We might even wind up with a pair.”

“I know the odds are long on the Horcruxes being there, but they must be someplace. If you have a better idea, say so,” Hermione said, glaring at him.

“Going home?” he said, suddenly looking up at both of them with a bit of hope. “We could go back to the Burrow and plan some more, and use that as our base of operations. Then when we think we’ve got a real lead, we can go out and get the bloody Horcruxes, but in the meanwhile we can eat regularly and sleep in real beds and not be bouncing around a bunch of vacant, boring wilderness all the time.”

“And what do we do when the Death Eaters who are undoubtedly watching your parents’ house show up to kill us all?” Hermione said, though Harry noticed her tone wasn’t actually unkind, just weary.

“Are we sure they’d really be looking for us there? I mean, I’m supposed to have spattergroit, so that’s taken care of. Why would they look at the Burrow?” Ron said stubbornly.

“Because they’re evil, Ronald, not stupid,” Hermione said, sighing. “I’m fairly sure they already know the ghoul in your parents’ attic isn’t you, and they’re just waiting for you or better yet all three of us to turn up on their doorstep. It just isn’t sensible.”

“Well, I’m tired of sensible!” Ron said so loudly that Harry jumped. “Nothing about this stupid search has been sensible so far. Rooting about in some bloody field for hours just because Slytherin might possibly have got married there about a thousand years ago and maybe You-Know-Who stuck a piece of his rotten soul in some random piece of junk and hid it there is pathetic!”

“Not quite as pathetic as complaining about being bored while people are disappearing or dying elsewhere,” Hermione said coldly. “At least we’ve been somewhat safe. Others aren’t, you know.”

“Yeah, because thinking of Death Eaters watching my mum and dad’s every move is definitely going to make me feel better about all this,” Ron said. “Your parents are safely stowed away, so you’re fine.”

“Yes, I’m so lucky to have parents who don’t even remember that I exist,” Hermione said, folding her arms.

“So? That was your choice,” Ron said. “Deal with it.”

“And it was your choice to come along on this trip knowing full well how much we’d be blundering about,” Harry finally broke in, his temper having finally blown. “If you can point out where the next Horcrux is, Ron, please, enlighten us. The field didn’t work out, but it was at least a fair try.”

Ron waved his hand dismissively as if to say Harry wasn’t making any sense, but his expression said he was uncomfortable. On a hunch, Harry got up, strode to what passed for their kitchen table, grabbed the ugly locket that housed Voldemort’s soul, and shoved it in a cupboard. As soon as the door closed on it, he could almost physically feel the air in the room grow less charged, like opening a window to chase out a terrible smell. When Harry turned around to look at the others again, there
was a slightly less angry angle to their postures, but damage had still been done.

“I guess the Horcrux couldn’t stand to see us well fed and content for once and had to louse everything up,” Harry said almost apologetically.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Ron said, though he didn’t sound particularly certain that was the problem, and Harry was more than a little uneasy himself. “Do you think it really can see?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “Maybe not literally, but it definitely senses things somehow. Like the diary. It could tell what was going on around it and even think for itself some.”

They all looked at the closed cupboard door, feeling like there was an intruder in their midst.

“I really hate that thing,” Hermione said in barely more than a whisper.

Harry nodded. Things were difficult enough without the locket starting to ramp up their frustrations and turn them against each other. He was reminded of something Luna had said to him, that Voldemort would want him to feel alone. Harry wondered if it was possible the Horcrux realized that their greatest asset now was one another, and it was trying to undo their friendship and support in whatever way it could. It certainly sounded like an idea Voldemort would concoct.

“How about a story, then?” Harry asked Hermione. “There’s got to be some more you haven’t told us yet.”

“I’m turning into a right little Scheherazade, aren’t I,” Hermione said, still looking glum.

“Bless you,” Ron said.

“I didn’t sneeze. That was a queen’s name in a story. Her husband threatened to kill her, but every night before bed, she would begin to tell him a story, and then promise to finish it on the following night if he permitted her to live. She told stories for a thousand and one nights, by which time she had given birth to at least two children, and he decided to let her live since she’d been so amusing,” Hermione said, becoming less gloomy when she had something to talk about.

“Your lot have weird marriages,” Ron said. “Do you know enough stories for that long?”

“I don’t think we’ll be out travelling for quite that long. At least I hope not. But I’ve still got a fair few,” Hermione said.

“Well, then, favor us with a tale, m’lady,” Harry said with an exaggerated bow. Hermione laughed, but Ron gave him a slightly dark look.

“Fine, as there are three of us, let’s have ‘The Three Billy Goats Gruff,’” Hermione said.

“But you’re not a billy goat,” Ron said sagely. “You’d be a nanny goat.”

“Once again, well spotted,” Hermione said, obviously remembering their fourth year. “I don’t suppose the gender of the goats actually matters all that much in this story, though. It really could be just as easily ‘The Three Nanny Goats Gruff,’ I suppose.”

“Doesn’t have as good of a ring to it, though,” Ron said, squinting at the ceiling.

“Perhaps not, although the repetition of the long e sound is present in both versions as a device to tie the words together. In any case, once—,” Hermione began.

“Wait, wait, what do you mean gruff?” Ron said. “We’re not even past the title yet and I’ve got
questions that need answering!”

Hermione took a deep breath and seemed to be praying for strength for a moment before she said, “It basically just means that they’re rather rough and uncouth, which really isn’t all that unusual for goats.”

“Okay, I’ll accept that,” Ron said. “You can go on now.”

“Thanks ever so,” Hermione said with a sarcastically simpering smile. “Where was I? Once—“

“—upon a time,” Ron finished, and Harry noticed that whether she realized it or not, she had waited for the interruption to occur.

“Yes, there were three billy goats, all brothers, who lived in a green meadow near a river,” Hermione said.

“Do they have names?” Ron asked.

“No, not that I ever heard,” Hermione said.

“Oh, well that’s fairly normal. Wait, do they talk?” Ron asked.

“Yes, actually, they do,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said, looking crestfallen. “I suppose there has to be something odd in these things or they’d be boring.”

“A story that was simply a retelling of mute goats roaming about the hills and eating grass more than likely wouldn’t meet your discriminating tastes in plot development and characterization,” Hermione said primly. “The three goats were, as usual, eating on the hillside, but they had such voracious appetites that they had already eaten up almost all of the good grass.”

“I know how they feel,” Ron said. “I wish I could eat grass sometimes.”

“It’d make life a lot simpler at the moment,” Harry agreed.

“Unfortunately, none of us is experienced in partial animal-to-human transfiguration, so as we don’t have goat stomachs or those belonging to any bovine species, grass really isn’t among our options,” Hermione said.

“It’s a bad sign when grass starts to sound as good as one of Florian Fortescue’s sundaes,” Ron said.

Hermione said nothing but looked wistful at the memory of those ice cream confections. Harry had to admit that Ron had a point. They had all become a bit obsessed with food. If Harry didn’t get a slice of treacle tart again soon, he was going to wonder if his tongue were going dead.

“So what did the goats who had literally eaten an entire hillside of grass do?” Ron asked, breaking their reverie.

“Well, the smallest goat noticed there was a fresh, green field full of the most delicious grass just across a river that bordered their field, and there was a little wooden bridge that went across from their side to that one,” Hermione said.

“From the way these things usually go, I’m guessing the goat didn’t just try to cross the bridge but did something daft like diving into the river and being swept away by the current or trying to build a boat out of rocks or flapping his horns and flying across or something,” Ron said.
“Flapping his horns?” Hermione said, giving him a look of patented disbelief.

“You told us one once where two kids rode a duck across a pond, and another where a boy outran a giant and cut down a huge beanstalk before it caught up to him,” Ron said. “Are horn-flapping goats all that far out of the range of possibility?”

“When you put it that way, not really,” Hermione admitted.

“Now I can’t get the Crumple-Horned Snorkack out of my head,” Harry said.

“They are not three Crumple-Horned Snorkacks nor Nargles nor Wrackspurts nor Bibbering Humdingers nor Galumptious Whowhatsits or anything else Luna goes on about,” Hermione said crossly. “They’re just goats.”

“The weird stuff Luna believes in kind of annoys you, doesn’t it?” Ron said.

“I suppose a bit. She’s a nice girl and a good friend, but I wish she wouldn’t be quite so gullible about things that can’t possibly exist,” Hermione said, sounding exasperated.

“So it gets your goat, then?” Ron asked, grinning.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake,” Hermione grumbled while she rubbed her forehead as Harry laughed. “Yes, fine, it gets my goat, but let’s get back to the other perfectly normal, barnyard quality goats on the hillside.”

“That all talk,” Ron pointed out.

“All right, then, normal goats except for their ability to speak,” Hermione said. “Let’s not split hairs, shall we.”

“Fine. So the smallest Crumple-Horned… I mean goat is going to try for the nice green grass in the neighbor’s garden,” Ron said. “So what exactly does he decide to do?”

“He crossed the bridge,” Hermione said.

Ron looked at Harry, then back at Hermione.

“He did?” Ron asked in stunned disbelief.

“Yes,” she said. “What’s so odd about that?”

“Nothing,” Ron replied. “That’s what so odd about it.”

“Notice that I didn’t say he got to the other side, though,” Hermione said. “He was going across the bridge, clickety-clackety-clickety-clackety, when suddenly—“

“Clickety-clackety?” Ron said, giving her a look that plainly meant he thought she’d gone mad.

“It’s supposed to be an onomatopoeia for the goat’s hooves going across an old wooden bridge,” Hermione said.

“I got that, but it’s rather twee,” Ron said. “Also, why is there now something on a mat of peas?”

“No,” Hermione said, smiling. “Onomatopoeia. It means a word that is supposed to sound similar to the sound it represents, like pop or buzz or boom. In this case, it’s a bit less formal.”
“There’s a specific word for a word that sounds like what the sound it sounds like sounds like?” Ron asked.

Hermione worked that sentence out in her head for a moment before answering, “Yes.”

“That’s just beyond the level of specificity any language needs,” Ron said. “What’s next? A word for spot between your eyebrows?”

“The glabella,” Hermione said at once and continued on, ignoring Ron’s look of desperate disbelief leveled at Harry, who was now completely convinced Hermione had not only read the entire dictionary but had taken copious notes on it. “The littlest billy goat gruff was almost across when he heard a thunderous voice bellow, ‘Who is that crossing my bridge?’ With that an enormous troll appeared from underneath the bridge.”

“But who was it who asked who was crossing the bridge?” Ron asked, confused.

“The troll,” Hermione said.

“But trolls just point and grunt,” Ron said. “Back me up on this one, Harry.”

“I do have to go with Ron in this case,” Harry said. “Trolls don’t exactly have a great ability to speak English.”

“Recall that the troll is speaking to a goat,” Hermione pointed out. “Give your imagination a stretch.”

“Okay, but even so, I’m betting a goat learns English before a troll does,” Ron said. “Come on, Hermione, you nearly got pulverized in the girls’ toilet by one. He wasn’t exactly quoting Shakespeare at the time, now was he?”

“No, he most certainly was not,” she said with a shudder. “And by the by, thank you for that, both of you.”

Ron preened a moment while Harry merely said, “No problem” and looked modest, both conveniently forgetting to mention they were the ones who had locked it in the loo with her to begin with.

“You need to understand that Muggles think of trolls a bit differently than they really are,” Hermione said.

“Like fairies,” Ron said with a frown, bringing up his favorite example for the hundredth time.

“Yes,” Hermione said, “a bit like that. They’ve got parts of it right. They know trolls are big, very strong, and inclined to attack without provocation, particularly if they’re hungry. They think they live in the mountains, which is at least partly true for mountain trolls, as well as under bridges, which is true of river trolls, so they got bits of their nature correct, but they mixed them together here. Muggles also seem to think they’re a tiny bit brighter than trolls really are. Oh, and they’re usually supposed to be native to Scandinavia for some reason.”

“Fine, fine, at least parts are almost right. Let’s say this one’s a paragon of trolls and he speaks English really well… to goats,” Ron said, shaking his head. “I ask you. So the troll pops up and eats the goat?”

“No, the goat said, ‘Oh, don’t eat me! I’m far too small. My big brother will be along in a minute or two, and he’s much tastier than I am!’” Hermione said, using an oddly high-pitched bleating voice for the goat.
“Do you need a lozenge?” Ron asked kindly.

“No, that’s just, oh skip it,” Hermione said.

“Right, so after the troll ate the smallest goat as an appetizer, what did he do?” Ron asked.

“He didn’t eat the goat at all,” Hermione said. “He thought about it and decided he’d rather have the bigger goat, then let the smaller one pass by into the meadow to eat grass to his heart’s content.”

“He didn’t think to eat both of them?” Ron asked.

“No, apparently it didn’t occur to him,” Hermione said.

“Considering he’s a troll, that actually makes sense,” Ron said. “So the rotten littlest goat, whom I am now christening Percy, throws his family to the troll to save himself and gets to romp about in a meadow of happy daisies?”

“Well, yes,” Hermione said, “but there’s more to the story. You see, the smallest goat was right, and the middle-sized goat also decided to cross the bridge to the better pasture. He too went to cross the bridge, going lompety-bompety-lompety-bompety.”

“Lompety… bompety…” Ron said slowly.

“It’s supposed to make it sound like his footfalls are heavier than the one that went clickety-clackety,” Hermione explained.

“Lompety… bompety…” Ron repeated, looking ill.

“Ehm, I suppose it is a bit over the top,” Hermione said, blushing. “I can use clompety-clompety instead, if you like?”

Ron looked helplessly at Harry.

“Let’s just assume he made a louder noise and move on before Ron has an aneurysm or something,” Harry said.

“Fine. The troll popped out from under the bridge once again, saying ‘Who is that crossing my bridge?’, and this goat gave the same defense as his little brother,” Hermione said.

“What? He said, ‘Don’t eat me because I’ve got an even bigger brother coming along and you don’t want to stuff yourself too much’?” Ron said.

“In so many words, yes,” Hermione said. “Considering the troll had believed the first goat and he turned out to be telling the truth, I suppose there’s a bit of a reason to suspect this goat might be as well, so there’s a tiny smidgeon of rational thought happening.”

“Okay, so Percy the Second goes over to the pasture to romp with Percy the First,” Ron said.

“Shouldn’t Percy’s older brother be Charlie and the next Bill?” Hermione asked.

“No,” Ron said, looking scandalized. “Charlie wouldn’t do a thing like that! There are two Percys in this story, and that’s final.”

Harry couldn’t help wondering if the rift in the Weasley family was ever going to mend. Percy was a prat, no doubt of that, but he was certain Mrs. Weasley missed him terribly, and he wondered if his brothers, sister, and father would ever really be able to let go of their anger towards him, even if
Percy managed to apologize one day. As much as he had never been particularly fond of Percy, he hoped they could for Mrs. Weasley’s sake.

“By this time, the largest billy goat gruff had realized his two younger brothers had gone to the other pasture, and he decided to join them as he was still very hungry. He went across the bridge as well, going STOMP-STOMP-STOMP-STOMP!” Hermione said, ending by yelling the last four words so abruptly that Ron almost jumped into Harry’s lap in surprise.

“Too much?” Hermione asked, a little concerned.

“Just a little, yeah,” Ron said. “Is this goat the size of Fang or something?”

“Some goats do reach fairly good size, up to as much as three hundred pounds in some cases, so theoretically, yes, he could be quite a lot larger than Fang,” Hermione said.

“Goat size,” Ron said. “I’ll add that to the list.”

“List of what?” Hermione asked.

“Random things you know that make me think you might not quite be human,” Ron said.

“I’m still trying to wrap my head around a three hundred pound goat,” Harry said shuddering. “And I thought the most disturbing thing about them was those freakish horizontal pupils.”

“I admit, I find those a little disconcerting myself,” Hermione said. “They just don’t look right somehow.”

“Okay, so there’s a three hundred pound ungulate with horizontal slit pupils stomping across the troll’s bridge. I suddenly feel pity and empathy for a troll. Now what?” Ron asked.

“The troll came out from under the bridge, saying, ‘Who is that crossing my bridge?’ and with that the third and largest of the billy goats gruff lowered his horns, picked up speed, and butted the troll right off the bridge and into the gorge where the river flowed far below, and he died,” Hermione said.

“A goat of few words,” Ron said.

“Also some pretty impressive butting skills there,” Harry said.

“True,” Ron said, nodding his approval. “I do feel a little sorry for the troll, though, since he didn’t actually eat anyone in this yet, but I’m not all that fussed. Maybe a two on a scale of one to ten. So I take it the biggest goat, who really is obviously either Bill or Charlie, then went to the meadow?”

“Would that make him named Barlie or Chill?” Harry asked.

“Oh, Chill, definitely,” Ron said with a grin. “Much cooler. But the goat did get to stuff himself full of grass?”

“Yes, he and his two brothers ate on the other hill and got tremendously fat and could travel back and forth over the bridge without fear. And they lived quite happily ever after,” Hermione said.

“Hurrah for the happy goats, I suppose, even if two of them were a couple of rotten turncoats on the big one,” Ron said.

“Or they knew that the oldest goat would be able to take care of himself and just trusted in his abilities,” Hermione pointed out.
“I guess,” Ron said uncertainly. “Still, it keeps reminding me of another story I’ve heard, but I can’t quite remember what it is.”

“Probably ‘The Three Brothers’ by Beedle,” Hermione said, nodding in the general direction of her little beaded bag where the book Dumbledore had left her in his will rested along with all the other tomes she’d taken along on their journey. “There’s even a bridge in that one, too.”

“There is?” Harry asked, looking curious.

“Oh yeah, that’s the one,” Ron said, and he looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Would you mind not telling it tonight, though? It always gave me nightmares when Mum told it when I was little.”

“It’s awfully late now anyway,” Hermione said. “We should be turning in.”

Harry was a little disappointed that he wouldn’t get to hear a wizarding fairy tale, but he had to admit he was very tired himself. As the three of them found their beds and slumped into them, exhausted but in better tempers, it was Ron and Hermione who remembered the enemy who had confronted the Peverell brothers upon the bridge, and while Ron still shuddered at the thought of confronting Death itself, Hermione remembered the ending of the tale. The last enemy to be defeated was Death, though not in the way Voldemort had tried. Perhaps there was some hope in that.

As the wind blew fiercely once more against the fabric of the tent, the Horcrux remained out of sight, and for once, their dreams were peaceful.

Chapter End Notes

*Deathly Hallows* suggest Harry has never heard "The Three Brothers" before, so I had to avoid making Hermione tell that one here, but I couldn’t let the comparison go completely unremarked upon.
Stone S(o Very, Very Wrong)oup

Once again, a promising lead in the search for the remaining Horcruxes had culminated in a dead end, though Harry took a moment to remind himself that at least that hadn't been literal. Ron had actually come up with the idea that the Sorting Hat’s song about the Founders of Hogwarts might possibly have been a clue, which Hermione had roundly applauded. Since they were looking for Hufflepuff’s cup and the hat had mentioned she had come from a “valley broad” during the song that opened their fourth year, he had suggested they try looking at maps for a valley not far from Hogwarts that might fit the description.

What had followed was Hermione unloading a truly massive number of books from her beaded bag, including several atlases, history books, and encyclopedias of Great Britain, until practically the entire floor of the tent was covered. Ron had turned more than a little pale just looking at the sheer number of them.

“Seriously, Hermione, did you leave any books at all in the Hogwarts library?” Ron said, gaping at the collection.

“Of course,” she replied. “I only took what I thought we might need, but I admit I imagined rather a lot of scenarios, so certain sections are a bit depleted.”

“A bit?” Ron said in disbelief, poking one of the books with his toe cautiously as though he thought it might bite. Granted, after The Monster Book of Monsters, Harry thought he had a point.

“Well, yes, plus there were a few volumes I was concerned about leaving behind during the war since it was logical You Know Who would probably take over the school and put his retainers there,” Hermione said, shuddering. “I don’t even want to think what he might have done to the Muggle Studies collection or any of the books that dealt with pureblood supremacy being an unproven myth. So I took them to protect them.”

“You were worried about protecting books from Death Eaters?” Ron said, looking at her like she’d gone mad.

“Of course,” Hermione said. “What’s so odd about that?”

“Nothing, nothing,” he said quickly, though Harry could tell that “nothing” in this context meant “you are one weird witch.”

They had spent hours upon hours searching through the books that day, combing through them for any reference at all to broad valleys (“or wide hollows or big topographical depressions or the like” as Hermione had added), and they had indeed turned up a few possibilities. The following days had been spent examining valleys that had included an enormous shopping mall, an abandoned castle, and a forest that reminded Harry uneasily of the one surrounding Hogwarts, though thankfully there hadn’t been any giant spiders.

What there really had been at the last possibility, though, was a very angry group of guard dogs who had barked loudly enough to alert their Muggle owners to three trespassers on their grounds. Before they could Apparate away, Harry was sure at least two Muggles had seen them, and now they were almost certainly going to be a nine days’ wonder in the village nearby, a bit of attention they most definitely did not need. Obviously, they had packed up at once and changed their location to be as far as they could from the mishap, but all of them were jumpy now.
“Well, it could have been worse,” Harry said.

Ron slowly swiveled his head to look at him and paused dramatically before saying, “How, exactly?”

“We didn’t get caught, did we?” Harry said.

“No,” Ron said, sighing. “Just sighted, which is nearly as bad, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not,” Hermione said. “We moved immediately, and there shouldn’t be any way to trace our path from that little forest in Scotland to a campsite on the Severn near Forden Gaer, now is there?”

“Logically, no,” Ron admitted. “But I’m not feeling logical at the mo. And I’m the one that loused this one up. Stupid to think that bloody song meant anything other than a catchy ditty and an appeal for interhouse unity or some such idiocy.”

“You did not louse it up,” Hermione said consolingly, “and it really was an excellent idea that nobody else even considered.”

“Yeah, because it was wrong,” Ron said gloomily.

“I’m still not sure it is,” Hermione said. “There are any number of broad valleys about, and who’s even to say it was in Britain? Perhaps Helga Hufflepuff was from the continent. Helga certainly isn’t traditionally an English name, is it? Isn’t it Old Norse?”

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake, tell me we’re not going to have to go climbing up and down fjords or some such thing now!” Ron said pleadingly.

“I don’t think so. It would probably be better to exhaust all the possibilities closer to home first,” Harry said, not so much because he actually believed that Hufflepuff’s cup was lying near at hand in a broad valley somewhere as he thought Ron’s head might explode if he gave any other answer.

“Harry’s most likely correct,” Hermione said, “though really, the Scandinavian countries are very pretty.”

“And cold,” Ron pointed out. “It’s nigh on freezing here. I don’t really fancy tromping about in snow deep enough to bury Grawp in unless we really have to.”

“Agreed,” Harry said, then glanced at Hermione.

“Oh, agreed,” Hermione said. “It was a bit of a thin lead on my part.”

“Speaking of thin, is there anything to eat?” Ron asked.

“No,” Harry and Hermione chorused together in identically frustrated huffs.

“Oh,” Ron said, seeming to collapse into himself even further. “I thought not.”

“You know, that raises a question I’ve always had,” Harry said, deciding that distraction might be the best goal, and also because this point of magic really was one that bothered him. “Why exactly can’t wizards just conjure food?”

“It’s part of Gamp’s Law of Elemental Transfiguration,” Hermione answered at once. “Food cannot be created.”

“Yeah, I remember, but why?” Ron asked.
“It just can’t,” Hermione said. “Five things can’t just be created: food, gold, silver, copper, most gemstones, and living beings.”

“Which is why wizarding money uses those particular metals?” Harry asked.

“Yes, although technically knuts are bronze, but that’s an alloy made with copper, hence it’s inability to be properly copied as currency,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but why?” Ron repeated, looking forlorn.

“I don’t know. They just can’t,” Hermione said. “Of course, if you’ve got something to start with, you can make more of it if you know how or turn it into something else, but there has to be a base to begin it.”

“Which he haven’t got,” Ron said. “Say, what sort of base do we need? If I had, say, a rock or something, could one of us turn it into an apple?”

“I don’t think so,” Hermione said, but Harry noticed she was smiling. “Well, not outside of a Muggle story, anyway.”

“There’s a fairy tale about rocks turning into food?” Ron asked, looking more interested.

“Not exactly,” Hermione said. “In fact, I suppose it’s not really a fairy tale per se. The only real magic in it is how clever the main character is.”

“So it makes logical sense?” Ron said, looking doubtful.

“I suppose so,” Hermione said. “Shall I tell it?”

“Please do. If one of these has a tiny bit of sanity in it, I’m dying of curiosity,” Harry said, and Ron nodded in agreement.

“All right then. Once…,” Hermione began.

“Upon a time?” Ron asked.

“Yes, but why do you sound so unsure. We’ve done this dozens of times now,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but I wasn’t sure if the mental start would be the same if the story itself wasn’t quite so mental as usual,” Ron said.

Hermione sighed but plunged gamely on.

“Once upon a time, there was a soldier who became lost during a war,” Hermione said.

“So, basically, us,” Ron said.

“Except we’ve got one another,” Hermione pointed out. “This poor fellow was all alone, having got separated from the rest of his regiment. He wandered for a long time through the countryside with nothing to eat until at last he came to a small village. Being very hungry, he went from door to door, knocking and begging for scraps of food, but no one would give him anything or even open the door.”

“Poor bloke,” Ron said, then paused. “Wait, is this in enemy territory or his own?”

“It’s a good question, but different versions of the story set it in different places, sometimes in
friendly territory and sometimes not. Honestly, I’ve heard it set everywhere from Russia to America and from the 1600s to the 1800s and just about everywhere and every time in between, so the background is rather vague,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, because really you’d think if he’d blundered into a village on the opposite side, someone probably would have killed him or at least captured him,” Ron said.

“True,” Hermione said, tilting her head to one side and pondering. “Most likely it’s on his own side then, although the ramifications of a village refusing sustenance and shelter to a soldier fighting on the side they espouse would be particularly inhospitable and cynical. On the other hand, if it’s meant to be a town from the opposite side of the war, their refusal to aid and abet an enemy combatant is more understandable, though the lack of open hostility could suggest that this specific town doesn’t care one way or the other. Of course, the soldier might have wandered so far from the field of battle that he’s reached neutral territory, which might explain a good deal too.”

“And thus we have a summation of why this lot won’t give him any food,” Ron said. “Whatever the case, they’re stingy and the bloke’s hungry.”

“Yes, and those are the important bits. When he realized no one in the town would help him, he came up with a brilliant plan,” Hermione said.

“He ate at a local pub and then ran out the door without paying?” Ron asked.

“No, he did not stoop to petty theft,” Hermione said with a disapproving tone in her voice, though silently Harry thought Ron’s idea had some merit. “He took a great cauldron out of his pack, got a small cooking fire going on the village green in full view of all the town’s windows, and filled the cauldron with water from the village well. Then he put the otherwise empty pot over the fire.”

“Boiled water. Delicious,” Ron said, rolling his eyes. “He’s gone bonkers, this one.”

“That’s precisely what all the villagers thought, but you’ll notice he had their attention, which was really what he wanted,” Hermione said.

“No, what he really wanted was food,” Ron said.

“Ah, but one will get him the other,” Hermione said mysteriously. “As soon as he was completely certain that absolutely everyone was watching him, he went back into his pack and pulled out a very big rock,” Hermione said.

“And he threw it through the window of one of the tightfisted villagers and ran off with some of their food?” Ron asked.

“No,” Hermione said frostily. “He put the stone in the boiling water.”

“Right,” Ron said, looking at Harry. “Boiled rock. One of my favorites. Second only to boiled water. How about you?”

“I think I’ll pass. Might sit a bit heavy in the stomach,” Harry said.

“True,” Ron said, then turned back to Hermione. “Why exactly was this exhausted, hungry bloke carrying around a giant cauldron and a big rock in his rucksack? Was he not miserable enough without the extra pointless weight?”

“Or was he wizard?” Harry asked suddenly. “That might explain the cauldron.”
“Hey, yeah!” Ron said excitedly. “Is that possible?”

“Now that you mention it, there’s really nothing to contradict that he could be a wizard anywhere in the story. Wizards can’t make food, he was hungry, and he was carrying a bag full of heavy supplies including a cauldron, though Muggles at the time certainly would have cooked in ones just like it. I suppose the only solutions are that he was either a wizard or the army cook,” Hermione said.

“He’s definitely not the cook,” Ron said firmly.

“Why not?” Hermione asked.

“Two reasons. First, any army that lost its cook would go looking for him,” Ron said.

“Yeah, that’s reasonable,” Harry said. “If hundreds of hungry fellows have only one man to feed them, they’re not likely to misplace him without a full search party.”

“Agreed,” Hermione said, her stomach growling as though to underscore her thought. “What’s the other reason he can’t be the cook?”

“Boiled rock?” Ron said, raising his eyebrows. “Doesn’t seem likely he’s cooked much, does it?”

“Hmm,” Hermione said, pursing her lips and thinking. “There’s actually a very good explanation for what he’s doing, but quite frankly, I think Harry’s right. It’s entirely possible the soldier is a wizard.”

“He might not even be a soldier,” Ron said. “Maybe he just found some clothes lying about and wanted to try to blend in with the Muggles, like at the World Cup.”

“A fair few of those didn’t exactly do the best job with that either,” Harry said.

“Are you speaking of Poncho and Kilt Man, by any chance?” Hermione said, giggling at the memory.

“Among others,” Harry said, returning the laugh.

“What was so wrong with the poncho and kilt anyway?” Ron asked. “It didn’t look all that odd to me, really. No odder than the rest of the stuff Muggles wear at any rate.”

“I’m not sure I can explain Muggle fashion all that well at the best of times since in terms of female styles it’s usually based on idealized fetishism of impossibly caricatured bodies paired with freakishly inaccurate anatomical knowledge leading to clothing that only looks good on a hanger and makes any human wearing it appear bloated and misshapen, which oddly we then tend to blame on ourselves rather than on the clothing,” Hermione said, becoming rather scarlet in the face with suppressed anger. “But men’s fashions, well, kilts are rarely seen outside of Scotland and never worn with ponchos, if that helps at all.”

Ron had slowly inched closer to Harry as Hermione had been near explosion level, and he carefully said, “Yes, that’s helpful, thank you,” in a particularly cautious tone.

“So, the soldier, if that’s even what he is at this point, tipped the stone into the cauldron and…” Hermione began, but Ron immediately interrupted her again.

“Just out of curiosity, how many cauldrons are you carrying in your bag?” Ron said.

Hermione gave a pained expression but stopped, dug around behind some cushions, and pulled out her beaded evening bag. She opened it and rummaged around inside, then produced no less than five
cauldrons.

“Pewter, copper, brass, iron, and granite,” she said. “Those should hopefully cover any eventuality.”

“So how many do you think the soldier had?” Ron asked.

“What, in his bag? Most likely one as that would be all the room he’d have,” Hermione said.

“Unless he could do the same little trick as you to make it bigger on the inside,” Ron said.

Harry felt oddly that he’d heard that phrase somewhere before, but shrugged and added, “Two tricks, you mean. There’s no point in making the bag huge if you can’t move it, too.”

“Fair enough,” Ron said. “So is there anything else in there besides a cauldron and a big rock?”

“Nothing that enters into the story,” Hermione said. “Certainly not any food at any rate.”

“Oh,” Ron said, then asked suddenly, “why didn’t you bring more food with you?”

“Excuse me?” Hermione said, looking rather angry.

“Why didn’t you? If you packed half the library and five cauldrons and a tent and changes of clothes and medical supplies and Merlin knows what all, why didn’t you bring loads and loads of food, too? We ran out fairly fast,” Ron said.

“Pardon me, Ronald, but exactly what was your contribution to our future safety, comfort, and success when we had to evacuate Fleur and Bill’s wedding?” Hermione said in a tone so cold Harry could practically see her breath turning into frost.

“Ehm… I had a couple of those cheese and cracker appetizers in my suit pocket?” Ron said sheepishly.

“I hadn’t intended to flee for my life at that exact moment, and I was fortunate to have thought to bring everything I’d been putting together with me to the wedding reception in the first place. So if you think I didn’t do well enough, kindly shut it,” Hermione said, glaring daggers.

“I guess nobody can think of everything, even you,” Ron said before adding magnanimously, “I forgive you.”

“Or we might possibly try saying thank you,” Harry said, giving him a glare himself.

“Oh, right. Or that,” Ron said, looking uncomfortable.

Hermione sighed deeply, and for a moment Harry thought she might be about to stop the story entirely and go to bed, but she went on.

“The soldier took a spoon out of his bag, dipped it into the pot, and blew on it to cool the water, making a great show of it, then popped it into his mouth and made a face of unparalleled bliss as though he had just tasted the most wonderful thing in the world,” Hermione said.

“Crackers,” Ron said to Harry. “Mental, I’m telling you.”

“Not at all. He knew that the people were watching and would be too curious for their own good, and sure enough, one of the villagers came out of her front door and went up to him to ask what he was doing,” Hermione said.
“I’m surprised they waited this long,” Harry said. “What did the soldier say?”

“He said, ‘Oh, I’m making a great delicacy from my hometown. It’s called stone soup, and it’s the most delicious thing you can imagine,’” Hermione said, giving the soldier a gruff voice that reminded Harry simultaneously of both Sirius and Neville with a head cold, which was odd.

“Uh-huh,” Ron said. “And she fell for that?”

“Completely,” Hermione said.

“Whatever country this was supposed to be, it’s definitely not inhabited by geniuses,” Ron said.

“The woman asked if she could taste the soup, and the soldier sighed, saying he would love to share it with her, but the soup really should have a few potatoes in it to make it really perfect,” Hermione said. “No sooner had he said this than the woman, who was very curious about stone soup, went back to her home and returned with a large bag of potatoes.”

“And he took the potatoes and Apparated?” Ron asked.

“No, he peeled them, cut them up, and put them in the pot. By now other townsfolk had arrived as well, and the soldier once again sipped the soup and declared it very good, but that it would be improved by some carrots. Another villager brought a great bunch of them, and then the soldier suggested that a bit of bacon was required, and yet another villager brought a rasher of bacon too,” Hermione said.

“Why is it called a rasher, anyway?” Ron asked. “I never got that. You don’t really have a rasher of anything but bacon, do you?”

“It can be used for slices of ham as well,” Hermione explained. “It probably comes from the Old English word rashen, which means to cut, since bacon is cut thinly to cook.”

“Okay, yeah, and I’ll just gloss over that you know the etymology of a word pulled from Old English at the drop of a hat, but people slice onions thinly too, and that’s not a rasher of onion, and the same goes for lettuce or noodles or apples or such. Why just ham and bacon?” Ron asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe it has something to do with being pork as well,” Hermione said irritably. “At any rate, by the time the soldier was done, the villagers had produced not only potatoes, carrots and bacon, but peas and salt and barley and mushrooms and loaves of crusty bread and great slabs of cheese, all sorts of things they’d been hiding away.”

“Suddenly feeling more generous, aren’t they?” Harry said.

“Yes, now that they know there’s something in it for them,” Hermione agreed. “Finally, the soldier sipped the soup and proclaimed it absolutely perfect. Each villager came up to the great pot to get a bowl of freshly made stone soup, and they all declared it to be the most savory and outstanding dish they had ever eaten. ‘Who would ever have thought such fine soup could come from only a stone?’ they said, and the soldier smiled as he ate his dinner. The end.”

“Apparently the soldier really wasn’t a complete idiot then,” Ron said. “In fact, he was quite clever.”

“Yes, but you didn’t say the usual last bit. Did he live happily ever after?” Harry asked.

“I suppose so,” Hermione said. “He was certainly smart enough to make his way to the next town and keep food in his belly.”
“Unless the stone had lead in it and they all died of poisoning,” Ron pointed out.

“Yes, or that,” Hermione said, rolling her eyes. “So what did you think?”

“Well, if he really was a wizard, it’s a case of fooling Muggles into giving you what you want again because they’re supposed to be gullible idiots, isn’t it?” Ron said. “I mean, they should be able to realize that the stone had nothing at all to do with the soup, that they were the ones who were really making it, but they’re too dim to get it, aren’t they? So we’ve got another story about how stupid Muggles are and how to make them do all the work while the wizard really does nothing.”

Hermione wrinkled her forehead with thought as Harry worked that one out for himself and realized Ron could indeed be right.

“I’m starting to think every story I know is either pureblood propaganda or the ravings of a violence-obsessed misogynist culture,” Hermione said. “Maybe we really shouldn’t analyze these quite so much.”

“What’d be the fun in that?” Ron asked.

“None at all, I suppose,” Hermione said. “Well, I haven’t any stones or potentially offensive, stereotypically naive Muggle villagers about, so I think we should call it a night.”

“Fair enough,” Harry said with a yawn.

“Any idea where we’re off to tomorrow?” Ron asked, though Harry wasn’t sure if he was asking Hermione, him, or both. He did know there was a bit of an edge to Ron’s voice, though.

“At this point I’m up for sticking a pin in a map while blindfolded,” Harry said with a sigh as he looked at the collection of atlases and maps still strewn about the tent’s main room. “We can’t do much worse.”

“Suppose not,” Ron said.

“Actually, I have no problem with that,” Hermione said, digging out a pin from the sewing kit she had stashed away in her bag. She opened one book to a section on Great Britain, let it fall open to a random page, then looked doubtfully from the pin to the book, obviously struggling internally with something.

“Oh, for pity’s sake, it’s only a pinhole, Hermione!” Ron said in exasperation. “We are not desecrating books or whatever term old pinched-up Pince would use.”

“I suppose not,” Hermione said, still looking deeply uncomfortable before thrusting the pin away from her and averting her eyes. “Here, Harry, you do it.”

“Okay,” he said, taking the pin, then closing his eyes and plunging it full force into the page.

“Ow!” Ron yelled at the top of his lungs and Hermione screamed.

“What! Did I stab you?!?” Harry said, immediately opening his eyes and gaping at Ron in a panic.

“Nah, I just wanted to see your face if I did that,” Ron said, then the pair of boys laughed madly as Hermione buried her face in her hands and muttered something about saving her from idiots.

They went to bed and then moved on to another nearby valley the next morning, never having checked where the pin had actually landed: a map of London, and more specifically, the exact
location of Gringott’s.
“Well, that could have gone a lot better,” Ron said gloomily as he came through the tent.

Harry, who had stayed at their camp today with a slight cold while Ron and Hermione went to check the public library in a small town in east Wales for historical incidents relating to a Horcrux wreaking havoc on the population, looked up at Ron and paused quite a while before he trusted himself to open his mouth.

“Why are you covered head to toe in dried mud?” Harry said, trying to sound rational and losing the battle. Normally he would have just made a joke about the state he was in, but Ron had been so touchy for the last several days that he thought it would be a bad idea.

Ron blinked, and Harry realized that literally the only bits of him not plastered in mud were his eyeballs. Even his red hair appeared to be a nondescript shade of brown from the amount of mud caking it. Ron shrugged and clumps of the stuff fell to the tent floor.

“Ask Hermione. She’s the stupid little do-gooder,” he said bitterly before flopping onto the nearest chair. Even Harry winced at what Ron was undoubtedly doing to the upholstery.

“Ehm, dare I ask where she is?” Harry asked gingerly.

“Damned if I know. Last I saw of her she was chasing some ridiculously runty excuse for a dog around a copse of pine trees next to the river,” Ron said with grunt.

“And this would be the river you fell into?” Harry asked.

“Yep,” Ron said. “I should probably get this stuff off me now that I’m back in the tent and can do magic properly without observation and all that rot, but I’m too tired to flick a wand at the moment. Besides, let her see exactly what damaged she’s done when she walks in the door.”

Harry had secretly hoped that Ron and Hermione would use the opportunity of being alone together today to finally work out whatever it was their relationship was, and possibly end the seemingly endless tension mounting between them. He wasn’t sure whether he wanted them to kiss or scream at each other, but if it made the rest of their hunt less likely to result in an explosion from either or both of them, he was all in favor of it. Unfortunately, it didn’t look like his plan had worked. Harry was just about to ask whether they’d been able to scrounge something for dinner when the door opened again and in walked Hermione looking perfectly normal.

“Oh, dear, you really did take a header into the river, didn’t you,” Hermione said as she took in Ron’s frankly alarming appearance.

“ Noticed, did you?” he said, folding his arms. A wad of mud fell from one of his shirtsleeves.

“Of course I noticed. I was the one who got you out of the river, wasn’t I? But I had to get Pickles home before I could come back here,” she said, and Harry noticed she too was doing her utmost to
keep calm around Ron. For example, she hadn’t yet mentioned the chair’s upholstery, and Harry was silently betting she couldn’t make it through another five minutes without it.

“Pickles?” Harry asked.

“The sweetest little puppy,” Hermione said.

“An ugly mutt with a face like a cross between Umbridge’s and Neville’s toad,” Ron said. “And he tried to bite me into the bargain!”

“He did not!” Hermione said defensively. “I admit he snapped at you, but then you called him, and I quote, ‘a mangy, flea-ridden offense to all canines everywhere.”

“It’s not like he knew what I was saying,” Ron shot back.

“Exactly how do you know that? Besides, it’s less what you say than the tone you say it in,” Hermione said, “and your tone was deeply insulting.”

“So was what he did to my shoe!” Ron yelled, and Harry suddenly realized what he’d been smelling since Ron walked in.

“Okay, can someone just explain to me what happened here?” Harry asked.

“We went to the library, but neither of us could deduce any pattern of bizarre rage-inspired incidents in the surrounding area’s newspaper morgues, so we were leaving to come back to the tent,” Hermione explained. “The polyjuice potion was still going strong, so we were disguised very well. Then I saw a tiny dog who was being terrorised by a group of the most horrid little boys.”

“Most likely the dog was terrorising them instead,” Ron grumbled loudly. “I’d bet he started it.”

“Ron, there is no excuse for five boys all hitting a puppy with sticks and rocks,” Hermione said, setting her jaw angrily.

“Wait, what? I didn’t see that bit,” Ron said, looking genuinely shocked. “How did I miss that?”

“Most likely because that rather pretty girl with the skirt that barely covered her backside had just passed us and nearly given you whiplash,” Hermione said coldly.

“Oh, yeah. I do remember her,” Ron said, then whispered to Harry. “Nice bum on that one like you wouldn’t believe. Can’t really be blamed.”

Harry rolled his eyes but Hermione continued on as if she hadn’t heard Ron’s last remark, though he was pretty sure she had.

“So I ran after them, yelling that I’d call the police if they didn’t leave the dog alone, and like most little hellions confronted with the possibility of an authority figure, they took to their heels and scattered,” Hermione said.

“Okay, but how did Ron wind up looking like something out of a bad science fiction movie?” Harry asked.

“The dog took off like a shot. I probably scared him even more by shouting at them, and I was afraid either the boys would find him again or he’d run into a roadway, so I followed him and Ron came along as well,” Hermione said. “He did lead us a merry chase, and at one point Ron made a dive for him, missed his mark, and tumbled top over teakettle into a rather muddy riverbank.”
At which point the dog just randomly jumped into Hermione’s arms without a bit of fuss whatsoever,” Ron said. “Then I got out of the mud.”

“With a bit of help,” Hermione added. “I was able to do a touch of wandless, nonverbal magic to give you a hand.”

“Was that what that was?” Ron asked, raising an eyebrow and having yet more flakes of dried mud hit the floor. “I thought a fish was trying to jump into my trousers.”

“Yes, well, it was a rather complicated spell to try to pull off while carrying a wiggly puppy, so my aim might have been off,” Hermione said, blushing. “I am glad you’re not hurt, of course.”

Ron sighed but looked significantly less angry. At least Harry thought he did; he couldn’t quite be sure with all the mud.

“So, how did you find out his name is Pickles?” Harry asked.

“He was wearing a collar and license,” Hermione said, “and as I still had time before the potion wore off, I took him back to his mistress a few streets over. Apparently he’d bolted through a little hole in the bottom of her fence.”

“Wasn’t that a bit risky? What if you’d stayed too long and she’d realized your face was changing,” Ron said.

“No, it wasn’t, considering the elderly lady happened to be blind,” Hermione said, and Ron shrank a bit.

“Oh,” he said. “Well, I guess you did a good thing, not that I can see the use of it really.”

“What do you mean by ‘use’?” Hermione asked.

“Well, you saved the dog from the mean kids, which is all well and good like I said, but it’s not like saving old Piccadilly—“

“Pickles,” Hermione immediately correct him.

“Whatever, is going to be of any use on the Horcrux hunt,” Ron said.

“Probably not,” Hermione admitted, then added, “but then again, who knows?”

“Am I sensing a story?” Harry asked.

“You might be, and a very old one at that,” Hermione said.

“Oh, good,” Ron said. “Just what we need: more mental stuff. Give me half a moment first to stop looking like a dirt road after a rainstorm, yeah?”

“Just a second,” Hermione said, pulling her wand out of a pocket in her coat. “Scourgify!”

Even for someone like Harry who was now mostly used to magic, it was a little disorienting how quickly Hermione had been able to turn Ron back into something resembling a human being again.

“That’s better,” Ron said, settling more comfortably into his chair. “Now then, about that story?”

“It was first told by a Greek man named Aesop, well, we think he was Greek, but he might actually have been from a number of other places as well,” Hermione said.
“Was there a B Sop?” Ron asked with a completely straight face, and even Harry wasn’t quite sure whether he was joking.

Hermione, however, kicked his now clean boot with her foot and rolled her eyes before continuing.

“Aesop, if he did really exist and wasn’t just an amalgamation of lots of different people, and I think he probably was a real person, liked to tell stories about talking animals,” Hermione explained.

“So no actual magic,” Ron said.

“Not as such, no,” Hermione said.

“Well, talking animals is always good for a bit of a laugh,” Ron said to Harry. “Okay, so what happens in this story that relates to ickle Petunia?”

“Pickles,” Harry corrected immediately. “Petunia is my aunt. Let’s not bring her into this.”

“Oh,” Ron said. “I thought I’d heard that name somewhere before.”

“I’m not sure I blame her for being unpleasant with a name like Petunia,” Hermione said with a shudder.

“Why’s it so much worse than, say, Lily or Heather or Daisy or some other plant name?” Ron asked, and Harry noted he very carefully and wisely refrained from mentioning Lavender in that list.

“It just sounds odd, at least from a Muggle perspective,” Hermione said. “Some plants and flowers are fine for naming people, like the ones you mentioned or Iris or Rose, but naming your child Rhododendron or Asphodel or Begonia or Petunia is fairly bizarre.”

“I suppose,” Ron said. “Still, no excuse for her to be a prat to Harry.”

“No, it isn’t,” Hermione said, then paused for a second before continuing. “I’ve always rather liked the name Rose myself.”

Ron snorted derisively.

“Really? And do you have a name you prefer, by chance?” Hermione asked, and Harry had to admit Ron had just bollocksed up the chance Hermione had just handed him rather spectacularly.

“Well, while the charms of my Uncle Jklngszkrtpbt’s name are obvious, I rather like Coriolanus,” Ron said firmly.

“Coriolanus?” Hermione said, looking slightly revolted. “From Shakespeare?”

“No, from this bloke who used to have a shop in Diagon Alley and sold the most magnificent cottage pies I’ve ever tasted. Even better than Mum’s,” Ron said rapturously, then added with a reflexive glance over his shoulder, “um, but don’t tell her I said that, yeah?”

Hermione just stared at him for a full minute, then shook her head as though to clear it and went on as if nothing had happened. Harry was betting that was her way of clinging to sanity at these moments.

“Well, once upon a time, long ago,” Hermione began.

“Wait, since he’s from so long ago, is this Aesop bloke the one who actually came up with that starter?” Ron asked, looking excited.
“It’s possible, but I doubt it,” Hermione said. “I’m not sure how it would translate from ancient Greek, but that’s more of a modern rendition of it.”

“But the fellow himself actually is from once upon a time a long time ago,” Ron pointed out.

“Well, yes, I suppose Aesop is,” Hermione said.

“So ‘once upon a time a long time ago’ was created by someone once upon a time a long time ago,” Ron said, crossing his arms and nodding with pride at his deduction.

Hermione bit her lip and squinted.

“Good Merlin, it’s like looking at an Escher print,” Hermione said.

“A what?” Ron asked.

“Oh, he was a Muggle artist who bent all the laws of proportion and perspective in his paintings so none of them actually make sense but somehow still look like they do,” Hermione said.


“You have?” Harry asked, more than a little surprised.

“Sure. He was a wizard,” Ron said.

“No, he wasn’t… was he?” Hermione said, seeming to consider this.

“Oh yeah,” Ron said. “How else do you think he got his paintings to do all that stuff? If you look really fast out of the corner of your eye, sometimes the little fish and stick people and things will wave at you. Oh, and this crystal ball thing floats around in them sometimes. No idea what that’s about. He just really liked playing with Muggles.”

Hermione opened her mouth as if to say something, then stopped and glanced at Harry, who shrugged.

“Actually, that would make perfect sense,” Hermione said. “Where was I?”

“Ehm, let’s see: Escher, Aesop, once upon a time, I think that’s as far as we’d got,” Ron said.

“Right, so, once upon a time a long time ago there was a lion who lived in a great grassland and was king over all he surveyed,” Hermione said.

“Okay, sounds nice, and very Gryffindor friendly what with the lion and all,” Ron said.

“It was indeed,” Hermione said. “One day, as he was sleeping hidden in the tall grass, a tiny little mouse stumbled across him, and the lion awoke at once. In a split second he lashed out with his paw and trapped the mouse against the ground.”

“Aw,” Harry said. “Poor thing.”

“Yeah, stinks to be the mouse;” Ron said.

“The mouse thought so as well, but he squeaked out, ‘O, please, sir lion, do not hurt me!’” Hermione said, putting on her very squeakiest voice, which was actually so high that it was hurting Harry’s ears.
“Right, I forgot you said the animals talk in this,” Ron said. “Okay, what’d the lion do?”

“He said, ‘Why should I spare your life?’ and the mouse replied, ‘Truly, in addition to your great mercy, I should always be your friend, and if you ever had need of my help, I would return the favor most gladly,’” Hermione replied.

“Yeah, that’ll happen,” Ron scoffed.

“That’s about what the lion said,” Hermione said, “but in the end he let the little mouse go since he wouldn’t even have made a mouthful for the great beast, and he felt kindly towards him.”

“See, definitely a Gryffindor lion,” Ron said proudly.

“He does make a very kind and fair decision there, and I admire him for it, but that’s really more Hufflepuff’s trademark than ours,” Hermione said.

Ron blew a rather ear-shattering raspberry.

“Seriously, when have you ever heard a story about a kind and fair badger, I ask you,” Ron said disgustedly.

“Well, there’s Mr. Badger from *The Wind in the Willows,*” Hermione said. “He’s a bit of a curmudgeon, but I always liked him. And Trufflehunter in *Prince Caspian,* who’s always loyal.”

“Whatever, I like the lion, so he’s a Gryffindor,” Ron said firmly. “I’ve never yet met a Hufflepuff I could stand for more than five minutes.”

“Cedric was all right,” Harry said, and a silence hung in the air for a few seconds.

“Point taken, mate,” Ron finally said, breaking the uncomfortableness. “Oh, and that bird with the braids, what’s her name?”

“Hannah Abbott?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah, her. Bit odd, but she seems okay,” Ron said.

“Hannah is a nice girl,” Hermione said. “We talked a few times at the D.A. meetings, and she’s really a very decent sort, always willing to work with some of the others who were having more trouble getting their spells to work right, like Neville.”

“Okay, fine, so I’m prejudiced unjustly against Hufflepuffs,” Ron said. “I’ll work on it. Possibly. If I work up the effort to care. So after the lion let the mouse go, then what happened?”

“For quite a while, nothing,” Hermione said.

“See? Told you,” Ron said.

“Until one day some hunters came to the wild,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said.

“They rigged up a great net under a tree and then left,” Hermione said. “The lion came along and, not seeing the net, stepped into it and triggered the trap. The next thing he knew, he was swinging high in the air, unable to escape.”

“A bit cowardly of the hunters, setting out a trap like that to make the lion helpless so they could just
pick him off from safety later,” Harry said with a frown.

“And what, you’d want a fair fight with a lion, especially if you were a Muggle using old-fashioned weapons?” Ron asked.

“The real question is why they’re bothering the poor lion in the first place as he lives in the middle of nowhere and doesn’t seem to be harming any humans,” Hermione said, and Harry saw a flash of the same anger in her eyes that usually accompanied an S.P.E.W. tirade.

“Okay, so the lion is stuck in the net,” Ron said, deftly drawing the conversation back to the story, and Harry suspected he’d caught the same hint of danger. “Then what?”

“The lion roared loudly in anger and fear, and who should hear him but his old friend, the little mouse,” Hermione said. “At once he rushed towards the lion and saw the situation he was in.”

“And exactly how is a mouse going to help a lion in this situation? Fetch a very tiny ladder?” Ron asked.

“No. He chewed,” Hermione said.

“Chewed?” Ron asked.

“Yes, the mouse ran up the tree and began to chew through the ropes of that net. In a very short time, long before the hunters could return to claim their prize, the mouse succeeded. The lion fell back to the ground, free of the net,” Hermione said.

“Huh,” Ron said. “Okay, I admit, that’s not only useful but actually possibly something a mouse could really do. You know, if a mouse formed an unlikely friendship with what is essentially an extremely overgrown cat.”

“It really is a massive play on the whole cat and mouse animosity,” Hermione agreed. “In the end, though, the lion was free because he had shown mercy to the mouse and the mouse had kept his promise. It all goes to show that sometimes acquaintances who seem like they may not be powerful can be the most important of all.”

“And the mouse and the lion lived happily ever after?” Ron asked.

“I suppose so, yes,” Hermione said.

“Why am I thinking of Neville again?” Ron asked. “He is a bit mouse-like, isn’t he?”

“But we already know in a fight he’s as loyal and true as any Gryffindor and a fast friend,” Harry pointed out.

“I suppose so,” Ron said, stretching. “I’m just glad to be rid of all that mud. I suppose we may as well turn in as there isn’t anything to eat again.”

“Who said there wasn’t anything to eat?” Hermione said with a grin, then pulled a paper sack out of her beaded bag. “The lady who owns Pickles insisted I take this with me as a token of her appreciation.”

Inside were several homemade meat pasties and a dozen shortbread biscuits, all still piping hot. Harry and Ron stared at them with their tongues hanging out for a full count of five before Hermione finally said, “Oh, for pity’s sake, it’s not like you’ve never seen food before! Fall to already!”
They had a wonderful meal for once that night, and Harry noted that Ron didn’t have a single negative word to say about Pickles from then on.
“You do know we should have found them all by now, right?”

Harry didn’t look up from the biography of Voldemort he was currently reading. He was already in a bad mood because the author refused to use Voldemort’s actual name in a book about him, and he was sick to death of all this He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named nonsense twenty times per page. Already in a bad mood, he let Ron’s question hang in the air like a poisonous fume as he counted slowly backwards from fifty, desperately trying to remain calm.

“There isn’t a timetable for this sort of thing, Ron,” Hermione said, her voice rather tight, and as much as Harry appreciated her sentiment, he was annoyed enough at the moment that even the sound of her voice talking about the Horcruxes was enough to set his teeth on edge.

“Yeah, I know, but even so, we’re not going to spend the rest of our lives bouncing around from one wrong location to the next, never finding anything but old bottle caps and the odd handful of Muggle money coins some idiot dropped so we can have another terrible take away dinner before disappearing again at dawn, are we?” Ron said.

“Maybe we will,” Harry said in a deathly quiet voice, still not raising his eyes from the biography. Ron laughed in a completely cheerless way as though Harry had just told a particularly weak joke, but he was the only one.

“I’m being serious,” Harry said. “I’ve no idea how long it will take to find the other ones. I had hoped we’d be done by now, but then if we’re going by hopes, I’d hoped we’d just bump into them at the Burrow, toss them in a convenient pit of lava, and the war would be finished before Fleur and Bill’s wedding. That didn’t happen, so no, I don’t know if we might not spend months or years or the rest of our lives tracking down parts of Vol…”

“Don’t!” Ron interrupted, and Harry very nearly finished the word just to annoy him but stopped.


“This is ridiculous,” Ron mumbled, wadding up a scrap of paper he’d been scribbling on and throwing it at the wall of the tent. “We’re never going to find them.”

“We’ve got one,” Hermione said, motioning to the locket that was sitting on the table and emitting an unsettling pale green glow, possibly in reaction to the argument. “That’s more than we had.”

“But it’s still here,” Ron pointed out. “We haven’t gotten rid of any of them yet!”

“The diary’s been gone for years thanks to Harry, and Dumbledore managed to get rid of the ring,” Hermione said, though Harry noticed she didn’t mention that Dumbledore’s hand had been slowly withering away as a result. “With the locket, that’s half of them already, and that seems fairly reasonable, I think. It’s going to be hard. We aren’t likely to stumble upon them by accident or find
one hidden in the tent, Ron!”

Harry scratched his forehead absently. Either his scar was hurting again or he was getting a headache. He wasn’t sure which.

“Maybe we’re going about this the wrong way,” Hermione said cautiously. “We’re looking for new Horcruxes, but maybe we should be trying to destroy this one instead first.”

The locket’s glow intensified a barely perceptible amount, but Harry could feel it more than see it. That thing did not like the topic of conversation. Well, good. Hermione was probably on the right track then.

“How? Stab it with a basilisk fang? You don’t have one of those sitting about in that little beaded bag of yours,” Ron said, then stopped. “Wait, do you?”

“No, I do not,” Hermione said primly. “Those are more than a bit difficult to get. Thankfully basilisks don’t just wander about Britain dropping their teeth all over the place like mad hens laying random eggs.”

“Mad hens laying random eggs?” Harry repeated slowly.

“Well, I couldn’t think of another metaphor. If you can, bully for you. And as the tooth fairy didn’t turn out to be among the real creatures I had formerly thought to be mythological prior to my Hogwarts letter, it’s not like we can just request one from her catalogue either,” Hermione said. “There are other ways, though.”

“Like what?” Harry asked.

“Something severely destructive, obviously,” Hermione said. “Dragon fire might do the trick, or possibly having a Gorgon stare at it. A nuclear detonation might be able to end the bloody thing if we absolutely had to use Muggle technology.”

“A new clear what?” Ron asked.

“Trust me, you’re happier not knowing,” Harry said, then turned back to Hermione. “Okay, assuming we leave off our list weapons capable of destroying a small country in one go, how are the other options looking?”

“Rotten,” she said, rubbing her forehead. “I haven’t actually come up with a way to approach anything that dangerous without getting us all killed.”

“Harry fought a dragon before. Why can’t he do it again?” Ron asked, and Harry thought there was a definite edge in his voice.

“I was getting a dragon away from an egg, not asking it politely to blow fire on a locket while not roasting us along with it,” Harry said sharply. “If you happen to speak Dragon, please, enlighten us to the etiquette of the finer points of the situation there.”

“I bet Hagrid would know how to do it,” Ron said. “Too bad we can’t get in touch with him. Or maybe we could try soaking it in Acromantula venom of something.”

“Not strong enough,” Hermione said. “I checked.”

“Another dead end,” Ron huffed, staring at the ceiling and looking sullen. “This is impossible. I think we should all just go home and deal with the Death Eaters some other way.”
“What home?” Hermione said coldly. “In case you’ve forgotten, Harry doesn’t have one anymore and neither do I.”

“You could both come to the Burrow,” Ron said softly. “Mum wouldn’t mind.”

“Ron, you know that Harry would be killed there immediately, and so would I most likely, and really so would you,” Hermione said. “We’ve had this argument before. There isn’t any ‘home’ to go to.”

“Then we go somewhere else, somewhere they won’t expect, like, I don’t know, India or America or Peru or something, and just wait it all out,” Ron said.

“While our friends die waiting for help in the meanwhile?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, well, better them than us, mate,” Ron said angrily. “We’re getting nowhere!”

“Yes, we are!” Hermione said loudly. “You just need to be more patient!”

“Fast is a lot better than patient,” Ron said, folding his arms decisively.

“Not always,” Hermione said, and Harry was surprised to see that a smile was playing around the corners of her mouth. He hoped against hope that once again they were about to be saved by Hermione’s apparently inexhaustible treasure trove of weird tales and batty legends.

“Why do I have a feeling this just triggered a memory of a story?” Harry said.

“Because you are being highly perceptive,” Hermione said.

“Whatever,” Ron said, waving his hand dismissively, but Harry could tell he was still intrigued by the darting look he shot towards Hermione when she thought her attention was elsewhere. “Those things are daft.”

“Not always,” Hermione said. “This one has a very clear moral to it. Aesop’s usually do since they’re fables rather than regular fairy tales.”

“Is there magic in it?” Ron asked, betraying a bit of interest.

“No, but it does have talking animals,” Hermione said.

“Fine, let’s have it then as we aren’t going to be picking up more bits of You-Know-Who’s soul this evening,” Ron said.

“Please?” Hermione said, folding her arms every bit as tightly as he had done earlier.

“Okay, okay, fine, please tell the story,” Ron said.

Hermione seemed to consider whether Ron’s politeness was sufficient or merely feigned (Harry personally thought it was the latter) before sighing and settling into her usual cross-legged storyteller position on a cushion.

“Once upon a time, there lived a hare and a tortoise,” Hermione said.

“I take it you mean the rabbit-like thing and not the stuff on your head,” Ron immediately interrupted.

“Yes,” Hermione said.
“What’s the difference between a rabbit and a hare anyway?” Ron said.

“Well, they’re in the same family, but hares tend to be bigger than rabbits, and their ears are longer. Also, rabbits usually live in big groups but hares prefer to be solitary or live in pairs,” Hermione said immediately.

“Seriously, is there any topic you don’t know about?” Ron said.

“I’m not all that up on Quidditch,” Hermione said with a shrug.

“So you just know about dull, unimportant stuff,” Ron muttered under his breath, and thankfully Hermione either didn’t hear it or decided to pass it over.

“Also I had a pet rabbit when I was little,” she said.

“Named?” Harry asked.


“Who?” Ron asked.

“A Muggle writer of children’s books, usually about talking animals. She painted pictures to go along with them that are really quite pretty,” Hermione said.

“Do they move?” Ron asked.

“Of course not. I said she was a Muggle,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said. “That still seems so weird to me: stationary pictures. Unnerving. It’s like they’re dead or something.”

“Thank you, Ronald, you have just succeed in making my childhood memories seem macabre and depressing,” Hermione said, and the way she was holding her head, Harry suspected she might be developing a splitting headache. Again.

“Okay, so there’s a tortoise and a hare, which is not a rabbit,” Harry said. “Now what?”

“So what’s the difference between a tortoise and a turtle, then?” Ron immediately asked before Hermione could get a word out of her mouth.

“Turtles are amphibians that need to be near water, though they are capable of walking about on land, while tortoises are mostly land animals,” Hermione said through gritted teeth. “There are further differences that can be observed, but is that sufficient?”

“I suppose, but I still think they ought to just call them big hermit rabbits and dry turtles,” Ron said. “Go on, though.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said. Not for the first time, Harry wondered whether Hermione had a blood pressure cuff in her bag and what it would read if it were currently on her arm. “As I was saying, there were a tortoise and a hare. The hare was always bragging about how fast he was.”

“Is it really bragging if it’s true?” Ron asked. “Because they are. Fast, I mean.”

“Yes, it most certainly is bragging,” Hermione said. “If it’s true, then the person, or hare in this case, shouldn’t need to be spouting off about it every few seconds. It gets annoying.”
“Fair enough, but really, how many topics of conversation would a hare have anyway?” Ron said.


“The status of other talking animals?” Hermione said. “Creating hare-based oral literature and poetry? Developing a system of writing? Questioning the nature of the universe and a hare’s place in it?”

“Yeah,” Ron said, unimpressed. “Boring. Then again, there’s no Quidditch to talk about, so I can’t blame them. Though I suppose they could invent some kind of pseudo-hare-Quidditch.”

“Pseudo-hare-Quidditch?” Hermione repeated, and Harry really was starting to worry a little about whether or not she might run screaming out of the tent into the wilderness one of these nights.

“Sure, they could weave goal posts out of meadow grasses, though I suppose that’d be hard without thumbs and all, and maybe they could use butterflies in place of a Snitch, oh, and Quaffles could be, I don’t know, potatoes or wild onions or something,” Ron said.

“What about broomsticks?” Harry said, becoming intrigued with the idea against his will.

“Hmm,” Ron said. “I suppose they could ride on moles or badgers or any other animal that would stand for it, and they could release hornets instead of Bludgers and beat them off with fern fronds or cattails or what have you.”

Hermione looked back and forth between the two boys.

“You’re obsessed. Completely obsessed. You do know this, right?” Hermione said.

“Bit more interesting than discussing the weather or bragging about how fast they can run,” Ron said.

“Yes, because bragging about Quidditch is so much more wonderful,” Hermione muttered so low that Harry barely caught it before she went on.

“Regardless, the hare was confronted by the tortoise, the slowest of all the animals, who took him to task for his conceit,” Hermione said.

“Tortoises are not the slowest of all animals,” Ron said at once.

“No, they’re not, but perhaps they’re the slowest of all the talking animals in this story,” Hermione said.

Ron paused for a moment before shrugging and saying, “I will accept that since there is no evidence to the contrary.”

Hermione shot him a look that Harry swore he’d seen McGonagall use, but she kept plodding on.

“The tortoise said that he wanted to challenge the hare to a race, and after the hare was finished laughing at him and realized the tortoise was in earnest, he decided to humor him and agreed,” Hermione said.

“It is pretty ridiculous,” Ron said.

“Perhaps so, but the other animals all gathered around, and they plotted out a course that went all around the great field where they lived and looped back to the start once more. The tortoise and the hare stood beside one another at the starting line, and at a signal from a fox, who was the judge, they
took off. As expected, the hare rocketed out of sight before the tortoise had barely moved at all,” Hermione said.

“Okay, now I feel kind of sorry for the poor tortoise, even though he did set himself up for total failure,” Ron said.

“He took on a nearly impossible task,” Hermione agreed, “but he kept at it, plodding along with determination.”

“Meanwhile the hare had lapped him already,” Ron said.

“No, actually the hare started to show off,” Hermione said. “He was so full of himself and so absolutely certain he would win that he purposely slowed down. Finally, he decided that he was tired, so when he came across a great shady tree, he decided to take a nap for a while.”

“A nap? Now that’s just insulting, that is,” Ron said.

“It could certainly be seen that way,” Hermione said. “The hare slept for a long while, but the tortoise kept going forward, never stopping. Finally, the hare woke up to realize that he had slept far too long, and the tortoise was only a few steps from the finish line. The hare put on a tremendous burst of speed, nearly as fast as a lightning bolt, but the tortoise managed to cross the line a split second ahead of him to the cheers of all the other animals, proving that slow and steady wins the race.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Ron said, screwing up his face in disgust.

“Yes, it does,” Hermione said, her voice rising a bit. “The tortoise won because he was determined, and the fastest one doesn’t always win.”

“No. That is absolutely not physically possible,” Ron said firmly.

“Oh?” Hermione said. “Why?”

“Unless the hare was sick or asleep for days on end, no tortoise is going to beat him in a race,” Ron said.

“Actually, it’s entirely possible,” Hermione said. “Let’s say the racetrack was a full mile long. A tortoise will usually travel at about 0.17 miles an hour, which would work out to a bit less than five hours for him to complete the circuit. However, tortoises have actually been clocked at up to 5 miles an hour in some cases, so that would mean he could finish the lap in all of twelve minutes. Assuming this tortoise isn’t quite that unusually swift, let’s say he moves at three miles an hour. He could finish the trip in twenty minutes, which isn’t a very long nap for the hare at all.”

“Uh-huh,” Ron said. “How fast does a hare run?”

“Oh, about 47 miles an hour in sprints,” Hermione said. “But he couldn’t keep up that pace terribly long.”

“So, if my rusty maths are right, the hare could run a mile in less than a minute and a half?” Ron said.

“Your maths are fairly good, but it’s closer to a minute and a quarter,” Hermione said.

“Right. So the hare runs for, oh, say, a minute, then takes a twenty minute nap, wakes up, and can’t finish the bit left over before the tortoise crosses the finish line?” Ron said.
“Those are pretty good approximations, I would say, and entirely feasible under the circumstances, so you’ve just proved my point: slow and steady really can win the race,” Hermione said.

“Only if the hare is an idiot,” Ron said. “If the hare actually took the thing seriously, he’d have won easily. It’s not that the tortoise won, it’s that the hare lost because he was downright stupid.”

Harry glanced between them, afraid to admit that Ron certainly seemed to be right.

“But if the tortoise had given up or decided the race was too hard or not worth it or hadn’t even tried it in the first place, it wouldn’t have mattered that the hare was acting stupidly,” Hermione said. “The tortoise’s effort did make it possible for him to win.”

“As long as the other fellow is so full of himself that the tortoise catches him napping,” Ron said. “I guess the whole point is supposed to be that determination and patience get somebody to the goal, but it’s really more that if you’re a conceited git with an ego the size of Malfoy’s, somebody will eventually trip you up and you’ll lose because of your own arrogance.”

“Why can’t both of them be the moral of the story?” Harry broke in quickly.

“I’d always thought Aesop’s fables tended to be more clear and single-minded, but yes, both could be valid interpretations,” Hermione admitted.

“Fine. So if we’re the ridiculously optimistic tortoise, we’re hoping that You-Know-Who has such an overly inflated sense of his own invulnerability that he makes a dumb mistake, which is when we, blindly stumbling forward…”

“Tortoises are not blind,” Hermione interrupted him, sounding a little desperate.

“Fine, but we’re still stumbling forward, not even sure where the bloody finish line is, and hoping we have the good luck to catch him napping and win in spite of ridiculous odds,” Ron said, looking disgusted. “That’s bonkers.”

“Yes, it is,” Harry said, facing him squarely, “and that’s exactly what we’re doing. We might be the tortoise, and we’re a long shot in any race, but if we give up I guarantee you that we and everyone we care about will definitely lose.”

They sat in silence for a moment, really looking at how long the odds were on finding the missing Horcruxes, destroying them, and all three of them surviving the battle that would inevitably take place. Harry guessed that Fred and George wouldn’t be putting their last Galleon down on that possibility. It was a stupid bet to take, and they wouldn’t be such fools.

Then Harry realized immediately that he was wrong; they and everyone back home, and there really was still a home, were all gambling everything they had on the three of them, including their lives. It was humbling and terrifying but heartening at the same time.

“Fine,” Ron said quietly, and Harry thought he had come to the same conclusion. “We keep going.”

“We do,” Hermione said.

“But I’d still rather we were hares without the overconfidence issues and could finish this up by teatime tomorrow,” Ron said as he turned towards his bed for the night.

“Don’t we all, mate,” Harry said as Hermione blew out the candle, ending another day of searching so they could sleep for a few sweet, blissful hours and begin another day of searching tomorrow. “Don’t we all.”
“I miss Hogwarts,” Hermione said, breaking the comfortable post-dinner silence in the tent so suddenly that she put a hand to her mouth apologetically.

It had actually been a decent day for once. While they still hadn’t settled on a plan to destroy the locket or found another Horcrux, they’d decided they needed a day off. This had actually been Hermione’s idea, to Harry’s complete surprise, but he had to admit it was a brilliant one. The day before, she had found nearly thirty pounds in Muggle money that someone had just left lying on a park bench, and they’d split it evenly among the three of them before setting out on their holiday. The only rule, besides obviously not doing anything stupid, was they weren’t allowed to think about anything to do with the Horcrux hunt for the next several hours. Harry wasn’t sure about the other two, but he certainly felt worlds better for it.

Harry had chosen to take a walk through the nearest town, having taken Polyjuice first to avoid being recognized, and had simply enjoyed a few hours of solitude, sipping tea in a little shop while people watching, listening to a rather horrible children’s chorus singing in a park, and catching an excellent football match on a pub’s telly. He’d even bought a good take away from a curry restaurant, and when he’d arrived back at the tent, the others had actually applauded the dinner.

As they’d devoured the lovely food, Ron had talked about his own mini-holiday, a stroll down a country road while watching some sheep graze, followed by a visit to an ice cream shop and then playing chess in the park (apparently just having missed both Harry and the off-key choir) with a Muggle pensioner who regaled him with stories from his time in World War II. Ron was more than a little stunned by what the old man had gone through in his younger days.

The two of them asked Hermione more than once what she had been up to before she sheepishly took off her shoes and socks to reveal bright pink toenails.

“You got a pedicure?” Ron said, looking confused.

“Yes,” Hermione said, and Harry was stunned he’d even known the word.

“But… that’s a girl thing,” Ron said, wrinkling his nose. “I thought you didn’t like that kind of stuff.”

“It may be difficult for you to believe, Ronald, but it is possible to be female, intelligent, brave, and like the occasional pretty nail varnish,” Hermione had said defensively. “They aren’t incompatible qualities.”

“I guess,” Ron said, still looking like he was on the other side of the looking glass. “Is that all you did today?”

“No,” Hermione said. “I also read for a while.”

“Now that’s more normal for you,” Ron said, and then quickly added, “unless it was one of those beauty magazine things.”

“It was not, though my choice of reading material in my own leisure time isn’t really your affair,” Hermione said primly.
“Uh-huh,” Ron said. “What’d you read?”

“Pride and Prejudice, if you must know,” Hermione said.

“What’s that? An exposé on pureblood culture?” Ron asked.

“No, though I admit that would be an apt title,” Hermione said. “It’s a novel by a Muggle author named Jane Austen.”

“Oh,” Ron said. “Any good?”

“I like it. I think this is the fifth time I’ve read it, actually,” Hermione said.

Ron raised his eyebrows. “Did you get hit on the head or something?”

Hermione sighed before asking, “And what precisely is that supposed to mean?”

“Because memory damage is the only reason I can think of that someone would want to read the same book more than once. You already know how it ends, so what’s the point?” Ron asked.

“The point is that I love the story,” Hermione said. “It’s fun to pick up the book and visit with Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy and all the rest of them even if I know what’s going to happen. It’s not the ending that’s the point, really, but the journey to get there.”

“Whatever floats your Fizzing Whizzbee, I guess,” Ron said, shrugging but looking like he was still concerned for her sanity.

“Look, you know how with the Omnioculars at the Quidditch World Cup you could watch the exact same play over and over again, even though you knew whether it was going to work or not?” Hermione said.

“Oh, yeah!” Ron said, smiling broadly. “That was great, that was.”

“It’s much the same thing,” Hermione said.

“I guess,” Ron said, but he looked doubtful. Silently, Harry despaired that the two of them were ever going to be on the same page about much of anything. “I mean, okay, if there were a test on it or something, I could see it, but still.”

Harry thought Hermione looked wistful for a moment, and he couldn’t stop himself from saying, “Seriously, Hermione, you’re not getting nostalgic over taking tests, are you?”

“What? No!” Hermione said a bit too quickly. “No, not sitting exams or anything, just, well, I do miss class and mastering new things and learning from the teachers. Like I said, I miss Hogwarts.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, his expression rather wistful as well. “Me too.”

“Really?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah,” Ron said. “I miss the bangers and mash the kitchens used to send up for dinner every second Tuesday. Oh, and the chocolate gateau and the porridge with cream and sultanas, and the corned beef sandwiches for lunch on Wednesdays. Say what you want about the dangerous stuff at Hogwarts and the number of kids in the Hospital Wing at any given time, but the food is bloody amazing.”

Hermione stared at him.
“How do you not weight more than a Hippogriff?” she finally said.

“I fidget a lot,” Ron said with a shrug. “I miss other things too, though.”

“Quidditch,” Hermione said.

“Obviously, yeah, but visiting with Hagrid too, and sitting around the fire in the common room while playing chess,” Ron said.

“I miss the Fat Lady,” Harry said. “I wonder what her portrait’s been up to.”

“Oh, I do hope she’s managed to keep the passwords from any of the horrid people who are running the school now so Gryffindor can get a little peace at least,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, she’s good fun and a decent guard as well,” Ron said. “Who was she anyway?”

“You know, I have no idea,” Hermione said, looking surprised. “I never thought of it, but all the portraits are based on real people, aren’t they?”

“I think so,” Harry said.

“Do you suppose all of them are, you know, dead?” Ron asked.

“Dumbledore’s portrait appeared in his office after he died,” Harry said slowly. “So do all the other Headmasters’. I never really thought about it, but I guess they must be.”

“We don’t even know her right name, do we?” Ron said. “I mean, her parents didn’t name her Fat Lady, or if they did they were a couple of rotters.”

“Oh, now this is going to bother me,” Hermione said.

“Well, when we get back to Hogwarts, we’ll just have to ask her,” Harry said. “I bet she’ll be right pleased to have something to talk about other than which password Neville’s forgot that week.”

“I do hope he’s okay,” Hermione said. “I worry about him. I miss all the Gryffindors, and the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, really, when it comes to it. It’s a bit lonely out here with just the three of us.”

“Yeah. I think I’d even be happy to see Millicent Bulstrode at this point,” Harry said.

“You really must be homesick,” Ron said, looking disgusted.

Harry nodded, and Hermione rested her chin in her hand and looked thoughtful.

“Hermione, can you tell us a story with loads of magic in it?” Ron finally asked, breaking the silence again. “The last few haven’t really had much of it in them, and I miss how nutty the Muggles get things.”

“I think I can come up with one,” Hermione said, wiggling her freshly painted toes as she thought. “Yes, there’s one that’s fairly dripping with it, but there are some connections to real spells in there somewhere, though of course the Muggles don’t quite understand what’s happening.”

“As usual,” Ron said, then added quickly, “oh, not that I blame them. So does it start with ‘once upon a time’?”

“It does indeed,” Hermione said, snuggling back against her cushion, and Harry relaxed as well.
Dinner and a story. It was turning into rather a good day.

“Once upon a time,” Hermione said, “there lived a princess who was engaged to be married to a prince in a far off kingdom.”

“Why?” Ron asked promptly. “Had she ever met him?”

“No, and that’s part of the problem in the story. They’ve never set eyes on each other,” Hermione explained. “Royal children were often betrothed practically since birth to other royal children to help secure trade routes or treaties or alliances between their respective countries.”

“I don’t get it. How does a baby put together a treaty?” Ron said.

“Well, obviously, the baby doesn’t, but the idea is if you’re the king of Country A and you’ve married your daughter off to the king of Country B, you most likely aren’t going to invade Country B since you might harm your daughter or your grandchildren in the process,” Hermione said.

“Muggles really are weird,” Ron said. “But why haven’t any of the princes and princesses in the other stories been engaged to other people in their stories since they were kids too?”

“It’s an oversight, certainly,” Hermione agreed. “Particularly in the case of ‘Cinderella,’” where the prince is looking for a bride when his parents actually should have been using his marriage as a political bargaining chip for years. I suppose Sleeping Beauty might have been betrothed, but over the course of a hundred years her intended would certainly have died, releasing her from the contract.”

“One would hope,” Ron said. “Otherwise, you’d have somebody Ginny’s age marrying somebody about Dumbledore’s.”

“Yes, well, Muggles don’t tend to live anywhere near that long,” Hermione said. “Really, practically every royal character in most of the stories probably would have at least had major pressure from the families to wed a particular person for political reasons.”

“Makes it a lot less romantic, not that these toe-chopping, spindle-stabbing, kidnapping, and foot-mutilation obsessing stories really were in the first place,” Ron said. “Anyway, does this girl who’s marrying someone she’s never even gotten a good look at have a name?”

“No,” Hermione said.

“Does the prince?” Ron asked.

“No,” Hermione said.

“Does anyone?” Ron asked, looking a bit desperate.

“No. Oh, wait, yes! Her horse has a name, but that doesn’t come into the story yet,” Hermione said.

“Her horse. Well, I guess that’s something anyway,” Ron said, looking weary. “If somebody has to have a name, give it to the horse. Okay, go on. I let you get one whole sentence into the story this time before I had to ask you a question about the mad goings-on.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said primly before continuing. “The queen was about to bid her daughter farewell, but she wanted to give her a parting gift before she left.”

“That makes sense and also suggests that she actually likes the girl, a combination which is
practically a novelty for parents in these things,” Ron said. “Okay, despite the weird matrimonial tradition and the lack of names, this is actually going okay so far. So what does she give her?”

“The queen took a knife and…” Hermione started.

“There is no way that sentence can end well,” Ron interrupted.

“And sliced her a piece of cake?” Harry suggested.

“Oh. Okay, I guess it could,” Ron admitted.

“…and sliced one of her own fingers until it bled,” Hermione said.

“So no cake then,” Ron said. “At least I hope not. Why would she do a stupid thing like that?”

“She took three drops of blood and put them on a handkerchief, then gave it to her daughter to keep her well and safe from danger,” Hermione said. “It was supposed to act as a sort of good luck charm. The daughter tucked it into the bosom of her dress, promising to keep it safe.”

Ron grimaced and said, “That’s just disgusting. ‘Here you go, precious popkins! A bloody handkerchief that will do nothing at all to keep you safe! Now stick it down your jumper and have a good life married to a bloke you’ve never met before in a country far away! Here’s hoping he’s not a homicidal nutter like the one with the blue beard!’ Hermione, your lot really are completely bizarre.”

“Actually, I’m not so sure about that,” Harry said, and both Ron and Hermione looked at him in surprise.

“Huh?” Ron asked intelligently.

“Well, it’s not a perfect connection, but the mother sacrifices a bit of herself to keep her child safe, and the child keeps the marks from it with her. Is it really all that different than what my mum did, only on a smaller scale?” Harry said.

Hermione’s jaw dropped open for nearly a full ten seconds before she said with stunning enthusiasm, “That’s brilliant! I chose this story because it really is just filled with bizarre charms and things, but this one does seem to have a basis in the wizarding world. I wonder, if the queen really is a witch, then it’s highly likely the daughter is as well, but regardless it could be a less potent, though still effective, form of the protection your mother put on you, Harry! Oh, that is just wildly interesting! And here I thought it was mostly a symbolic passing on of the puberty rights via a napkin that could represent the onset of adolescence via the menstrual cycle, but—”

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake! Can you not talk about that!” Ron said, looking like he was in danger or running out of the tent in a blind panic, Death Eaters or not.

“You can’t catch it,” Hermione said, and Harry heard her mutter under her breath “more’s the pity” before she sighed and said, “Fine. Besides, Harry’s connection is a very good one.”

“Yeah, that’s better,” Ron said, and his expression of dire panic reduced to vague unease. “So she goes off to the prince with a big retinue, right?”
“No, actually,” Hermione said. “She leaves only with her servant maid, each of them riding a horse. I assume she would have a dowry with her as well, but it may have been sent in advance.”

“That doesn’t seem very safe,” Harry said.

“No, it actually doesn’t. It would have been highly unusual for two lone women to travel by themselves back then, particularly for a long journey, but that’s what happens. Still, the princess’s horse was unusual,” Hermione said.

“How so?” Ron asked.

“Well, he could talk,” Hermione said.

“Oh, one of those talking-animal-whatsits,” Ron said.

“Sort of, but he’s the only animal in the whole story who talks, and it’s regarded as being a marvelous thing, so it’s a bit more magical than just a talking beast tale like ‘The Tortoise and the Hare,’” Hermione said.

“I’m guessing he’s the one with the name, then?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“Can I guess?” Ron asked.

“What is this? ‘Rumpelstiltskin’?” Harry said with a laugh.

“I don’t think you’re going to get it even with a thousand guesses,” Hermione said.

“It’s that weird?” Ron said with a note of trepidation in his voice.

“It’s Falada,” Hermione said.

“It’s that weird,” Ron said firmly. “Tell me, is this a common horse name among your people?”

“No, but it’s also not common for horses to talk either,” Hermione said. “I think it's supposed to sound musical, like do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti.”

“Like what now?” Ron said.

“Oh, like that one with the singing almost-nun!” Harry said, thrilled that for once he actually had a cultural reference that the Dursleys hadn’t forbidden him from seeing. Apparently Aunt Petunia found Christopher Plummer handsome, and to Dudley’s and Uncle Vernon’s disgust she had made them watch around every Easter. Harry had always thought it was fairly all right, though he always worried it would give his aunt ideas and he’d wind up wearing clothes made of their old curtains.

“Yes! Oh, I loved that movie when I was little. Still do, really. Maria and Captain Von Trapp and that horrid Rolf and the children and…” Hermione broke off as she saw Ron’s perplexed face. “It’s a Muggle play, and later a movie, with music in it. She teaches the children to sing with a little song about the notes in the scale using the solfège model, which uses do, rhyming with so, as the first note of any scale.”

“Uh huh,” Ron said.

“There’s also a family with seven children in it,” Hermione added quickly.
“Oh,” Ron said, brightening. “Well, that I can understand. Anyway, the princess with no name is riding the horse with the ridiculous name, and her servant is following on her own horse.”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “All went well for a while until they came to a stream. It was hot, and the princess said to her maid, ‘Fill my golden cup at the stream so I may drink.’”

“I hope she said please,” Ron said.

“No, actually, and the maid apparently took offense as well for she replied, ‘No, I am through taking orders from you. If you are thirsty, get your own water,’” Hermione said.

“Whoa, okay, that’s a bit extreme,” Harry said. “She’s not a slave or anything, right?”

“No, we can assume she was a paid worker, though the princess should have remembered that manners are still in order with anyone,” Hermione said. “Still, this was a bad, bad sign. The princess got down from Falada and knelt by the stream to drink, for the servant refused to give her the golden cup.”

“Oh, now that’s out of line if it’s her cup,” Ron said.

“It gets worse, for the princess, weeping at the strange situation she was in, bent to drink for the stream, and her mother’s handkerchief fell from her dress into the water and floated away,” Hermione said.

“Uh oh. If Harry’s right about that being a protective charm, there’s a major problem brewing. At least your scar can’t fall off or rub away or something,” Ron said.

“Even though I’ve wished it could more than once,” Harry said. “No, it doesn’t sound like that will end well.”

“The princess got back on her horse, and they continued on several more hours until they reached a second stream, and once again the princess asked the maid to fill the cup and get her a drink of water,” Hermione said.

“That’ll end well,” Ron said.

“She’s probably attempting to let the girl repent for her rudeness, but you’re right. The girl tells her to get down from her horse and get the water on her own, which the princess does, but then something very strange happens,” Hermione said.

“Which is?” Harry asked.

“The story usually says that the princess fell under the maid’s power because of the lost charm, and she had to do everything the maid said as though she had no will of her own,” Hermione said.

“No will of her own? That sounds like the Imperius Curse,” Harry said, frowning.

“Exactly. The maid tells the princess to switch clothes with her, which the princess does, and then tells her to ride the maid’s old nag while the maid rides Falada, and again, the princess does this without comment,” Hermione said.

“If that isn’t the Imperius Curse, I don’t know what is,” Ron said. “The handkerchief must have kept her from casting the spell, but when the princess lost it, the maid was able to do it. That’s a really hard spell to fight, too, if you haven’t got any practice.”
“Yeah, it really does sound like that. I’m guessing the maid is going to pass herself off as the princess?” Harry said.

“Yes, but there’s one more thing that happens. Before they get on their horses, the maid makes the princess vow that she won’t tell a living soul about what has happened or else she will fall down dead,” Hermione said.

Harry and Ron gave each other significant looks before turning back to Hermione and saying together, “Unbreakable Vow.”

“Again, it certainly does seem to be, though I’m not sure if that would work or not under the Imperius Curse since I’ve always assumed it usually requires someone to commit their will freely to it,” Hermione said.

“No, I don’t think it does, actually. When Fred and George tried to get me to do it when I was a wee thing, I didn’t know what I was about, but Dad said it would have worked if they’d managed to do it,” Ron said darkly. “I felt a bit bad for the maid at first, but I really don’t now.”

“I should think not,” Hermione said. “The princess, now dressed as her own maid, wept as she followed behind her richly attired servant, and at length they came to the castle of the prince she was to wed.”

“And since she isn’t traveling with anyone else, and no one there knows her, everyone believes that the maid is the princess and vice versa,” Harry said.

“Wait, no, someone knows,” Ron said suddenly. “Falada! The horse can say what happened, right?”

“You would think so, but he doesn’t,” Hermione said.

“Why bloody not!” Ron said angrily. “Did the princess skimp on carrots and make him go into a snit or something?”

“You know, I’ve always wondered about that too, but then I realized the horse probably had a bit in his mouth while they were traveling, so maybe he couldn’t talk because of that,” Hermione said.

Ron squeezed his eyebrows together in thought for a while before slowly nodding.

“Okay, I’ll accept that, though you’d think a talking horse wouldn’t need a bit and bridle in the first place,” Ron said.

“Maybe Falada could talk but didn’t know the way or wasn’t all that intelligent. It’s not like it was Bree and Whin heading for ‘Narnia and the North!’ or something,” Hermione said and received two completely blank looks. She sighed. “I am not explaining a seven book children’s series of Christian allegory involving pseudo-Medieval literary tropes in a fantasy setting involving a talking lion who is actually a Deity, an evil witch descended from Adam’s wife prior to Eve, and a magic closet with the ability to send people to far-off lands. It’s too involved. Read the books for yourselves.”

Harry thought that was probably best. Besides, seven books? That seemed like an overly optimistic number of books to expect kids to read.

“A closet that sends people to other places? You mean like a vanishing cabinet?” Ron asked slowly.

Hermione opened her mouth, looked perplexed, shut it again, then said, “Actually, yes, remarkably like that really. But let’s get back to the story we’re telling, shall we?”
“By all means,” Ron said, leaning back in his seat comfortably. “The maid dressed as the princess arrives at the castle, and what happens?”

“Well, the prince and the king both assume that she’s telling the truth, though actually they both thought that the supposed maid dressed in rags was more fair than the princess, but both had the good manners and common sense not to say so,” Hermione said.

“Are all princesses supposed to be pretty?” Ron asked. “I mean, is there no such thing as an ugly princess in any of these?”

As Harry watched, we could almost see Hermione mentally flipping through a card catalogue of all the stories she knew before she finally sighed and said, “Not one I can think of off the top of my head, no. There are a few about transformed princesses, and there are some ugly princes, but I can’t think of a princess in her true form who isn’t supposed to be beautiful in these stories.”

“Well, bully for them, I guess,” Ron said. “But the maid isn’t outright ugly?”

“No, that’s never mentioned,” Hermione said. “She simply isn’t as beautiful as the true princess. In any case, the maid-slash-princess was welcomed with joy and open arms by her soon to be new family, while the princess-slash-maid remained silent but sad. Finally, the king, taking notice of her, asked the false princess who the other girl was, and she replied, ‘Oh, she’s nothing but a servant girl who accompanied me, and she’s rather stupid. Give her some work to do, though, so she mayn’t be idle.’”

“Wow, this girl is a liar and downright mean as well,” Harry said.

“She’s horrid, yes,” Hermione said. “The king, feeling rather sorry for the girl, whom he thought was probably suffering from homesickness, gave her a job tending the geese, and that’s why this story is called ‘The Goose Girl.’”

“You know, this king is an all right sort of fellow, really,” Ron said. “He’s not snobby at all. He notices the girl who isn’t in the same class, at least supposedly, and he realizes she’s not happy and tries to help her. I like him.”

“He is quite a decent fellow,” Hermione said approvingly. “It’s like Sirius said; you can tell a lot about a person by how they treat people who work for them.”

“Or maybe he only noticed her because she was good looking,” Harry said.

“Or that,” Hermione said with a shrug. “Having disposed of the true princess as one of the lowest classes of servants, the maid had only one other witness to dispose of: Falada.”

“Almost forgot about him,” Ron said. “So what did she do? Have him help the princess herd geese?”

“No,” Hermione said. “She asked her betrothed for a boon for a wedding gift, and he agreed to give her anything she asked for.”

“That is one dangerous promise to make,” Harry said.

“Indeed. She said that the horse she had ridden had behaved so badly on the journey that she wanted its head cut off, and the prince agreed,” Hermione said.

“Oh, now that is just a full step beyond!” Ron said. “She killed the talking horse before it could even talk!”
“Quite,” Hermione said, “and the princess was deeply grieved over the death of her beloved Falada.”

“Okay, so the maid is a liar and a cheat and kills animals, including sentient talking ones, without a care in the world? I don’t like this girl at all,” Ron said. “She is officially going to be Pansy Parkinson in my head.”

“I thought she was already cast as the princess in the ‘The Frog Prince’?” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but she can have more than one role,” Ron said.

“I have no problem at all with that,” Hermione said. “The princess, the real one I mean, went to the man who had slaughtered the horse and paid him a few coins, asking him to hang the horse’s head over a gate in town through which she passed each morning with her geese. This way, she could at least see her old friend every day.”

Ron grimaced before saying, “Okay, I get she misses the horse, but how is watching its head rot going to make her feel any better? And would people actually hang a decaying horse’s head over a gate so that it starts dropping random bits of goo on whomever going under it?”

“Ronald, your imagery!” Hermione said, grimacing herself. “I know it doesn’t make much sense, at least not yet, but it’s part of the story. Besides, in the old days Muggles did sometimes hang parts of corpses from executions on town walls or gates to act as a warning for people not to commit those crimes. It’s disgusting, but it was done.”

“I’d say your lot is just plain bizarre, but I’m getting redundant at this point,” Ron said. “I’ll also hope the umbrella had already been invented so that people could at least protect themselves from whatever might be falling off the bridge or gate or wall or what have you.”

Harry shuddered. He’d had a horrible thought of how Voldemort might put the walls of Hogwarts to similar use if he got the chance. That image would undoubtedly go in his nightmares tonight.

“Okay, so Falada is the world’s worst interior—or I guess exterior here—decorating choice in history,” Ron said. “Then what?”

“For a few days, nothing happened. The false princess lived in the castle and married the prince, and the real princess went out to work as a goose girl,” Hermione said. “Then, of course, trouble occurred.”

“As it is wont to do in these things,” Ron said.

“There was a little boy who also guarded the geese who went out each morning with the princess. Every day, as she passed under the gate with Falada’s head, she would say, ‘Oh, Falada, ‘tis you hang there!’” Hermione said.

“A logical statement, I guess,” Ron said.

“And then Falada’s head would respond, ‘’Tis you; pass under, princess fair. If your poor mother knew, her heart would break in two!’” Hermione added, using what Harry thought was an oddly horsey voice for Falada.

“The beheaded horse’s noggin not only is still talking, but it’s capable of coming up with the second part of a rhyming couplet in response to her?” Ron said, giving her a look of total bewilderment.

“That’s how the story goes,” Hermione said.
“Okay, so we’ve got a protection charm, an Unforgivable Curse, an Unbreakable Vow, and a talking horse who can keep gabbing on even if it’s dead,” Ron said. “What’s your explanation on that last one?”

“I honestly have no idea,” Hermione said. “Plenty of non-living items like mirrors are capable of talking in the wizarding world, but this just seems much beyond that.”

“And the little boy going out with her each morning is hearing this too?” Harry asked.

“Yes, and it bothers him,” Hermione said.

“I should hope so,” Ron said, snorting.

“Oh, and the boy’s name is Little Conrad, by the way, or Curdken in some versions, so there is one other character with a name. I’d forgot about that,” Hermione said.

“Curdken?” Ron said.

“Curdken,” Hermione said firmly.

“Curdken,” he repeated. “That’s just odd. I think I’ll go with the other since Little Conrad seems like a fairly sane sort. What happened then?”

“Well, they would lead the geese under the gate and into a meadow,” Hermione said. “As they were watching the geese, Little Conrad noticed how beautiful the princess’s hair was and how it shone like red gold in the breeze.”

“That’s a pretty image,” Harry said with a dreamy smile, thinking of Ginny’s red hair.

“So he wanted to pull some of it out to play with it,” Hermione said.

“That’s a less pretty image,” Ron said with a frown. “I’m back to calling him Curdken again. He deserves it.”

“The princess wasn’t happy about it either, but she had a plan. She said, ‘Wind, wind, gently sway. Blow Curdken’s hat away. Let him chase o’er field and wold til my locks of ruddy gold, now astray and hanging down, be twisted in a plaited crown,’” Hermione said in a rather mysterious sing-song voice.

“And the kid’s hat blew away so he had to chase it until she finished braiding her hair up so he couldn’t pull it out?” Harry asked.

“Precisely,” Hermione said, folding her arms triumphantly.

“Okay, while the incantation is completely ridiculous, it’s obviously a spell, and one not that much different from something like the Levitation Charm we learned in first year,” Ron said. “Wingardium Leviosa sounds a lot less silly than what she’s spouting, but it’s still the same thing.”

“Oh, it’s easily the most traditionally magical thing in the story,” Hermione said.

“So the princess is also definitely a witch,” Ron said. “I thought she might have been a Squib for a bit.”

“And she can manage wandless magic on top of it,” Harry pointed out, “since I’m guessing the maid wouldn’t have let her keep one.”
“Yes, that’s a fair point as well,” Hermione said. “This went on for three days before Conrad went to the king to complain.”

“Three days? Why didn’t she just start braiding her hair before she left in the morning?” Ron said.

“I don’t know. Maybe it was too dark to see when she got up, or maybe it wasn’t her responsibility to remove temptation from Curdken when he should have been learning self control, or maybe she just forgot. She’s under rather a lot of pressure after all,” Hermione said.

“Uh huh,” Ron said. “And this king will just drop everything to talk to a little kid who watches the geese?”

“Considering the kid is about to tell him that the goose girl is really a princess, maybe,” Harry said.

“Except that’s not what he was going to say,” Hermione said.

“What? But the horse’s head keeps saying she’s a princess each morning, or didn’t he pick up on that?” Ron asked.

“He had, but he really wanted to complain that working with her was dreadful and he couldn’t take all the odd things that were happening like the horse talking or his hat blowing away,” Hermione said.

“He seems to have conveniently left out that he keeps trying to pull her hair out every day,” Ron noticed. “So what did the king say?”

“Nothing at first. When he heard of the strange things happening, he decided to hide and watch what was going on, so he got up early the next morning and waited in the shadows of the gate with Falada’s head on it,” Hermione said.

“Again, I like this king,” Ron said. “He’s using his head. And Falada’s as well, if it comes to that.”

“Yes, two heads are better than one,” Hermione said, giggling at her pun as the other two groaned. “Sure enough, when the goose girl passed under the gate, she spoke to the horse again, and the horse’s head replied in the same words it had used before. The king heard the head call her a princess and began to become suspicious. After that, he hid in the fields and watched as Curdken’s hat was blown away until the princess had finished braiding her hair into a crown, which is probably another symbol of royalty. The king left at that point and went back to the palace to think.”

“Something he’s done more of than any other ten characters in any of the previous stories combined, with the possibly exception of the soldier in the story about rock chowder,” Ron said.

“Stone soup,” Hermione immediately corrected him, but Harry was pretty sure Ron was just pulling her leg from the sly grin he was giving. “Later that day, after the geese were brought in from the field, the king went down to the kitchens to speak to the goose girl.”

“He goes to her rather than having her come to him?” Harry said.

“I’m glad you noticed that bit, since it really is important,” Hermione said. “It would have been highly unusual, but again, he’s trying to make her more comfortable. He asked the goose girl if anything at all was wrong, and she said, ‘Oh, your majesty, I have made a promise that I may not breathe a word of it to any living soul!’”

“Yep, that’s the Unbreakable Vow for you,” Ron said.
“The king thought again for a moment, then said, ‘Fine. Then tell your troubles to the stove,’ and he left the kitchen,” Hermione said.

“Well, that’s a bit rude of him,” Harry said.

“Yeah, he’s just ignoring her and telling her to do something stupid now that he knows something’s really wrong,” Ron said indignantly.

“It looks like it, but it wasn’t at all,” Hermione said. “The goose girl, having been given an order by the king, did as she was told. In some versions of the story, it’s actually a very large stove that hasn’t been lit and she crawls inside it, which probably represents some sort of return to the mother’s womb with the safety that represents, but in others she just sits beside the stove. Either way, she tells it all that happened to her.”

“A stove is womb?” Ron said slowly.

“Possibly,” Hermione said.

“Whatever. So she tells the stove her troubles. Wait, does the stove talk back?” he asked suddenly.

“No, why would it?” Hermione said.

“The beheaded horse talked back,” Ron pointed out.

“You’ve got a fair point there,” Hermione said, “but no, it didn’t talk. However, the king, who was very clever indeed, was standing in the courtyard outside next to the stovepipe where the smoke would usually exit, listening to every word she said.”

“Ha! That’s brilliant!” Ron said. “Oh, I really do like this fellow.”

“Would that really get around the Unbreakable Vow?” Harry asked.

“Actually, yes, since she had no idea a living soul was listening to her. She really thought she was just talking to a stove,” Hermione said.

“It seems a bit risky, but if it worked, that really is clever,” Harry said.

“At once the king returned to the kitchen and had the goose girl sent up to the royal chambers where she was dressed in a beautiful gown in place of her rags, and she looked lovelier than a morning in spring,” Hermione said.

“That’s nice,” Ron said, smiling. “Then what?”

“Then, that evening, after dinner, he called for the true princess to be brought before the assembled hall of the castle, including his son and the son’s new bride, the serving maid. The king then turned to the serving maid and showed her the princess and said, ‘Tell me, daughter-in-law, what do you think the punishment should be for a serving wench who tries to pass herself off as a princess?’” Hermione said.

“Oh boy,” Harry said.

“Yeah, she knows she’s in trouble now,” Ron said.

“Actually, she didn’t,” Hermione said. “The princess was still alive, so she assumed that she hadn’t told anyone about the switch. Instead, the former maid assumed the princess had tried to dress in a beautiful gown and that the king must think the real princess was acting in a way far above her
station, so she thought this was the perfect opportunity to get rid of her for good.”

“I guess I can see that,” Ron said. “She’s overly confident. So how did she answer?”

“The maid said, ‘The best punishment for such a person is to be placed naked in a barrel with spikes pounded into it all around, and that barrel to be attached to two white horses and driven up and down the streets until she is dead,’” Hermione said.

“Okay, that’s going to give me nightmares for a month,” Ron said, looking green. “I take it back. The serving wench isn’t just mean; she’d downright evil. I’m not sure Parkinson would even do that to somebody.”

“That really is disgusting,” Harry said.

“So what happened?” Ron asked eagerly.

“The king said, ‘Behold, you have pronounced your own punishment, for you are the false serving wench who has married my son through lies, while yonder stands the true princess! Guards, do to her as she has commanded!’” Hermione said.

“Harsh,” Ron said, turning a shade greener, “though at least it makes sense in a really brutal way, I suppose.”

“So the serving maid was executed via a spiked barrel?” Harry asked.

“Yes, and as the prince was now a widower, the true princess could marry him and live happily ever after,” Hermione said. “The end. So what did you think?”

“Well, in spite of how horrid she was, I’m kind of hoping the serving wench managed to Apparate out of the barrel since she’s obviously a witch too,” Ron said. “On the other hand, if she didn’t, I’m really not too fussed about it.”

“I just want to know how the Muggles found out about so many different spells,” Harry said. “Even You-Know-Who didn’t really understand about my mother’s protective spell for years. I’m still not sure I understand all of it myself.”

“And the Imperius Curse, and the Unbreakable Vow and the Levitation Charm and all the rest of it,” Ron said.

“All I can say is that they probably didn’t really know what they were dealing with, but they knew enough to piece bits of it together,” Hermione said.

“I wonder what the prince thought of all this,” Harry said. “His wife dies and he gets a new one out of nowhere.”

“Not very much is said about him,” Hermione said. “Much more attention is paid to the king.”

“Whom I still like, by the way, even with the execution thing,” Ron said.

“I miss being surrounded by magic,” Hermione said, looking glum. “In Hogwarts, just walking down the corridor you could see a hundred different spells. It’s lonely out here.”

“Yeah,” Ron agreed. “I miss it too.”

“Me too,” Harry said, “but at least we’ve got each other.”
“True,” Hermione said with a smile, “and a decent dinner for once, and a day off.”

“And painted toenails, of all things,” Ron said, shaking his head and staring at her pink toes, but smiling. Then he pulled out his wand and said “Orchideus!” and a bouquet of matching pink daisies popped out of the end of it. He handed them to Hermione with a little bow, saying, “A token of appreciation for the storyteller.”

She smiled shyly and sniffed them. Harry rather wished he was elsewhere at the moment, but at least as they all turned in to bed for the night, Hermione’s flowers tucked into water in an empty tin of Freshwater Plimpy soup, it looked like the pair of them had found something in common enough for now.

Chapter End Notes

Just a very brief note here. It's kind of you to show enough interest to suggest various stories I could do, but please be aware that I have a current list of roughly thirty more stories I'm exploring for possible chapters, so really, I do have plenty of ideas of my own.
The Little Match G(ood Merlin, What Is Your Problem!?)irl

To say it was cold was an understatement of gargantuan proportions. The three of them had enjoyed a brief warm spell, but that had ended abruptly with a huge dumping of snow while they were staying in northern Scotland, hopping from one small town to another while looking for another Horcrux. They had awoken that morning to no less than eleven inches of snow piled against the door and snowflakes falling so fast that nothing was visible more than ten feet away. Harry was certain of this because they had set up the tent very near three large oak trees, and as far as he could tell they had got up and walked away in the night.

“Well, we’re not going out today,” Harry said as he close the tent’s flap. “We’d freeze in no time.

“I suppose it’s another research day, then,” Hermione said, pulling a frightening number of books from her little beaded bag. “We’re going to start having more and more trouble with this as we’re getting into winter.”

“Maybe we could try looking for parts of You-Know-Who’s soul somewhere warmer for a while?” Ron suggested.

“Fine by me,” Harry said. “Like where?”

“Dunno. Fiji, maybe?” Ron asked hopefully.

“What connection is there between You-Know-Who and Fiji?” Hermione said, giving him a look that suggested the highest level of suspicion.

“None?” Ron said sheepishly. “But anyone who’s been through this kind of weather in Scotland is going to want to go there, so maybe he did and we just didn’t hear about it.”

“I highly doubt we’ll run into the Hufflepuff cup in Suva,” Hermione said disdainfully as she opened a particularly enormous book. “Now Albania, that does hold some chance.”

“How cold is it there?” Ron asked, and Harry thought he sounded pessimistic.

“Well, it should be above freezing along the coastland and in the southern bits, but He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was probably more in the northern section by the mountains, so—” Hermione started.

“So, cold,” Ron said, shivering.

“Most likely, yes,” Hermione said.

“Then let’s stay in Britain,” Ron said with a note of defeat. “At least the snow is familiar here.”

“I’m fairly sure Albanian snow is much the same as Scottish snow,” Hermione said.

“Nah,” Ron said, waving his hand dismissively. “You’ve heard that every snowflake is unique, right?”

“Theoretically, that’s true,” Hermione said.

“So the snow in Albania can’t look like the snow in Scotland because no snowflake looks like any other snowflake,” Ron said. “I prefer to stay where I recognize the snowflakes if I’m going to freeze to death.”
“We’re not going to freeze to death. Stop being so melodramatic!” Hermione said, rolling her eyes. “The warming charms on the tent are actually fairly good most of the time.”

“Maybe, but I never really feel warm when I hear the wind pelting snow on the tent’s walls,” Ron said.

“I just never feel warm at all,” Harry said, and it came out a bit more eerie than he’d meant it to. Sometimes he really did feel that something was wrong inside of him, but he put the thought aside again.

“What about a warm breakfast at least?” Hermione said. “I picked up some oatmeal at that shop yesterday and I’ve had it soaking overnight. Now we just need to cook it.”

“Overnight?” Ron said. “Doesn’t that seem a little overly zealous?”

“No. These are regular oats, not the quick kind, so they need to soak to cook correctly,” Hermione said. “Your own mum does it; I’ve seen her.”

“I suppose,” Ron said uncertainly. “I generally stay out of the kitchen unless I’m there to eat, so I don’t really know what she gets up to in there. For all I know she’s building a portal to France.”

“Is it, um, something you’ve made before?” Harry asked, dubiously eyeing the bowls of porridge Hermione had brought to the table.

“In the Muggle world, yes,” Hermione said. “I’m not much of a cook, I admit, but I think I can handle a bit of simple oatmeal, particularly in Scotland, for pity’s sake. It seems like they use it in everything.”

Harry gave Ron a despairing look behind Hermione’s back. For someone who was brilliant at spells, she was pretty much hopeless in the kitchen. Still, what could possibly go wrong with porridge? Unfortunately, the moment Harry had formed that thought, he realized he was tempting fate. With trepidation, he watched Hermione flick her wand towards the bowls in what to his unpracticed eye did look remarkably like the same spell Mrs. Weasley had cast at breakfast more than once when he’d visited the Burrow. At first, everything seemed to go well. The porridge bubbled up in the bowls, steam rising and a pleasant, oaty smell permeating the tent. Harry smiled in relief, and Ron seemed to have let go of a breath Harry hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

Unfortunately, the porridge went straight from pleasantly cooked into slightly burnt and then unidentifiable lumpy rock-like-things in less than ten seconds. Hermione’s face fell.

“Oh, that was most definitely not how this was supposed to work!” she said, shaking her wand as though it had insulted her. “Now what are going to eat?”

“I think there’s some bread left in the box on the kitchen counter,” Harry said. “Toast?”

“Yeah, Hermione, think you can handle something as complicated as toast?” Ron asked with an alarmingly nasty sneer. For one brief second, Harry was reminded of Malfoy.

“No, I don’t,” Hermione said, her voice shaking with her fight to control it. “You can bloody well make your own toast if you’re going to be so rude! Burning the porridge was a mistake, as though you’ve never made a single one in your life!”

“I’ve never burned porridge, no,” Ron said as though that somehow explained it.

“Because you’ve never even attempted making breakfast even once in your whole life unless you
were practically compelled by force,” Hermione shot back. “Please, your mum still makes your bed, does your laundry, and cooks all your meals for you and you’re nearly eighteen.”

“Not at Hogwarts,” Ron said defensively.

“No, not at Hogwarts,” Hermione said. “There you have a fleet of house-elves doing all of it for you. What are you planning on doing once you’ve finished school?”

“Maybe I can save up and buy a house-elf of my own,” Ron said defiantly.

“That or marry some poor girl and work her like one,” Hermione said with bitter laugh. “I doubt Lav-Lav is up to that, though.”

“All right, all right, enough,” Harry said, getting up and moving towards the remains of the loaf from yesterday. “We’ve not had breakfast, we’re all cranky, and fighting like this isn’t warming things up at all. I’ll make the toast. If it catches fire and looks like the charred remains of one of Neville’s Potions mishaps, well, eat it anyway.”

“Fine,” Hermione said, pulling a book towards her, “and thank you.”

The silence in the tent was deafening as Harry popped the bread into the toaster (removing a few spots of mold from it beforehand). Hermione was obviously seething as she flipped through the pages, though Harry would bet fifty Galleons she still was scanning hard for any sign of a Horcrux mention, while Ron stared at the wall and fumed, but, as Harry noticed, otherwise really did do nothing. Hermione had a point there, he thought.

In short order, the toast was done, and to Harry’s satisfaction it wasn’t the least bit burnt. After a bit of butter and a smear of what was left of a jar of blackberry preserves, it didn’t look at all unpleasant.

“Ready,” he said, and the other two joined him at the table, choosing opposite sides to munch on the toast, Hermione taking extremely small bites that she chewed almost past the point of sanity before swallowing and Ron finishing his two slices in three bites each without appearing to chew at all.

“Okay,” Ron said, staring at his empty plate. “Now what?”

“You could start the washing up?” Hermione suggested coldly.

Ron glared and said nothing for several beats, and all three of them listened to the sound of the snow hitting the tent.

“I’m cold,” Ron complained, then sighed.

Hermione and Harry said nothing but continued to eat. Harry wouldn’t admit it, but Ron was right. Whether it was the heavy snow or the enchantment keeping the tent warm not working properly or possibly even the doing of the Horcrux, it really was bitterly cold, and he felt like he might never warm up. He wondered if Hermione felt the same, but as he glanced over at her hand, still gripping the toast, he could see for himself the gooseflesh on her arm and the bluish tone of her skin.

“Hermione, do you think we could risk an actual fire?” Harry asked. “It really is freezing in here.”

“It is,” she said, putting down the crust of her toast forlornly.

“Probably your warming charm not working,” Ron said, shooting her a dirty look.

“Cast your own, then,” Hermione said, not even bothering to look at him. “No, it’s not that. I think…”
is it the Horcrux?"

“I was wondering the same thing,” Harry said. “Ron, have you got it?”

“Yes,” he said, taking it out from his shirt, then almost shrieking. “Blimey, look at the thing!”

It was glowing malevolently with a cold, green light that did nothing to warm or brighten the tent. It almost felt as though it was eating the light rather than adding to it.

“What on earth is it doing?” Hermione said with a look of repulsion.

“If you don’t know, I reckon it’s safe to say nobody else in this tent does,” Ron said. “I don’t think it’s anything good, though.”

“No,” Harry said. “Better get it off your neck, Ron. Hang it on the back of the chair or something.”

It seemed to take Ron a long time to get the chain off, as though the locket had become very heavy and was refusing to move. Not for the first time, Harry silently noted that the locket seemed to affect Ron particularly badly, like it preferred him or had some way of provoking him that was worse than anything it could find with himself or Hermione, though he knew neither of them had been acting quite normally for the last few months either. Finally, the chain slipped from Ron’s head and hung on the chair with a surprising loud smack for something so small. The light had tapered off a tiny bit, but it still looked, well, hungry was the word that came to Harry’s mind, and he didn’t like to think what it might be hungry for.

“You wouldn’t happen to feel any better by chance, would you?” Hermione asked Ron, looking so critically at the locket that Harry could almost hear the gears of her brain turning.

“Maybe a little,” Ron admitted. “Do I act like a total prat with that thing on sometimes?”

“Yes,” Hermione and Ron said together, neither taking their eyes from the Horcrux.

“Oh,” Ron said. “Ehm, sorry about that.”

“Oh, don’t bother,” Hermione said with a sigh. “We both do the same thing when it’s our turn to wear it, I think. It’s getting stronger, and it seems to be acting like, well…”

She didn’t want to finish the sentence, which scared Harry more than the glowing.

“Like what?” Ron asked.

“It’s almost like a miniature Dementor,” Hermione said.

Now it was Harry’s turn to look at the locket with repulsion.

“It’s weird, but I think you’re right,” Harry said. “We feel colder, we get hopeless, we…”

“Start treating each other like prats,” Ron added. “But… you don’t really think there’s one locked in there, do you?”

“I don’t think so,” Hermione said, though she looked uncertain. “You-Know-Who might have cast some sort of protective spell on it to mimic some of the properties of a Dementor, though. And if that’s the case, then Dementors get stronger and breed in environments that cause human misery, so the worse we feel—”
“The worse it can make us feel,” Ron finished for her. “Oh, blimey, that would be something he’d come up with it. It just feels like him.”

Harry nodded, then took out his wand and looked questioningly at Hermione.

“What if I called up my Patronus?” Harry asked. “What if all three of us did? Might it finish the thing off?”

“I don’t see that it could hurt anything by trying, and it might very well help,” Hermione said, taking her wand in hand. “Ron?”

“It’s worth a shot,” Ron said, gripping his wand tightly. Harry noted he really did seem personally offended by the Horcrux’s defense mechanism hitting him hardest, and all he could think was that if he’d been on the receiving end of that look Ron was giving the locket, he would have run for it.

“On three?” Hermione suggested.

“On three,” Ron said through gritted teeth. “One…”

“Two…,” Harry said.

“Three!” Hermione said.

“Expecto patronum!” all three cried out, and the small tent filled with a silvery glow. Harry noticed that his stag wasn’t appearing as quickly as normal, but in a moment it was cantering around the inside of the tent. Ron’s terrier yipped at the larger animal’s heels a few moments later, and Hermione’s otter, rather wispy-looking and transparent, appeared last of all, but it made a beeline for the Horcrux itself. Harry was startled to see the otter actually knock the Horcrux off the chair. The terrier picked up the chain and began worrying it between its teeth. Once it had dropped the locket back on the floor, the stag began pounding the horrible locket between its front hooves as though it were trying to kill it. All three of the humans in the room held their collective breath, waiting to see the outcome of the fight.

None of them was quite prepared for the faint, unearthly shriek that split through the room. The three of them covered their ears reflexively, but at least something seemed to be happening. A few seconds went by, but the three Patronuses slowly began to fade into mist, and as they dissipated, the shriek faded away to nothing as well. The locket was still glowing, but only barely.

“Okay, that’s a bit better,” Harry said, looking mildly impressed.

“Can it finish it off?” Ron said, looking more hopeful than Harry had seen him in months. The change was shocking. He hadn’t realized just how mournful his best friend had taken to being until he saw him almost normal again.

“I’m afraid not,” Hermione said sadly, and Harry watched as Ron’s face fell back into hardened disappointment.

“Why not?” Harry asked, and while he knew it was stupid and irrational he felt like he wanted to blame her for it.

“Because a Patronus is meant to protect people, but it’s not really meant as an offensive device,” Hermione said. “In some cases, like when Malfoy and his goons were pretending to be Dementors on the Quidditch pitch, they can actually knock people or other beings over, and they can dispel actual Dementors, of course, since they’re more a solidified form of depression than actual living beings, but then can’t really smash things to bits or kill attackers. It’s not in a Patronus’s nature to be
able to fight something as evil as a Horcrux and destroy it, but apparently it can stave off the side effects it can cause, like aggravation and ill will."

“For a while,” Ron added, looking gloomy.

“It’s still better than nothing,” Hermione said in a small voice.

“Yeah,” Ron said, and all three of them looked at the Horcrux, which somehow even appeared smaller than it had been a few minutes ago. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

There was a silence that lasted a few seconds before Hermione asked, “Are you still cold?”

“No, I think I’m getting warmer now,” Ron said. Harry wasn’t quite sure if he believed him or not, but as he thought about it, he realized he didn’t feel as cold either.

“It’s warming up a bit, yeah,” Harry said, putting his wand back in his pocket. “We’re going to need to do this more often.”

“That’s a good idea,” Ron said. “I really was freezing.”

Hermione’s expression changed just a bit, but Harry knew what that meant.

“He just reminded you of a story, didn’t he,” Harry said.

“Well, yes, though I warn you it’s not an especially happy one,” Hermione said. “In fact it’s quite depressing.”

“Oh, why not?” Ron said, leaning back against the couch and looking oddly comfortable. “Go ahead.”

“All right then,” she said, then took a deep breath. “Once upon…”

“… a time,” Ron finished.

“I thought you might have broken that habit,” Hermione said.

“I think you thought wrong,” Ron said. “It’s too mad not to play with. Anyway, continue.”

“There lived a little girl whose family was very poor,” Hermione said.

“Okay, I can sympathize on that front,” Ron said.

“I’m not sure you can, really,” Hermione said. “Her parents paid her no attention at all and kicked her soundly when they got the chance. She wasn’t permitted to go to school, but instead she had to go out every day to sell matches.”

“Oh,” Ron said. “No. Things might be rather tight, but Mum and Dad wouldn’t do anything like that. Why matches?”

“People did used to make them a long time ago, so it would work as a cottage industry product. Muggles needed matches a lot in the days before electricity for everything from light and heat to cooking. Wizards can simply conjure up fire, of course, but it’s not so easy for Muggles,” Hermione said.

“Wouldn’t that be kind of dangerous, letting a little kid sell matches?” Harry asked.
“It probably would,” Hermione agreed. “However, children were more used to dealing with fire back then and had to learn proper safety and all that as part of their daily life.”

“Yeah, kids shouldn’t play with matches,” Ron said. “For that matter, neither should my dad. He was having far too much fun at the World Cup with those things. He might have the makings of a pyromaniac there.”

“I highly doubt it,” Hermione said, but she was hiding a smile.

“Oh, it happens,” Ron said. “My cousin Floobus Weasley had this weird thing about fire. You know how wizarding kids sometimes do automatic magic when they’re little, and that’s how their parents know they’ve inherited it? Well, when Floobus was just a little tyke, maybe two, he kept lighting things on fire with magic: the laundry, the pictures on the walls, even the cat.”

“That’s actually rather disturbing,” Hermione said.

“You think you’re disturbed, try being the cat,” Ron said. “Poor thing high-tailed it to a Muggle family the next county over after the third time. Still, most kids outgrow that once they’re old enough to have some control.”

“So whatever happened to Floobus?” Harry asked.

“Last I heard he was in Azkaban for arson. He burned down a fireworks plant somewhere in Belgium. Flanders, I think it was,” Ron said.

“So Floobus flamed a fireworks factory in Flanders?” Harry said, unable to resist.

Ron snorted, and Hermione just shook her head in disbelief at the two of them.

“If you’re both through giggling at arson,” Hermione said reproachfully, but Harry thought he caught a small grin pulling at the corner of her mouth.

“Oh, right. Back to the little sprog selling matches in spite of a bevy of safety risks,” Ron said.

“Thank you,” Hermione said. “It was New Year’s Eve, and a hard snow was falling. The little girl stood on the corner of a normally busy street, but there was no one about. Everyone had hurried indoors for their New Year’s dinners and to be with their families, so the girl was quite alone, and there was no one to buy her matches.”

“Okay, it’s bad enough having lousy parents and getting stuck with a stupid and potentially dangerous job, but standing alone on a street corner on New Year’s Eve in the snow is just plain depressing,” Ron said. “Poor kid.”

“On top of that, she had no shoes, so her little toes were freezing,” Hermione said.

“Wild guess. That Andersen weirdo wrote this one, didn’t he?” Ron said.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “I did mention this particular story once before in another tale of his.”

“Yeah, not really recalling it. All the foot torture sort of blends together. What is it with this bloke and feet?” Ron asked. “And why hasn’t the kid got any shoes at the end of December?”

“She’d originally taken a pair of her father’s slippers, as she had no shoes of her own, since it was so very cold, but some cruel boys had come up to her, making fun of her for her enormous shoes. Eventually they shoved her into a snowbank and took the shoes as spoils. One of the little boys said
he couldn’t use the shoe for his foot as it was so big, but he might save it for his firstborn to use as a cradle,” Hermione said.

“Okay, now I’m angry,” Ron said, frowning. “Bunch of rotten bullies.”

“Sounds a bit like Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle,” Harry said.

“More like a lot,” Ron said. “So her family’s poor! That’s no reason to steal the little she’s got.”

“I quite agree,” Hermione said, and Harry was pleased to see the two of them at least like-minded about something.

“I’m guessing she’s nameless as well as shoeless?” Ron asked.

“Yes, so far as I know she has no name,” Hermione said.

Ron tilted his head to the side for a moment, considering.

“Betsy,” he finally said. “I’m calling her Betsy.”

“Why Betsy?” Harry asked.

“Dunno,” Ron said, shrugging. “It’s a nice, normal, Muggle-friendly name, isn’t it?”

“Perfectly acceptable,” Hermione said.

“Well, the girl deserves something decent even if it’s only her name,” Ron said, then repeated firmly, “Betsy.”

“Betsy,” Hermione said as though conferring her agreement, and Harry had to admit something about Ron’s naming of the little waif was oddly touching.

“So what happened next?” Ron asked again.

“She, that is to say, Betsy, was afraid to go home without having sold any matches at all as she knew her father would beat her horribly for it,” Hermione said.

“And hello Uncle Vernon,” Harry said.

“But they didn’t actually beat you, did they?” Ron asked, turning his surprisingly concerned face towards Harry.

“No,” Harry said. “I think they would have if they thought the neighbors wouldn’t notice, and of course Dudley punched me whenever he could, but he and my aunt didn’t. Still, I think if Uncle Vernon had been expecting money from someone and they didn’t follow through, he could have got pretty violent.”

“This kid has got it bad,” Ron said. “So what happens to Betsy?”

“After several hours in the cold, she finally decided that perhaps she could chance lighting just one of the matches to warm herself, even if her father became angry with her for it,” Hermione said.

“One match? He’s going to beat her over one match when she’s freezing to death?” Ron said.

“Apparently so,” Hermione said.
“How expensive were these bloody matches?” Ron asked.

“How?” Hermione said, considering for a moment. “Probably about the equivalent of a penny or so, which in modern money would be a bit more but not by all that much.”

“I have a sudden desire to buy several Galleons’ worth of matches,” Ron said through gritted teeth. “So she lights a match?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “She huddled into an alley between two great houses and lit the match with a great ‘scratch,’ when suddenly something unexpected happened.”

“Father Christmas arrived late?” Ron asked hopefully.

“No, the wall beside her became transparent, and she could see through it as though through a veil,” Hermione said.

“Okay, that’s weird,” Ron said.

“Inside, she could see the family’s dinner sitting on the table: a roast goose on a platter, potatoes, puddings, bread and butter, apples, plums, sweets, all sorts of wonderful things,” Hermione said.

Harry looked nervously at Ron, expecting to see his usual reaction to any mention of food, which was an expression so ravenous it would send werewolves running. Instead, though, Ron merely looked thoughtful and a little sad.

“Did she get any of it?” Ron asked.

“Almost,” Hermione said. “As she watched, the goose hopped off the table, complete with the carving knife and fork stuck in its breast, and began to waddle towards her, waving its wings in greeting.”

“I think that goose might possibly be a bit undercooked,” Harry said, and Ron snorted.

“But before the goose could reach her, the match went out, and the wall was solid once again,” Hermione said.

“Could she be doing some kind of magic?” Ron asked.

“I’m not sure,” Hermione said. “Food can’t be created from nothing, of course, but if there really was food on the other side of the wall, then she wouldn’t be creating it, just trying to summon it to her. Remember when Flitwick had us make pineapples tapdance during exams? It does seem a bit like that.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I’m not so sure about seeing through walls, but I bet it’s possible.”

“Oh, it is,” Hermione said. “It’s just considered highly rude, so it isn’t taught at Hogwarts.”

“So maybe Betsy is a witch,” Ron said.

“She might be,” Hermione said. “I suppose it’s possible.”

“When the match went out, what happened to her?” Ron asked.

“She lit another match, hoping to see the goose again,” Hermione said.
“Even though that really is kind of nightmarish, walking around with a knife stuck in it and offering itself up to be eaten,” Harry said.

“I’m hungry,” Ron mumbled, and Harry shrugged, realizing it had to happen eventually.

“What happened with the next match?” Harry asked.

“Oh, the wall on the other side became transparent, and she could see the family’s Christmas tree, an absolutely enormous one, glowing in their parlor,” Hermione said.

“I think I’d rather have the freakish zombie goose,” Ron said, “but she’s only a kid, I guess.”

“The tree had hundreds of lit candles on it, and beautiful decorations like she had seen in the store windows, a glorious sight, and it seemed to her that the tree was so large that the lights on it blended with the stars in the sky,” Hermione said.

“All those candles and they couldn’t have bought even one little match from her to light them?” Ron said.

“They probably never noticed her there, which is usually the problem with people,” Hermione said.

“Why do you think it’s impolite for house-elves to be seen? Someone might take pity on them if they were more visible.”

“I don’t know, Hermione,” Harry said. “There are plenty of homeless people in every big city, usually sitting in plain view, and it’s pretty rare anyone notices them either.”

Hermione seemed to consider this for a moment before admitting, “You have me there. In any case, the match went out, and she was left in the dark again. Just at that moment, she looked up in the sky and saw a shooting star. ‘Someone is dying’ she said, for that is what her old grandmother had told her that shooting stars meant.”

“I think I know where this is going,” Ron said.

“Probably,” Hermione said. “Andersen isn’t being terribly subtle. The girl, I mean, Betsy, lit another match, hoping to see the beautiful tree again, but instead she saw her dear old grandmother, who had died some time ago and was the only person who had ever been kind to her in her life, standing before her in the glow of the flame.”

“Oh, Grandmother!” she cried, ‘Stay with me!’ and she lit match after match to keep her there with her,” Hermione said. “At long last, she burned the only one remaining, and when its light went out, her grandmother was still there. She took the little girl in her arms and soared with her up into the sky to heaven, where there was no cold or hunger.”

Harry glanced over at Ron as he heard a sniffle, but he decided to let it pass without comment.

“The next morning, the little match girl’s body was found, frozen to death in the alleyway with a bunch of burned matches next to it. ‘She must have been trying to warm herself,’ the people said, for none of them knew what glories she had seen,” Hermione said. “The end.”

There was a long pause before anyone said anything.

Finally, Hermione said, “I did warn you that it was sad.”
“I’m just trying to decide whether Andersen wrote the story to make people feel guilty about kids freezing to death on their doorsteps without their noticing or to make them feel better because the kids go someplace better afterwards,” Ron said.

“If that’s even what happens,” Harry said. “I mean, it’s nice to think that when you die your family comes to get you so it’s not so bad, but I wouldn’t bet that’s going to be what happens to me some day.”

“I hope they buried her wearing shoes,” Ron said sullenly, “even if it was too late to do any good.”

“I would think they did,” Hermione said, patting his hand kindly.

Harry looked over at the locket, and while it certainly wasn’t glowing the way it had when it was busily attacking their minds, he could still see a dim, barely perceptible light emanating from it. Somehow he knew that it was waiting, recovering from the attack by their Patronuses, biding its time before it tried to turn them against one another again. But not today. There were people to remember, people counting on them.

“I’m not as cold as I was,” Ron said, though Harry suspected he wasn’t so much feeling the cold less as feeling determination more.

“Me neither,” Harry said, listening to the wind whistling around the corners of the tent.

Hermione merely nodded, but it was enough. All three of them waited for the storm to pass, and then they would keep going on, one point of light at a time, even if each one burned out in turn, until finally they reached the one that held their goal.
“I’m telling you, it was a Skrewt!” Ron yelled, peering nervously over his shoulder as he and Harry entered the tent.

“A Skrewt?” Hermione said, looking up from her book.

“No, it wasn’t,” Harry said, taking off his snow-covered hat and hanging it on a hook near the door, his soaked gloves following immediately after.

“It was,” Ron said firmly, dropping his gloves on the floor before starting to pull off his boots. “I’m certain of it.”

“If it was a Skrewt, that’s a very serious problem,” Hermione said, and Harry noticed a slight flare of panic in her voice. “Only Hagrid ever had access to the Skrewts directly, and most of them wound up killing one another until there were only a handful left. If you just found one wandering the Yorkshire countryside, that could mean the Death Eaters have figured out how to breed them on their own, or worse that they’ve got Hagrid, maybe under a very strong version of the Imperius Curse, and are forcing him to create mutations of various animals to use against the Order and the general population!”

“It was a cow,” Harry said calmly as he removed his own boots and set them on the mat.

“That hideous thing was not a cow!” Ron said sharply. “It was a Skrewt!”

“So far as I remember, Skrewts didn’t really go about mooing all that much,” Harry said.

“Skrewt,” Ron said firmly.

“Cow,” Harry countered.

“Well, which is it?” Hermione almost screamed at them. “It’s not like they look very much alike!”

“We were going along an old road, a dirt one, and there was a heavy fog,” Harry said.


“We were going past this particularly ancient farm, and I admit it was dead creepy since we never know now if it’s just regular fog or if Dementors are breeding,” Harry said.

“Then there was this horrifying, murderous, ear-splitting shriek,” Ron said.

“A rooster crowed,” Harry told her.

“It did not!” Ron said. “It was an unearthly wailing, like a banshee or summat.”

“It was a rooster,” Harry repeated, giving his friend a deeply tired look.
“Then this terrible, repulsive shape rose out of the mist and bellowed and started coming after us down the road,” Ron said.

“I’ll admit I didn’t know what it was at first either,” Harry said. “It was just a big shadowy thing that was in the middle of the road, and it did start coming toward us.”

“So we ran for it,” Ron said, “and I’m 100% sure it was a Skrewt.”

“It was a cow that had gotten out of its pasture,” Harry said, sitting down on one of the chairs and glaring at Ron. “Look, I ran too, so it’s no big stain on your honor or something, but you know as well as I do that Skrewts don’t have hooves that make a clopping sound, they don’t have horns, they don’t wear bells, and they most definitely do not moo.”

Ron looked between Harry and Hermione angrily, then sighed and threw himself on the couch in a snit.

“Fine! It was a ruddy cow!” he said. “I still think mine was the better story though.”

Hermione buried her face in her hands, and for a moment Harry wasn’t sure if she was laughing, crying, or just trying to block out the sight of both of them because her head was about to explode.

“A cow?” she finally managed to say. “I was two seconds away from planning a rescue mission to save Hagrid, and you got a cow mixed up with a ruddy Skrewt?”

It had been the third option, Harry decided. One of these days the poor girl’s skull was going to shatter like a pumpkin shell after Halloween.

“Mostly,” Ron said.

“Mostly?” she repeated back at him with an expression worthy of Mrs. Weasley trying to get to the bottom of something the twins were saying.

“Okay, I knew it was a cow, but, well, it’s embarrassing admitting a cow ate my bleeding hat, isn’t it!” Ron said.

“It ate your hat?” Hermione said.

“Yeah,” Ron admitted. “It fell off in the middle of the road while we were running, and when I looked back I could see the red and gold pompom on the top sticking out of its mouth while it was chewing.”

Hermione seemed to be rather valiantly struggling not to laugh as she added in a calm and controlled tone, “Oh. Um, that’s a shame. I’ll have to set about knitting you a new one tomorrow as it’s so cold now. I should have enough yarn tucked away. Still, you shouldn’t go about crying wolf just to save face.”

“I didn’t cry wolf,” Ron said, looking confused. “I cried Skrewt. And I didn’t cry, either!”

“It’s an expression from an old story,” Hermione said, “one from Aesop again.”

“Like that weird turtle and rabbit story?” Ron asked.

“Tortoise and hare, but yes,” Hermione said, and Harry had to hand it to Ron. He’d managed to subtly shift the conversation away from his lie and into a much less explosive topic.

“Okay, so tell us about the weeping wolf, then,” Ron said.
“Not a crying wolf, someone who cries out the word wolf,” Hermione said. “The story is called ‘The Boy Who Cried Wolf.’”

“Well, off with you, then,” Ron said, waving his hand. “Give us the story.”

“Oh, may I?” Hermione said, giving him a fake moony-eyed look of adoration worthy of Pansy Parkinson before rolling her eyes and beginning. “Once upon a time, there was a town that had a small flock of sheep.”

She paused, looking at Ron expectantly.

“What?” he said.

“This is usually when you interrupt me to make some comment or ask a question or say something doesn’t make sense,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but so far everything pretty much does make sense,” Ron said. “It’s a town and they have sheep. I’m not seeing a problem yet besides the whole ‘once upon a time’ bit, and we’ve had that part out before.”

Harry considered this for a moment before nodding.

“He’s got a point. So far, everything is normal,” Harry said.

“A whole ten seconds. It’s a new record,” Ron said, grinning.

“Every day, a little boy from the town would lead the sheep out to feed in a green meadow, watching them to be sure they were safe,” Hermione said.

“Now that doesn’t make sense. That’s a fairly tall order for a kid. Just how little is the boy?” Ron asked.

“And the record ends,” Hermione said. “Young children in olden times were often given serious chores to help their families or even communities, as in this case. For example, children might tend geese or sheep or goats, or stand in fields of crops to frighten away birds or other animals, or they might draw water from wells or streams that were a good distance away. Most of the illustrations I’ve seen would suggest the boy was probably six or so years old, perhaps a little older.”

“So how is a six-year-old kid supposed to keep a whole flock of sheep safe?” Ron asked. “I’m assuming there are predators who want to eat the sheep.”

“Yes, but that was fairly typical still,” Hermione said. “The child would be expected to throw stones at the animal or make noise to frighten it into going away.”

“Which would probably result in scaring the sheep, too, resulting in a sheep stampede,” Ron said, shaking his head.

“A sheep stampede?” Harry said. “I don’t think they really move fast enough for it to be called that.”

“Actually, sheep have been clocked running at up to twenty-five miles an hour,” Hermione said, “though only for short bursts.”

“How do you know this stuff?” Ron asked, looking partly frightened and partly impressed.

“I read,” Hermione said. “Still, it’s a fair point, the sheep would most likely scatter if frightened, but probably not very far.”
“And they give the job of fending off hungry wolves and lions and Manticores and what-have-you via a few rocks and some shouting to a little kid?” Ron said.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “Children back then would have had a well-developed sense of community responsibility early on.”

“It’s not the responsibility I’m worried about so much as the kid becoming an hors d’ouevre,” Ron said.

“Point taken,” Hermione said. “Regardless of the possibility of that, this little boy—”

“No name, I take it,” Ron said.

“No,” Hermione said.

“Fine, I’ll just go with it,” Ron said.

“What, you’re not going to name her like the girl with the matches?” Harry said.

“Her I felt sorry for. This one, what with the whole wolf thing, I don’t think I want to get too emotionally attached,” Ron said.

“As you wish,” Hermione said, and Harry wondered for one wild moment whether Hermione had seen *The Princess Bride* at some point and this was meant as a code, but as she didn’t seem at all flustered or out of the ordinary, he assumed he was grasping at straws. He shrugged and tried to come to terms with the inevitable fact that his two friends were going to remain in denial for at least another decade.

“One day,” Hermione continued, “after the boy had spent several hours watching the sheep in the meadow with no sign of excitement at all, he became bored.”

“I can’t blame him,” Ron said. “Standing around watching sheep munch grass can’t be very exciting. Even worse than one of Binns’s lectures.”

“Am I the only one who ever feels a bit sorry for Professor Binns?” Hermione asked.

“Yes,” Harry and Ron said together.

“Oh,” Hermione said, blushing at the abrupt answer. “It’s just he doesn’t seem to have had very much of a life, and now he doesn’t even have very much of a death either, and he’s so committed to the school that he didn’t even let dying stop him from showing up to class, and he does know an awful lot about history, even if he is rather, well…”

“I believe the word you’re looking for is ‘dull,’” Ron said.

“Still, is that really reason enough for everyone to hate the poor man, err, ghost?” Hermione said.

“I don’t hate him,” Ron said.

“Yeah, I hate Snape or Lockhart or Umbridge,” Harry said. “He’s not like that lot. Binns I just sort of suffer through.”

“Yeah, like having to eat veg before you can have pudding,” Ron said.

“So you view Professor Binns as a rather soggy cauliflower?” Hermione said.
“Add in that he’s a bit burnt and without any sauce,” Ron said, nodding in agreement. “Yeah, that’s fair.”

It looked as though Hermione were about to tell Ron off for not appreciating Binns’s literally undying commitment to Hogwarts before she seemed to deflate a bit and sigh.

“I admit you have a point,” she said glumly. “I still feel rather sorry for him, though.”

“I’d feel sorry for a burnt, soggy, unsauced cauliflower as well, so that just makes sense,” Ron said. “Anyway, the kid is out watching the sheep and gets bored. What sort of hijinks ensue?”

“He decided to see what would happen if he called out for help,” Hermione said.

“That’s his idea of hijinks?” Ron said. “Pathetic. Fred and George would have had the sheep knitting their own sweaters off each other in argyle patterns or performing *Grumhilda the Sulky Sorceress* or something.”

“*Grumhilda the Sulky Sorceress*?” Hermione asked cautiously, and Harry wasn’t sure he quite bought that Ron hadn’t made that up either.

“It’s a wizard ballet,” Ron said, seeming very earnest. “The whole plotline is there’s a cranky but very pretty witch named Grumhilda who’s angry she wasn’t invited to a royal party, so she makes it rain anvils on the king’s house until it looks like Swiss cheese.”

Hermione and Harry both gave Ron somewhat suspicious looks.

“Really!” he said. “I’m telling the truth! There’s a choral ballet section of the anvils dancing that’s actually very famous. That’s the one Boris the Barmy was trying to teach trolls in that tapestry outside the Room or Requirement!”

“Trolls as dancing anvils,” Hermione said, pondering it. “It does make a sort of sense.”

“And at the end of the ballet, Grumhilda gets reinvited to the party, but when she shows up, someone’s poisoned her food and she dies. She does a fifteen minute solo dance first, though, called ‘Writhing in Endless Agony.’ I always found that part a bit much,” Ron said, grimacing. “Still, productions of it get mounted every year on Boxing Day.”

“Why Boxing Day?” Hermione asked, obviously intrigued by this odd little story.

“It was supposed to be a Boxing Day party,” Ron said with a shrug, “so it’s tradition. Ginny was in an amateur production of it once when she was just a tiny thing. Played the Littlest Anvil, she did. It wasn’t much of a part, really. Mostly she just toddled around the stage and everyone cooed over how adorable she was, but Mum seemed dead chuffed over it. Anyway, it would probably be improved a lot by having sheep dance the main roles.”

Harry decided not to focus his attention on imagining a pint-size Ginny dressed as an anvil. It just didn’t fit with the images of her his subconscious usually chose to dwell on. He might well trot out that particular picture the next time he was desperately not trying to focus on her charms, though.

“Now I can’t stop imagining a herd of sheep baaing ‘The Anvil Chorus’ from Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*,” Hermione said, shaking her head as thought trying to be rid of the tune. “Anyway, the boy decided to cry ‘Wolf!’ at the top of his lungs to see if anyone would notice.”

“Hence the title. Why a wolf, though?” Ron asked.
“Well, wolves do go after sheep, so they would be a realistic threat that the villagers would almost certainly believe was possible,” Hermione explained. “A lion or a tiger or something like that wouldn’t be as likely and might tip the villagers off that he was lying.”

“I suppose, but really, of all the scary things to pick, a wolf is pretty tame,” Ron said. “Now a Manticore or a dragon or summat, that’d be more exciting.”

“Yes, but remember Muggles don’t believe those really exist, well, not now, though some of them probably would have believed it when this story is set,” Hermione said.

“The more fools they,” Ron said.

“As You Like It?” Hermione asked, looking stunned.

“As I like what?” Ron asked.

“You just quoted Touchstone from the play As You Like It, or nearly. The actual line is ‘The more fool I,’ but still,” Hermione said, obviously impressed.

“Oh, that,” Ron said. “Nah, I haven’t read that one. I think McGonagall said that to Harry and me once when we were in her class and kept turning our hamsters into Grindylows instead of teacups.”

“Yes,” Hermione said, “that does seem rather more apt. In any case, when the boy cried out ‘Wolf!’ in a loud voice, all the villagers came running to help him defend the sheep from the threat, bringing shovels and hoes and anything else that might be useful as a weapon and making a great commotion.”

“Just how far away is this kid?” Ron asked.

“I don’t know,” Hermione said. “Probably not terribly far, but the human voice can carry quite a long way under the right conditions.”

“Hmm,” Ron said doubtfully. “It seems like if they were close enough to hear him, they’d be close enough to see there wasn’t a wolf, and if they were far enough away not to see him, they might not be able to hear what he was yelling.”

“Perhaps,” Hermione admitted, “but we can assume there might be something blocking their view, say a hill or some trees, so he wouldn’t need to be that far to be obscured from sight.”

“Fine,” Ron said. “So the little urchin decides to make up an imaginary wolf and everyone comes running. Then what?”

“Then, when all the villagers got there, he fell down laughing at them because he’d made up the whole story,” Hermione said.

“Muggles have a weird sense of humor,” Ron said.

“The people didn’t find it very funny either, and they warned him not to do it again,” Hermione said.

“I think the Dursleys would have done a bit more than warn me if I’d pulled that trick on them,” Harry said, then frowned. “Actually, come to think of it, I wouldn’t have been able to do it. If I’d screamed a wolf was eating me, they wouldn’t have done anything.”

“Oh, sure they would have, mate,” Ron said, slugging his friend in the shoulder. “They’d have come running.”
Harry raised an eyebrow at him.

“Okay, running with a bottle of catsup and a serviette to help the wolf along, but still, they would have run,” Ron said.

Harry snorted a laugh, mostly because he was fairly sure Ron was right, but Hermione didn’t join in. She never really seemed to find anything about the Dursleys humorous. Frankly, Harry wouldn’t be surprised if Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia wound up with pigs’ tails to match their son’s if they ever ran into Hermione.

“The tale doesn’t actually mention the villagers threatening the boy, but it wouldn’t have been out of place for parent-child relationships of the era,” Hermione said. “In any case, the very next day the boy was bored again, so once more he cried ‘Wolf!’ as loud as he could. The people looked at one another for a moment, but decided it would be far too much to think the boy would lie twice in such a ridiculous way, and they feared for their sheep.”

“So they ran out with various farm implements of doom again?” Ron asked.

“Yes, and again the boy held his sides and laughed at them for being fools,” Hermione said.

“Nice kid,” Ron said, rolling his eyes. “About as interesting as day old bread and about as bright as your average troll. Granted, the villagers aren’t any brighter if they fall for this a third time.”

“That’s precisely what they thought,” Hermione said. “They all came to an agreement that if the boy cried ‘Wolf!’ again, none of them would come.”

“Okay, now that’s stupid,” Ron said.

“I thought you said they shouldn’t let themselves be fooled again,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but if they’ve got this kid out there watching the sheep because there really could be a wolf, and they don’t trust him enough to actually do his job, they need to sack him and get a new shepherd, not just ignore him,” Ron said.

Hermione paused for a moment, frowning.

“You have a good point there. Maybe there wasn’t anyone else available to take the job?” she suggested.

“If the sheep are that important and the wolves are that dangerous, somebody should have done it,” Ron said firmly.

“Okay, well, they don’t do that in this story,” Hermione said.

“Because these stories are full of bloody idiots,” Ron said quietly to Harry.

“Instead, on the third day, just as the little boy was about to try one last time to see if the people would come running, a gigantic and very much real wolf appeared and began to eat the sheep,” Hermione said.

“Told you,” Ron said to Harry. “Now what?”

“The boy cried out with all his might for the people to come, saying there was a real wolf and it was eating the sheep, but the people decided he was lying. Not one of them came to his aid,” Hermione said.
“Uh-huh, and what happened to sheep-boy?” Ron asked.

“Well, the wolf ate every last sheep, then ate the little boy for good measure,” Hermione said.

“So the wolf makes the boy pudding, the villagers lose all their sheep, and there’s a happy wolf running around ancient Greece with a nice, full belly,” Ron said. “What’s the point of this story supposed to be again?”

“That liars are never believed, even if they tell the truth,” Hermione said.

“Or that you shouldn’t let a liar guard the sheep,” Ron said, listing on his fingers. “Or if you don’t run when you hear an alarm, your sheep and the neighbor’s kid will get eaten. Or that this village provided all the village idiots for all of Europe back in the day.”

“Or maybe that mutton is tasty?” Harry suggested.

“Or perhaps that turning a cow into a Skrewt means I might not believe you the next time you tell some stupid story,” Hermione said, glowering at both of them.

“I really want some mutton,” Ron said dolefully, completely ignoring her last comment. “Mum used to make the best shepherd’s pie with these little onion things on the side. Merlin, those were good!”

“Honestly!” Hermione yelled in exasperation.

“Yeah, honestly,” Ron said innocently. “They were fantastic.”

Harry never even saw the cushion that Hermione managed to launch at both of their heads simultaneously, but by the time he and Ron had picked themselves up from the floor, she had marched from the room to the nook where her bed was and gotten in.

“Shepherd’s pie,” Harry heard her muttering to herself. “Scheherazade herself could show up and he’d turn every tale into a menu entrée!”

“I still say it looked like a Skrewt,” Ron said to Harry as the two of them turned in for the night as well.

“Ron, you look more like a Skrewt than that cow ever did,” Harry said with a laugh.

Somewhere in the snowy pastures surrounding them, a single cow wandered about the fields, completely lost. It very nearly stumbled onto their campsite, but Hermione’s protective spells managed to ward it off. It lowed miserably and ambled off into the night, entirely unaware of the very large Fire Crab that was following it until it was far too late. At least its last meal, Ron’s hat, had been quite delicious.
The Horcrux had been slightly less malevolent ever since Harry, Hermione, and Ron had tried their Patronuses against its power, but Harry suspected that their current problems stemmed from more than just the ugly locket. The snow had finally stopped, and after Harry had a bout of particularly violent sneezing, Hermione had doled out some Pepper-Up Potion to quell his oncoming cold, then decided that a bit should be given to Ron and herself as a preventative.

“Living in such close quarters, we’re bound to all come down with it as well,” she’d reasoned, and for several hours the tent had filled with the steam pouring from their ears.

Harry felt much better afterwards, but Ron kept shaking his head as though he were trying to get water out of his ears, and Hermione looked rather ill.

“I’ll be fine,” she’d said. “This potion always makes me rather queasy for a while. I’ll be right as rain by tomorrow morning.”

“What?” Ron had yelled. “It’s going to rain tomorrow morning?”

“No, it’s-- oh, skip it,” Hermione had said. “Give it while and your hearing will clear up.”

Now a few more hours had passed, and Ron’s hearing seemed much improved. Harry was sitting on the couch, head in his hands, as he tried to think for the millionth time of another likely hiding spot for a Horcrux. Every last one seemed less likely than the one before, and he was starting to wonder if Ron’s plan to search Fiji didn’t have some merit.

“Do we have anything left to eat?” Ron said, still a bit too loudly. “I’m hungry.”

“There are a few apples in the box on the table along with a half a loaf of bread and a bit of jam,” Hermione said, not looking up from the replacement hat she was knitting for Ron.

“Well, that’s something anyway,” he said in what Harry thought Ron might have supposed was a low grumble but which was actually his normal voice.

“That’s all we have until after breakfast tomorrow, though,” Hermione warned him, “so do leave something for the morning unless you’re willing to skip.”

Ron grimaced but took an apple, then threw one to Harry, who caught it easily. It reminded him of Quidditch, and he tried to remember the last time he’d really played Seeker properly. It almost seemed like someone else’s life now. Another apple went whizzing past him, though, hitting Hermione, who was engrossed in her knitting, squarely in the left temple.

“Ow!” she yelled. “What was that for?”

“I would, but not through my skull,” Hermione said, rubbing the spot and wincing.

“Sorry,” Ron said. “I think that potion’s got me a bit off balance. Something in my inner ear.”

“That can be a side effect,” Hermione admitted. “Still, it’s better than wandering about for three weeks with a streaming nose.”

“I’d rather just not wander about anywhere,” Ron said gloomily. “Can we stay in one spot for a while? Just for a change of pace?”

“I don’t think so,” Hermione said, but Harry noted that she sounded sympathetic. “It would be awfully dangerous.”

“At some point we’re going to run out of campgrounds and woods and small villages and such,” Ron said. “Then what do we do?”

“It would take rather a long time to run through the entire geography of Great Britain,” Hermione said dryly.

“Yeah, but the way things are going, we will eventually,” Ron said. “Then what?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said. “Start over again? Try the Forbidden Forest? Move on to Ireland?”

Ron just grunted and sat down again. Hermione applied a bit of salve out of her bag to her temple before sighing and starting to eat the now rather bruised apple. Harry said nothing. He had the feeling they simply didn’t know enough about Voldemort’s warped mind to figure out what he would value highly enough to trust with a piece of his soul and where he would hide it. Dumbledore’s research had been very valuable, and it had managed to expose the ring’s hiding place, but there were still a lot of the pieces missing in the puzzle.

“Are you absolutely certain Dumbledore didn’t give you any other clue that you might have missed, Harry?” Hermione said, making him wonder for the thousandth time if she might not secretly be a Legilimens.

“Unless You-Know-Who hid his soul in a lemon drop factory, no,” Harry said, for once avoiding the name since Ron was already sick, and making him tense wouldn’t help matters.

Hermione only nodded and looked pensive, but suddenly Ron broke the silence.

“Okay, this is going to sound crazy,” Ron said.

“You want to throw water on You-Know-Who to see if he melts?” Harry suggested.

“What?” Ron said, looking perplexed.

“Just trying to keep the concept of a crazy plan in perspective,” Harry said. “What is it?”

“What if we took Polyjuice potion and went up to some of the top Death Eaters and just flat out asked them about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’s background, like what he told them about his life and his childhood and things. They might know stuff Dumbledore couldn’t have got hold of,” Ron suggested.

“It’s not a bad idea,” Hermione said slowly, though silently Harry was thinking Ron really was bordering on being right round the bend on this one, “but it would be awfully tricky to pull off. Also, I’m not sure he would have told anyone about things like that. He doesn’t seem the sort to go around
making deep confessions about his past to his friends, if that’s what you could even call those people. Lackeys is more like it.”

“Probably not,” Ron said, sounding defeated. “You have to figure that a wizard’s not that forthcoming when his best friend is a snake.”

“Only friend, more like,” Harry said.

“It’s too bad we can’t just… talk… to…,” Hermione paused in the middle of her sentence and stared at Harry.

“What?” Ron said, looking confused again.

“Harry, do you think it’s possible you could talk to Nagini?” Hermione asked in a rush.

“I suppose I could,” Harry said. “I’ve heard her talk before, so I can understand her, yeah.”


“But think!” Hermione said, sounding more excited than she had in months. “She must know all sorts of things, maybe even where the Horcruxes are! And how to destroy You-Know-Who! And, well, just about everything!”

“Okay, yeah, true,” Harry broke in. “I’m not saying you’re wrong, but I don’t think we could do it. He never lets that snake out of his sight, and even if by some miracle we got hold of her, she seems pretty loyal to him. I don’t think she’d just give up the information.”

“Could Harry turn into another snake and chat her up?” Ron asked suddenly.


“Yeah, you were still coughing up hairballs into May,” Ron said, screwing his face into a grimace. “Harry might develop some weird tongue-flicking thing or summat.”

“If he ever managed to assume human shape again,” Hermione said. “Madam Pomfrey isn’t about, you know, and even with her it took months for me to be normal again.”

“As normal as you ever were,” Ron said with a laugh, but Harry noticed Hermione looked more hurt than amused. Ron really needed to learn when to keep his mouth shut.

“Regardless, Harry’s right. We’ve no reason to believe Nagini would tell us the truth, and I have no idea if Veritas serum works on animals,” Hermione said.

“Plus the fact she might be a Horcrux would probably make her kind of reticent to admit we’d need to kill her in order to defeat owner,” Harry said.


“It wasn’t a bad idea, just impractical,” Ron said consolingly. Harry’s hopes rose a fraction.

“Maybe, but there must be someone out there who knows something,” Hermione said.

Harry thought for a long moment, racking his brains for anything Dumbledore might have said in one of their talks. The truth was, he suspected Dumbledore had intended to tell him a lot more over
the following months, but he supposed that believing he only had a few months left to live, he hadn’t really considered the possibility of dying even sooner than that.

“Dumbledore interviewed Hokey the House-elf,” he said slowly. “Maybe one of the Death Eaters has a House-elf we can question?”

Hermione’s face briefly lit up, but Ron actually laughed at the suggestion.

“Yeah, I can just imagine that conversation. ‘I is not knowing where is the Horcruxes. Excuse me, sirs and miss, I must go now as I must be slamming my toes in the doorjamb and then telling my Master you is here so he can kill you. Is not personal. Is just part of the House-elf servitude of following orders. Would sirs and miss like a cup of tea before they is sent to their doom?’” Ron said, piping along in a high voice that was actually a pretty good imitation of an elf.

“He’s got a point,” Harry said.

“But Dobby was able to let you know what was going on with the Malfoys,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but only in the most round-about way possible, and even then only because he was really determined, even if it did mean ironing his hands,” Harry said.

“He had to iron his hands?” Hermione said, looking sick.

“Yeah,” Harry said, looking uncomfortable. “I guess I skipped mentioning that bit.”

“Oh, this whole system is just disgusting!” she said, visibly trembling with rage. “Who would think that was a morally defensible thing to make some poor elf do?!”

“The Malfoys,” Ron said blandly.

“And apparently a lot of other wizards who aren’t interested in elf rights,” Hermione said, and Harry thought there might be an accusation hidden in that.

“Hey, I don’t agree with that sort of nonsense,” Ron said immediately. “That’s just outright cruel, that is. Dobby had a horrid time of it, no question.”

“I know that,” Hermione said in a softer tone. “Still, there really are witches and wizards who think there’s nothing wrong with that kind of terrible treatment at all. They just assume that certain beings aren’t worth bothering about, and one day I think they probably will end up paying the consequences for it.”

Even though Hermione occasionally sounded a bit fanatical on the topic, Harry couldn’t help thinking that there was something to be said for that. Dobby really had been through a lot of abuse, and he bet he hadn’t heard even a tenth of it. He was just about to slip into a really depressing pattern of thought when Ron suddenly spoke.

“I don’t suppose there’s a Muggle story about that by any chance, is there?” Ron asked hopefully.

“What, about treating people kindly even if they don’t seem important?” Hermione said, and it was amazing how quickly her brain seemed to slip into gear. “Actually, there are several I can think of. Many times a mysterious stranger shows up, and whether they are offered hospitality or not changes the outcome of the whole story.”

“Then why not tell us one,” Ron said, settling back against a pillow in his chair. “We’re not kidnapping Nagini or a House-elf or a Death Eater anytime soon, so we may as well pass the time.”
Hermione shrugged and nearly mirrored Ron’s movements on the couch as she relaxed against the cushions.

“Fine then. Once…”

“Upon a time,” Ron finished with her.

“Yes, Ronald, once upon a time there was a man who had a wife who died, leaving him with a little girl,” Hermione said.

“Oh, these fellows need to start looking into copyright infringement or something,” Ron said. “That’s the background for a whole lot of these.”

“True, but it’s still how this one starts. Well, one version of it at any rate. The man remarried, and the woman he chose also had a daughter about the same age as his own,” Hermione said.

“Just one? Not two?” Ron asked.

“Just the one, but she was more than enough,” Hermione said. “The father died soon after, and the stepmother showed her true inner heart by treating her stepdaughter poorly, mostly because the girl was so kind and good and beautiful and her own daughter was mean and horrid and ugly into the bargain.”

“Quite the catch,” Ron said. “I wonder what the father ever saw in her.”

“One of the other versions is even rather worse,” Hermione said. “In that one, the woman isn’t the stepmother but the mother of both girls. She just likes the one who looks more like her better and treats the other poorly because she resembles the dead father, who she never much liked.”

“So she looks like the ugly girl?” Ron said. “Now I’m really confused. Most of the other ones at least had looks, but she didn’t even have that to excuse the father’s poor judgment.”

“In any case, one day, the stepmother sent the kind daughter to get water from a well that was very far away. The girl, who was always given the hardest and worst tasks, took up the bucket with no complaint and walked miles to the well.”

“They live miles from the nearest water?” Ron asked. “Why?”

“I don’t know, but it wasn’t unheard of in olden times for people to need to haul water a good way each day, and it’s still common in some parts of the world,” Hermione said.

“Why didn’t they just live closer to the water?” Ron asked.

“There could be a hundred reasons,” Hermione said. “Maybe they had their own well that was closer, but it had gone dry. Maybe the king had divided up the land parcels for his subjects in a stupid way, but they had to follow along with it because he was the king. Maybe the well is on someone else’s land, and they couldn’t dig one on their own.”

“Okay, okay, but it’s still odd to think of having to take a miles long hike just for a drink of water,” Ron said. “So the nice girl, who I’m assuming is nameless, goes to the well.”

“Yes, and you’re right, she has no name here,” Hermione said. “Once she got to the well, she drew up a bucket, but an old woman in tattered and dirty clothes came hobbling up to her and begged her for a drink of water.”
“I’m assuming she had gave the poor old thing some,” Ron said.

“Precisely,” Hermione said. “She was very kind to the old woman and let her drink as much as she liked from the bucket, then filled it once again. The old woman smiled at her and said, ‘I thank you, and more than that, I give you a gift to show what kindness dwells within you,’ and then she disappeared.”

“And what’s that?” Harry asked.

“The girl herself didn’t know,” Hermione said. “She quickly walked home with the heavy bucket of water, but because she had stopped to help the old woman, she was later than usual. Her stepmother was furious, shrieking at the girl for being a lazy good-for-nothing. The girl said only, ‘I am sorry, but I stopped to draw water for an old woman at the well, and that is what has made me late,’ but something truly strange happened when she opened her mouth.”

“Which was?” Ron said.

“With every word she said, a flower or a gem fell from her lips,” Hermione said.

Harry and Ron looked at each other.

“Pull the other one,” Ron said.

“No, really, that’s how the story goes. By the time she had finished speaking three diamonds, four rubies, two roses, five pearls, six emeralds, a sapphire, and three daisies had fallen from her mouth,” Hermione said.

“She’s vomiting flowers and gemstones?” Ron said, looking appalled. “That’s the gift?”

“Not vomiting exactly,” Hermione said. “They just appear whenever she speaks.”

“By falling out of her mouth,” Ron said suspiciously. “Are they covered in spit?”

“No, they are not covered in spit!” Hermione said strongly, then paused. “At least I don’t think so.”

“Okay, that is just bizarre,” he said. “Now what?”

“Well, obviously, the stepmother and her daughter were stunned, and the woman had the girl hold a bowl in her lap to catch the treasure while she explained everything that happened to her since she had left the house. When she had finished, diamonds and rubies and every sort of precious stone overflowed the bowl, but the stepmother had no use for the flowers and simply threw bouquets of them into the fire,” Hermione said.

“Uh-huh,” Ron said. “I’m sorry, but that’s disgusting.”

“It’s not really supposed to be, but I see your point,” Hermione said. “The stepmother saw a chance to change her own daughter’s fortune. She said to her, ‘You must go to the well tomorrow to gather water, and if an old woman asks you for a drink of water, give it to her with all courtesy. Then you shall have this same gift, and there will not be a man in all the world who would not want you as a wife.’”

“Me,” Ron said, raising his hand as though he were in class. “I don’t want the flower-vomiter for a wife.”

“Even with the jewels thrown in?” Hermione asked.
“As tempting as I admit that bit is, it’s just too weird. No,” Ron said.

“Suit yourself,” Hermione said, looking rather pleased with Ron’s declaration. “The stepdaughter was foolish enough to whine and complain about being made to carry water the next day, but her stepmother made her go anyway. She groused all the way to the well, and when she got there, sure enough, someone was waiting for her.”

“The old woman, right?” Harry said.

“No, it was a radiantly beautiful young woman dressed in a fine gown and rich jewelry like a princess,” Hermione said.

“Okay, that I didn’t count on,” Ron said. “So what’s the nasty sister do?”

“The beautiful woman asked her for a drink of water, but the girl was very haughty with her, saying, ‘I have no time for you! I am expecting a very important person, and after I see her, I will wealthier and more beautiful than you. Draw your own water if you are thirsty!’” Hermione said, giving the stepsister a wickedly grating voice.

“Boy, not only mean, lazy, and ugly, but stupid into the bargain,” Ron said. “I’m assuming the princess and the old woman are the same person, right?”

“Precisely,” Hermione said with a nod. “The fairy, for that’s what she was, fixed the stepsister with an angry glare and said, ‘Long I have watched how you and your mother have treated your good stepsister. Now, whenever you open your mouth, the evil within you will be revealed.’”

“For a second there, I thought she was going to get off easy, but that does not sound good,” Harry said.

“It also explains why she made the first one spew bouquets and loose gemstones. The Fae would think that was a good laugh,” Ron said. “I’m almost afraid to find out what that last bit meant, though.”

“So was the girl, and she ran home without even the bucket, her hand over her mouth the whole way,” Hermione said. “When she finally arrived at the cottage, her mother cried out, ‘Did you meet anyone?’ and the girl nodded in reply.”

“Putting off the inevitable here,” Ron said.

“Then her mother asked her, ‘Answer me! What did you get in return!’ and the girl said, ‘I saw a richly dressed lady, not an old one, so I refused to help her, and she cursed me!’ but this last part she needn’t have added as it was obvious, for with each word she spoke, a horrible frog or toad or other reptile fell from her mouth,” Hermione said.

“Okay, that’s a lot worse than flowers and jewels,” Ron said, looking thoroughly disgusted.

Harry tried to come up with an intelligent comment, but the mental image was so strong that he could only manage to groan, “Eugh.”

“By the time she had said this short sentence, three toads, two toads, two salamanders, a newt and a lizard were scurrying across the floor of their home,” Hermione said. “At once the horrified stepmother told her to hold her tongue, but the girl was so accustomed to complaining that she kept forgetting herself, and by the end of the day a veritable plague of toads nested in the house.”

Ron looked like he was about to say something, then stopped himself.
“What?” Harry asked.

“I was just wondering whatever happened to Neville’s toad, Trevor,” Ron said.

“I think he finally managed to make a break for it sometime during sixth year by the lake,” Harry said.

“I do hope he’s all right,” Hermione said, frowning.

“Who, Trevor? The lake’s a good spot. I’m sure he’s fine,” Ron said.

“No, not the toad. Neville,” Hermione said. “I wish we could get some news from Hogwarts.”

“I’m sure he’s okay,” Ron said. “He might look a bit helpless, but he’s a stouthearted little fellow.”

“’Little fellow?’” Hermione repeated with a laugh. “Ron, he was taller than you by half a head at the end of last year!”

“Was he?” Ron said, looking confused. “I always sort of picture him as a first year for some reason, maybe getting a bit taller now and again.”

Hermione gave him a look accompanied by a suppressed grin that Harry was relatively sure should have made Ron more than a little jealous if he’d noticed it. He hadn’t really thought about it, Harry supposed, but Neville really had changed in the last couple years. He’d actually caught Parvati eyeing him appreciatively during History of Magic at one point, and that was saying something.

“Well, regardless of the charms of Neville Longbottom,” Ron said, rolling his eyes as if he’d been discussing the appeal of radishes covered in caramel, “the stepsister winds up spewing toads and frogs left and right. Mind you, I think I would have taken that over the slugs Malfoy hit me with in second year, but still.”

“Malfoy didn’t do that to you,” Hermione said automatically. “You tried to make him vomit slugs but your wand was broken and it backfired.”

“Well, yeah, he called you a… you know,” Ron said, looking uncomfortable. “He had it coming.”

“Mudblood,” Hermione said with a sort of fierce determination, “and yes, he did. Still, that was a rather horrible curse.”

“It was a rather horrible insult, so I’d say that balances it out,” Ron said. “Worth it, frankly. Anyway, what happened to the two girls?”

“Oh, the king came riding by on his horse the next day and stopped at the cottage,” Hermione said. “The stepmother tried to throw her ugly daughter at the king, but when she greeted him, a snake, a lizard, a toad, and three newts came out of her mouth, rendering him speechless.”

“He’s a very polite fellow,” Harry said. “I’d have screamed blue murder.”

“Yes, but then the other sister came forward, offering him a spot by the fire to rest along with a drink of water, and each word was accompanied by diamonds and roses,” Hermione said. “This charmed the king, and once he got from her the story of how she had come to have this gift—“

“’Gift’ being a relative term,” Ron interrupted.

“—he offered to marry her and make her his queen,” Hermione said.
Ron looked between Harry and Hermione for a moment, then said, “Okay, I’ve heard daft marriage proposals in these things before—princes who fall in love with a girl after one dance, woodsmen who chop girls out of wolves’ bellies, weirdos who follow girls through forests made of gold and diamonds and what have you, even a couple of blokes who weren’t all that insistent that she be conscious or possibly even alive at the time—but this one proposes because she retches flowers all over the place every time she talks?”

“Flowers and highly expensive gems,” Hermione said significantly. “All she would need to do is talk and the kingdom would grow to be one of the richest in the world, probably in only a few days.”

“Yeah, he could just have her read the newspaper every day and turn into the wealthiest man on the planet,” Harry said.

Ron frowned and said, “Okay, I see your point, but I still think it’s odd.”

“Men have put up with much odder personality quirks from rich prospective brides than a tendency to regurgitate diamonds,” Hermione said.

“To each their own, I suppose,” Ron said. “So I take it she accepted the proposal, despite never having laid eyes on this fellow before in her life, and they lived happily ever after?”

“Yes, and the stepmother was so repulsed by her own daughter that she turned her out of doors and there she died, still with a snake or toad coming forth with every word she spoke to her last,” Hermione said.

“Bit harsh there,” Ron said, “dying alone in the forest, surrounded by reptiles. I suppose the moral is supposed to be that we’re supposed to be kind to anyone, regardless of what their station seems to be, or else pay the consequences?”

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“Except I don’t have any desire to spit up lilies and pearls the rest of my life any more than snakes and what have you,” Ron said, “so maybe we should just avoid everybody and keep to ourselves.”

Hermione opened her mouth, but stopped for a moment before saying carefully, “You know, in our current circumstances, you may have a point. Maybe trying to get information out of someone who might know about the Horcruxes is just too risky now. We’ll pay for it one way or another.”

Harry had to admit she was probably right, and Ron looked glum but resigned as well. At least the Pepper-Up Potion was in their systems, and Ron’s hearing had certainly improved, but Hermione still looked a bit ill. In fact, Harry thought, she looked as though she might be about to…

“Oh,” Ron said, staring at the puddle of sick. “That definitely isn’t a pile of diamonds.”

“No,” Hermione said weakly, “but at least it isn’t toads, either.”

“Good point,” he said, patting her back weakly as he used his wand to vanishing it. “Why not have a bit of a lie down, eh?”

“An excellent idea,” she said, heading back to her bed.

Within a few minutes, she was obviously asleep, and Ron and Harry both turned in as well. Just as he was about to nod off, Harry heard Ron whisper, “Harry?”

“Yeah?”
“What do you think it’d take to make Malfoy spew toads?” he asked. “Is it even possible?”

“I dunno,” Harry said. “If you can do slugs, I don’t see why not.”

Ron grunted with determination, and Harry was relatively certain that come tomorrow, Ron would have a new research project. As Harry prepared to sleep, though, he was haunted by a horrifying realization. The image of the dead stepsister’s decayed skull in the forest, still with a snake coming from her mouth, was identical to the Dark Mark. It was too much to believe it was a coincidence, and he shivered, wondering why the Death Eaters had chosen this story for their most recognizable symbol. For once, he didn’t want to know what Hermione thought. It was already disturbing enough without an explanation.
“That was close,” Harry said as he hung his scarf on the back of one of the tent’s chairs.

Ron and Hermione, immediately behind him in coming through the tent flap, nodded in silent agreement. They had taken Polyjuice that morning, turning into fairly nondescript people who really lived about a hundred miles away, and headed for a nearby town to take a bus towards a rather exposed village that might possibly have a link to Voldemort’s maternal great-grandfather. They had brought flasks of Polyjuice with them, of course, but they hadn’t expected the bus they were taking to get a puncture. As things turned out, all of them had begun to transform back into their normal selves before they returned to the safety of the tent, though luckily by that point they had managed to walk most of the way back to their camping spot, and no one else was around.

“We need to come up with better contingency plans,” Hermione said, digging through her beaded bag and checking their supply of Polyjuice. “I was certain we’d brought enough for at least double the length of time we’d be gone. I still don’t understand how we ran out.”

“So that’s why you ran out so long before the rest of us!” Hermione said. “Why would you even think of doing something so… so…”

“Stupid?” Ron said sheepishly. “It was daft, but I just couldn’t stand the taste of that bloke I turned into. He must have really been a peach. He tasted of rotten pickerel with hollandaise sauce that’d gone off.”

Harry and Hermione both grimaced but said nothing. Personally, Harry thought his own fellow had been fairly decent, all things considered, besides the mind-numbing pain of the initial transformation, of course. There had been a slight hint of cinnamon that had made things a little less horrid than usual.

“Mine wasn’t exactly biscuits and tea either, but purposely dumping it? Do you know how long it takes to make replacement potion?” Hermione said.

“Over a solid month, yeah,” Ron said. “I was there second year. I remember. Also, you’ll kindly note you ran out as well.”

“Partly because I poured some of my potion into your flask to stretch it,” she snapped. “I wasn’t even sure that would work, but the way.”

“There were a few weird side effects,” Ron said, blushing a bit, and Harry remembered Ron’s voice had suddenly got higher during their walk, “but yeah, in general, it worked.”

“I still don’t know how I got the equations wrong for the portioning,” Hermione said, frowning. “Harry, what happened to yours?”

“To be honest, I think I might have gulped too much at each go,” Harry said.

“Yeah, it’d be your luck to get someone whose potion tastes like first rate pumpkin juice or summat,” Ron said, and the sudden bitterness in his voice surprised all three of them. Even Ron looked abashed.
“Right, because my luck is always so fantastic,” Harry said, giving him a cold stare.

“Well, usually, yeah,” Ron said, seeming to rally. “I mean, okay, you’ve got no parents, but really you should have died when You-Know-Who tried to kill you, and you didn’t. Then you didn’t turn out to be a Squib even after being raised by the Dursleys, and you got to leave them and go to Hogwarts before things got too bad, then you turned out to be naturally gifted at Quidditch and won practically all the matches so everyone loved you, and then you accidentally destroyed a Horcrux without even meaning to, got a Nimbus 2000 for your birthday, were House champion and when you won the tournament got a whole mess of gold, survived Umbridge’s assassination attempt via Dementors, dated two of the prettiest girls in the school, and, oh yeah, you’re the Chosen One.”

Harry and Hermione remained perfectly silent for nearly a full minute.

“That may possibly be the longest sentence ever in English,” Harry finally said, trying not to rise to Ron’s bait.

“S’true, though,” Ron said, folding his arms defiantly.

“Except practically all of those came about either because of some horrible thing that also happened or because Harry had worked hard to prepare for all of the eventualities and tried to do the best he could,” Hermione said. Harry wasn’t quite sure what the expression was on his own face, but if he didn’t know better, he would think she was scared behind her apparently calm words.

“Whatever,” Ron said, flopping down on a chair. “I’m knackered. Do we have anything to eat?”

“Half a loaf of bread and an apple each,” Hermione said.

“As in each of us gets half a loaf of bread or there’s a half a loaf of bread to divide between the lot of us?” Ron asked.

“The second one,” Hermione said.

“Of course,” Ron said, his tone still sour.

Harry sighed but ignored him. Ron had a tendency to get this way lately in the evenings, especially if he’d spent too much time near the Horcrux. Harry was toying with the idea of having him skip his turns entirely, but he wasn’t quite sure how to suggest it without making Ron angry. It was undoubtedly getting worse, though, and only one thing seemed to distract him long enough to make a difference, if he could only swing the conversation in that direction.

“Anyone else feel like toast?” Harry suggested, walking to the kitchen table.

“Is there anything to put on it?” Ron asked.

Harry glanced at Hermione who shook her head slightly.

“No,” Harry said.

“Then no,” Ron replied. “Toast without butter or jam or anything is just mildly burnt bread, so what’s the point?”

“Actually, I think I’d like a piece of toast anyway, if you please,” Hermione said.

“Fine,” Ron said, scowling. “Show me up with your selfless ability to like dry toast!”

“Oh, for pity’s sake, Ronald, my decision to have toast is not an attack on your moral character!”
Hermione said, “I just want toast! That’s all! It doesn’t make me some sort of a self-congratulatory toast martyr!”

“Toast martyr?” Harry repeated. “Did you actually just say ‘toast martyr’?”

It was a second before she snorted once and then very quietly started to giggle. Harry couldn’t help joining in a few seconds after that, and even Ron rolled his eyes and gave a weary smile.

“Fine, have toast if you like and I won’t take it personally,” Ron said, going to the table and grabbing a slice of plain bread, which he proceeded to fold into quarters until it was a good thickness and bit into it.

“Thank you,” Hermione said, and while the moment of levity had made things better, there was still a bit of stress in her voice.

Harry, who had found he was actually rather good at toast if he kept his concentration steady, made two slices for himself and one for Hermione. She took her apple and sliced it carefully, putting the pieces on the bread and folding them over to make an apple sandwich. Harry simply ate his toast then polished off his apple practically down to the core, washing everything down with a good bit of water, the one thing they weren’t currently running low on.

“Hermione,” Harry said, hoping she might be able to fulfill his request and lower the tension even further. “I don’t suppose there are any Muggle stories that might involve Polyjuice, are there?”

“Oh, there’s a good number of transformations in various stories,” Hermione said with enthusiasm. “We’ve already had ‘Beauty and the Beast,’ of course, and ‘The Frog Prince’ and ‘The Wild Swans,’ but I’m sure that—”

“Yeah,” Ron interrupted, and Hermione shot him a dirty look, “but are there any you haven’t told us yet?”

“Yes, there are,” Hermione said rather coldly, and Harry was afraid his plan was starting to backfire. “Why? Would you like to hear one?”

“I wouldn’t say no to a story,” Ron said. “They always seem to make the food last longer somehow.”

“They sort of do, really,” Harry admitted. “Please?”

“Oh, all right then,” Hermione said. “Once upon—”

“—a time,” Ron immediately continued without even looking up from his bread.

“Yes,” Hermione said, “there lived a brother and sister with their stepmother and stepsister.”

“Who were both horrid, of course,” Ron provided, still staring morosely at the remainder of his dinner.

“Well, yes,” Hermione admitted, “so they decided it would be better if they ran away.”

“Wait, the stepmother doesn’t kick them out?” Ron said, suddenly more awake, Harry noticed.

“No, they decide to leave on their own after she starts kicking them for no reason and only lets them eat what the dog leaves behind,” Hermione said.

“I guess everyone really does have a breaking point,” Ron said. “Most of the time they just sit there
and smile blandly while the stepmum tries to boil them in oil or something.”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever told a story that involved someone being boiled in oil,” Hermione said, then paused. “Wait, have I?”

“I think I’d remember that, and I don’t,” Harry said, “so I’m going with no.”

“Good,” Hermione said. “I thought I was starting to slip. Anyway, the brother and sister decided to run away into the forest, but their step-mother secretly followed them at a distance.”

“Okay, there are two things wrong with that scenario,” Ron said. “First, going into a forest in these stories never seems to end very well. Better to go off into a desert or a savannah or the mountains or something.”

“But they lived in a cottage surrounded by forest,” Hermione said. “Rationally, they had to go into the forest to leave it, Ronald.”

Ron seemed to ponder this for a moment before he said, “Oh. Okay, then maybe they shouldn’t leave.”

“Didn’t you just argue that was the smartest decision they could have made?” Hermione said, an edge of possible insanity starting to creep into her voice.

“Yeah, but that was before I knew they were in the middle of the Terrifying Forest of Things That Can Kill You,” Ron said, somehow managing to make the capital letters clear from his tone of voice, which rather impressed Harry.

“But they don’t follow your sage advice and do decide to leave,” Hermione said. “What was the second problem?”

“Hmm? Oh, I nearly forgot,” Ron said. “The stepmother hates the sprogs so much that she follows them? That sounds more like she’s worried about them. Maybe they’re just over-reacting.”

“She’s following them to be sure they wind up dead,” Hermione explained.

“They aren’t over-reacting,” Ron said, giving a shudder.

“Oh, it gets much worse,” Hermione said. “As the children were going through the forest, they came upon a stream, and they were both very thirsty.”

“Bad idea just drinking from a random stream like that,” Ron said.

“Yes, it could have been highly dangerous for all the usual reasons, but this was even more perilous, for the stepmother was, of course, a witch,” Hermione said.

“Of course,” Ron and Harry said together.

“Your lot really don’t like witches, do they?” Ron said.

“There’s an intrinsic fear of women with power in many cultures, and when the power takes a form that appears to be supernatural in origin, then the assumption is made that it’s against the order of things and therefore evil,” Hermione said, “particularly since a parallel paranoia over males with power, even supernatural, does not seem to be as prevalent.”

“A paucity of parallel power paranoia proposes the presence of patriarchy,” Ron said proudly.
“Possibly,” Hermione said, suppressing a grin, but moving forward. “In any case, the mother cast a spell to make the water turn the first person to drink from it into a dangerous animal, who would then turn and kill the other.”

“That does sound a little like Polyjuice,” Harry said. “Drinking a potion to cause a transformation is the same, anyway, though I don’t want to think about an entire river of Essence of Crabbe.”

“Yeah, but it would be an animal transformation, not a human one,” Ron said. “They don’t work the same way, do they?”

“I can say from personal experience that no, they certainly do not,” Hermione said, grimacing. “Partially turning into Millicent Bulstrode’s cat is not an experience I ever want to relive.”

“What actually happens with that?” Ron asked, and Harry wished he would stop as it was obvious Hermione was not happy thinking about that incident from second year.

“Specifically, only parts of me changed, but the ones that did would have been a permanent transformation if Madam Pomfrey hadn’t been able to reverse it,” Hermione said.

“You almost become a permanent Hermione-cat hybrid?” Ron said, looking horror-stricken.

“It was a very bad error on my part,” Hermione said, “and it could have been fatal over time as well, though if it had been a creature who, say, couldn’t breathe air, like a fish, I probably would have been dead in a couple of minutes because of the inability to process oxygen. I’ve had that nightmare more than once.”

“Merlin,” Ron muttered, looking sick. “I thought it was a bit of a joke at the time, but looking back, it did take you months to get better, didn’t it?”

Hermione nodded, and Harry was stunned that he’d never really thought about the whole mess very much either. Between that and being Petrified, Hermione really had spent a good portion of second year in the Hospital Wing.

“Three cheers for Madam Pomfrey, I guess,” Ron said, still looking unnerved. “But the stepmother was able to make the river turn into some sort of animal-transformation potion?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, “specifically, it would turn the drinker into a tiger. But the sister realized what was happening because she could actually hear the river saying, ‘If you drink me, you will become a tiger.’”

“That’s convenient,” Ron said. “You lot often hear rivers talking to you?”

“No,” Hermione said coldly, “she obviously has some sort of gift. Her brother tries to drink from the stream, but she tells him that if he does, he will turn into a tiger with no memory of her and will turn and kill her.”

“And he believes her?” Ron said incredulously.

“Apparently so, because he doesn’t drink from it,” Hermione said.

“So the sister’s older than the brother,” Ron said.

“Why do you say that?” Hermione said.

“Because if Ginny told me that, I would have thought she was having me on and drunk half the river
down to make a point,” Ron said.

“And if Fred or George did?” Harry asked.

“As it’s them, I still wouldn’t believe them, but I’d be looking for exploding daffodils or something along the path leading in the opposite direction from the river,” Ron said. “Now, Bill or Charlie? Yeah, I’d believe them, probably.”

Harry noticed Ron had left out Percy, and he thought Hermione had as well, but both of them remained silent about it.

“You may be right,” Hermione said. “The story is very unclear about that. In fact, its title is actually ‘Little Brother and Little Sister.’”

“They can’t both be the youngest,” Ron said. “Well, not unless they have an older sibling, and they don’t, do they?”

“No,” Hermione said. “There isn’t one mentioned.”

“Then that’s just outright confusing, that is,” Ron said.

“It really is a rather annoying detail,” Hermione said, obviously unhappy with the story for being less than perfectly specific on that point. “However, you’re probably right. It seems like the sister is the older of the pair from their behavioral patterns.”

“Too right I’m right,” Ron said, smoothing back his hair as though he’d won a victory, which made Harry roll his eyes. “So the brother doesn’t turn into a tiger?”

“No, he avoids the temptation of the river because of the sister’s advice,” Hermione said. “However, they soon came to yet another river, and here too the brother was anxious to drink from it.”

“I’m guessing this one was talking to the girl too,” Ron said.

“It was indeed, saying, ‘Drink me and become a wolf! Drink me and become a wolf!’” Hermione said in an eerie tone.

“Just think, if we ever found that river, we could home-bottle lycanthropy,” Ron said. “I’m sure absolutely nothing could go wrong with that except, you know, everything.”

“It’s possible there might be an allusion to werewolves present in the second river, though most critics think the wolf is a less obviously dangerous animal than the tiger,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, tell that to Small Purple Beach Hat and the annoying kid who was watching the sheep,” Ron said.

“It’s true that most representations of wolves in these stories are distinctly lethal and threatening, so I tend to agree with you,” Hermione said, and Ron’s self-satisfaction level skyrocketed so high that the only word Harry could think to describe his reaction was preening.

“Right,” Harry said, quickly cutting off the possibility of Ron doing what he normally did and saying something that would totally undermine any progress he might have made, “so did the sister tell the brother not to drink from that one as well?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, “and once again he agreed, though he pleaded, ‘Oh, but I must drink at the next stream, no matter what it may do to me, or I shall die!’”
“Sounds like he winds up dead either way,” Ron said. “I assume there’s another stream?”

“Yes, but this one whispered, ‘Drink me and become a fawn! Drink me and become a fawn!’” Hermione said.

Ron looked completely confused.

“You do mean a fawn as in a baby deer, not the f-a-u-n kind that are half-goat, half-person, right?” Ron asked.

“Yes, though the other one would have been an interesting possibility,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, because a fawn isn’t exactly terrifying. Even if, let’s say, the stepmother, who although she is following them is somehow heading them off every time to put a spell on the various streams, which makes no sense at all unless she can also Apparate, has run out of Essence of Tiger and Elixir of Wolf, that’s a pretty weak substitution,” Ron said. “It’s about as violent as ‘Drink me and become Neville Longbottom!’”

“I don’t know about that,” Hermione said. “He did bloody Malfoy’s nose in first year.”

“Good point,” Ron said magnanimously. “Okay, ‘Drink me and become Colin Creevy,’” Hermione thought for a moment, then shrugged, unable to argue with that one.

“Once again the sister tried to stop him, but to no avail, and the brother did drink from the stream. No sooner had the water passed his lips than he turned at once into a fawn,” Hermione said.

“Aww,” Ron said in an overly exaggerated voice that was so twee Harry thought he might come down with diabetes from how sugary it was. “So now that wittle bwother is a wittle fwan, what’s wittle swister going to dwoo?”

Hermione twitched in an unexpectedly disturbed way.

“What?” Ron asked.

“You sounded like Bellatrix in the Department of Mysteries for a second,” Hermione admitted, shuddering. “That woman gives me the cold shivers.”

“Oh,” Ron said, rubbing his neck uncomfortably. “Ehm, sorry.”

“No cause,” Hermione said, waving it away, but now Harry couldn’t get that image from his mind either. He really hated that woman.

“Right, so, the brother is now a deer,” Ron said, and the concerned look he was giving Harry made him realize his expression must have been a dead giveaway where his thoughts had gone. “Now what?”

“Well, both the sister and the fawn wept, but the brother’s mind was still very much present in the deer’s form. The girl promised that no matter what, she would never leave him,” Hermione said.

“Okay, that actually is kind of sweet, in an odd, bizarre, freakish way,” Ron said.

“So the girl made a leash for him from some long grass by the edge of the pond, and together they roamed through the forest until they came to a little house,” Hermione said.

“Uh oh,” Ron said. “Was it made of gingerbread?”
“No,” Hermione said.

“Did three bears live in it?” Harry asked.

“No,” Hermione said.

“How about seven dwarfs?” Ron asked. “That at least ended pretty well for the extremely pale girl. No one in there tried to eat her at any rate.”

“No, no dwarfs, bears, or cannibalistic witches in candy houses,” Hermione said. “For once, it really was just an abandoned house.

“Well, where’s the fun in that?” Ron said defiantly. “So they just move in?”

“Yes, and the fawn lay on a bed of grass while the girl slept on a little bed, and they were quite happy there for some time,” Hermione said.

“Didn’t the step-mother try to kill them again? It didn’t go very well last time, after all,” Ron said.

“No, she sort of disappears for a while,” Hermione said. “One day, though, the king was riding through the woods on a hunt, with the trumpets calling and the drummers beating, and the fawn awoke and shivered, saying, ‘Oh, I must run or die!’”

“What’s a hunt?” Ron asked. “I mean, obviously I know the Headless Hunt. Poor Nick never did join that group of stupid blighters, but this doesn’t sound like the same thing.”

“No,” Hermione said bitterly. “In the olden days, royalty often owned all the wildlife in a certain area so they could hunt at their leisure, usually with lots of courtiers and lords and ladies and the like riding with them, and they’d have people flush animals out of the brush or their dens so they could kill them. There really wasn’t much sport in it as the animals were purposely panicked so the king could get a good number of kills, and on top of that, even though obviously a palace most likely wasn’t in need of game to eat, none of the peasants in the surrounding area were allowed to kill the king’s deer or they could face very severe punishment, even death in some cases.”

“I don’t like this king,” Ron said firmly. “None of that seems fair at all.”

“No, it’s not,” Hermione agreed, and Harry ticked off yet another point Ron had scored.

“Not that I’d say no to some venison about now, though,” Ron added.

Hermione sighed but continued with the story, saying, “The sister begged her brother not to go, but he was wild with the need to run, so she made him promise he would return safely, and that when he returned to the cottage that night, he would knock and say, ‘O little sister, let me in!’ so that she would know it was he and not the wild huntsmen who might harm her.”

“I’m just going to gloss over the fact the deer can still talk,” Ron said, “but this kid’s got some kind of a death wish going here.”

“It rather sounds like it, but whatever the case, he ran out of the cottage and joined the hunt, running and hiding and darting in and out of sight all day, but he was unharmed for he was fleet of foot,” Hermione said.

“Or hoof, as the case might be,” Ron pointed out.

“True,” Hermione said. “He came home that night, knocked on the door, and called out ‘O little
sister, let me in!’ and she did, happy to see her brother was safe.”

“Well, that was happy at any rate,” Ron said.

“Yes, but the next morning, the king, who had seen glimpses of the extremely fine deer who kept evading him throughout the day, was intent upon hunting again,” Hermione said.

“Oh dear, or deer, as the case may be,” Ron said, and Harry was again rather impressed that somehow he could actually hear the pun.

“As I’m sure you’ve guessed, the little brother once more begged to be turned free so he could run before the hunt, else he felt he would die,” Hermione said.

“Bit of a drama queen, isn’t he? ‘If I don’t drink the water, I’ll die! If I don’t go out and nearly get myself killed, I’ll die! If I don’t jump off that cliff, I’ll die!’” Ron said, giving the deer a quivery sort of voice that sounded like an extremely twee version of a cartoon fawn.

“He does seem to lack self-control throughout this,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “He’s not wicked at all like the stepmother, but he does cause problems for himself through his lack of discipline.”

“Or he’s just a bit of a spoiled brat,” Ron said.

“I suppose,” Ron said. “Still, it’s a bit sad if your only friend is a deer to begin with. She really should get out more.”

“That’s about to be rectified fairly soon,” Hermione said. “Unfortunately, this time the sister’s worries were justified, for one of the courtiers succeeded in giving the deer a minor wound to one of his legs.”

“Aw, poor kid,” Ron said.

“While it wasn’t a fatal strike, it was enough to slow him down, and the king was able to quietly follow him through the woods to see where he was going. Sure enough, he saw the deer approach the cottage, knock on the door, and heard him call out ‘O sister, let me in!’” Ron said, giving the deer a quivery sort of voice that sounded like an extremely twee version of a cartoon fawn.

“Sure enough, he saw the deer approach the cottage, knock on the door, and heard him call out ‘O sister, let me in!’,” Hermione said. “As well it might,” Ron said.

“He’s basically her only friend left in the world, and he’s out nearly getting killed for the fun of it. That’s got to make her worry.”

“I suppose,” Ron said. “Still, it’s a bit sad if your only friend is a deer to begin with. She really should get out more.”

“Unfortunately, this time the sister’s worries were justified, for one of the courtiers succeeded in giving the deer a minor wound to one of his legs.”

“Aw, poor kid,” Ron said.

“As well it might,” Ron said. 

“The sister bound the fawn’s wounds, and he was almost quite well by morning,” Hermione said.

“She’s got some of Madam Pomfrey’s skills there,” Harry said. “I’ve wished she was with us more than once out here.”

“Yes, I was able to speak to her a little bit before we left Hogwarts in June,” Hermione said. “I told her I was considering a possible career as a healer, and she let me ask her all sorts of questions about treating different medical emergencies. To be honest, I think she suspected a lot more than I told her, but she was really helpful.”
“The old girl’s a treasure,” Ron agreed. “I think she’s stitched our whole class back together at least twice each.”

“More like twice a year every year for me,” Harry said. “I really should get her some chocolates or something as an apology for taking up so much of her time.”

“Bonbons nearly always go down well,” Hermione said, and Harry glanced over at Ron to see if he was noting these wise words of advice, but he seemed to have been distracted by his untied shoelaces. Harry sighed.

“The next morning, the king, very curious about the cottage, decided to hunt one more time, but this was solely as a diversion. He sent out the hunters and beaters, but once the deer was sighted, the king slipped off to the cottage,” Hermione said.

“This one isn’t terribly dumb. I’ll give him that,” Ron said.

“Next he knocked at the door in the same pattern as the deer and said in a voice as like his as he could imitate, ‘O little sister, let me in!’” Hermione said.

“It’s a good skill to have,” Ron said, but the voice that came out was so like McGonagall’s that it was unnerving.

“It’s so odd when you can do that,” Hermione said.

“Still, it might be useful someday. Ginny can imitate Umbridge so well that it’s downright uncanny,” Ron said.

“She really can,” Hermione said. “One time she stood outside our dormitory door and made that stupid ‘hem hem’ thing that Umbridge used to do all the time. We all panicked before we realized Umbridge hadn’t been heard of for months. Then Ginny came in, laughing.”

Harry smiled at this, and the glance Hermione gave him let him know she’d told that bit of a story especially for his sake.

“So did the girl open the door?” Ron asked.

“Yes, and she was sorely frightened until she saw the crown on his head and realized he was the king,” Hermione said.

“I’m not sure that would really calm me down all that much if I were her considering he just lied his way into her house,” Harry said.

“A fair point,” Hermione said. “Still, the king was very taken by how beautiful she was, which in those times was taken as a sign of her innate goodness, ridiculous as that sounds, and in spite of her poverty, he immediately asked her to marry him.”

“That may be the most abrupt courtship in any of these crazy stories, and that’s saying something,” Ron said. “Don’t tell me she said yes?”

“Actually, she did, but with one condition. She made the king promise that the deer would be allowed to live in the castle with them, and he agreed,” Hermione said.

“That’s something, I suppose,” Ron said with a shrug. “So they get married and live happily ever after?”
“Not quite,” Hermione said. “At the end of a year, the girl, now queen, gave birth to a child, a little boy.”

“Okay, usually the story seems like it would have stopped by this point,” Harry said.

“Yes, but it actually gets even stranger. You see, the stepmother comes back into it since she’s heard the stepdaughter has now become queen and mother to the heir rather than being torn apart by wild beasts, and she decides that the good fortune she has had should go to her own daughter instead,” Hermione said.

“That doesn’t seem likely,” Ron said. “What’s she going to do? Stick her in a cabin in the woods with another talking deer and hope another king rides by?”

“No, she thinks of something much more insidious,” Hermione said. “Once the queen had the child, the stepmother disguised herself as a lady-in-waiting and went to her bedside, saying that she had drawn her a good, hot bath to strengthen her, and she and the stepdaughter, also disguised, carried her into the bathroom, where they had built a great fire under the tub.”

“Okay, I’m confused,” Ron said. “First off, this is right after she had the baby?”

“Yes, she’s just recovering from labor, which back then could be extremely perilous. A lot of Muggle women died not just from childbirth but from any of a large number of infections that could set in afterward. It was common for a new mother to be in bed for a good week or more after giving birth if she was a noble and could manage it, and possibly even if she wasn’t,” Hermione said.

“So where are the doctor, the midwife, the other courtiers, the other ladies-in-waiting, and everybody else who should be running around, cooing about how cute the baby is and checking on the queen?” Ron asked.

“I don’t know,” Hermione said. “Maybe the stepmother managed to get them out of the way somehow.”

“The king’s mother is obviously dead,” Ron said.

“How do you get that out of all this?” Harry asked.

“Oh, easy. If Mum were to become a grandmother, nothing this side of the house catching fire around her would make her leave her grandchild and the mother, and probably not even that,” Ron said.

Hermione thought about this for a second, then nodded. “You’re probably right, but at any rate, she’s alone.”

“Okay, the next issue,” Ron said, counting them off on his fingers, “they have a bathroom?”

“No in the modern Muggle sense of the word,” Hermione explained. “It would literally be a room solely for bathing, rather like a sauna, complete with, as mentioned, a fire built under the tub to make it warm.”

“I was wondering about that,” Ron said. “After Turnip Head, I assumed it wasn’t a loo. Still, and here’s issue number three, who would put a fire under a tub? A wooden one would catch fire, and a metal one would turn red hot.”

“I’m sure that a regular lady-in-waiting would have known how close to put the fire to the tub to keep it safe, but that’s not what the stepmother and stepdaughter were about,” Hermione said.
“I suppose I’ll just have to accept that,” Ron said, looking distinctly unsatisfied. “So they put the queen in the hot tub. Then what?”

“They shut the window, left the room, and locked the door, leaving her half-conscious in the bath with a suffocating fire,” Hermione said.

“Whoa! Okay, that is just not acceptable!” Ron said, looking shocked.

“But the king comes in and saves her, doesn’t he?” Harry said.

“No, the king was out hunting when his son was born,” Hermione said.

“Oh, for pity’s sake, there are some things more important than your hobby!” Ron said. “The birth of your child really should top that list!”

“I quite agree,” Hermione said. “Still, in the old days it was fairly common for husbands to be kept out of the way when their wives were giving birth so they wouldn’t be underfoot, possibly literally if they passed out from watching the process, which actually happens more often than you would think.”

“So who saved her?” Harry asked.

“No one,” Hermione said. “She died.”

The two boys looked at one another in disbelief.

“She died?” Ron said.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “The stepmother and stepdaughter opened the door after they were certain she’d either suffocated from the smoke or drowned and hid the body.”

“This is a very upsetting story,” Ron said. “Poor nameless girl with the freak deer-brother.”

“Then the stepmother transformed her own daughter to look like the queen as much as she was able,” Hermione said.

“More Polyjuice?” Harry suggested.

“Possibly, but there was a problem. The stepdaughter, in addition to being very ugly, which again in these things always seems to symbolize moral decay, also had only one eye, and the step-mother couldn’t concoct a way to fix that bit,” Hermione said.

“So, not Polyjuice, then,” Harry said. “When Crouch disguised himself as Mad-Eye, it made him look like he was missing an eye, a leg, and a nose. When it wore off, his real eye popped the magic one out on the floor when it came back, and his real leg did the same thing to his wooden leg.”

“Yes, but that’s subtracting something, not adding it,” Hermione said. “I don’t think Polyjuice can be used for things like re-growing an eye or a limb; otherwise, some wizards might take it just for that purpose. At least I’m not sure. I may need to research that.”

“Say,” Ron said suddenly. “What would happen if a person took Polyjuice that was made from himself? Like, say, hair or toenail clippings from when they were younger or before they were injured or something?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said uncertainly. “I suppose you’d transform into yourself, if that makes any sense, but again, I don’t think it can be used as fountain of youth or anything like that. I almost
don’t want to find out since it seems like it could be very easily abused. And for the record, I don’t know if it would work if the body parts, hair or nails or what have you, are from someone who has died since then.”

“It’d be awful if it transformed the person into a corpse,” Harry said, feeling rather sick. “Instant death by Polyjuice.”

“Well, whatever the spell or potion was the stepmother supposedly used, it’s obviously not quite following the rules of true Polyjuice, but it’s close enough to be a Muggle interpretation loosely based on the real thing,” Hermione said.

“We’re really overthinking this, you know that, right?” Ron said.

“Probably, but it’s better than under-thinking it,” Hermione said. “In any case, the stepmother pulled the curtains in the room to make it dark, then had the girl lay on her side so that the missing eye wouldn’t be visible, and when the king came in, she was to tell him that she was too tired to move and must rest.”

“That’s not going to work forever,” Harry pointed out.

“No, but it did fool the king for a time,” Hermione said. “He never suspected his wife had died.”

“That can’t be the end of the story,” Ron said, sounding a bit desperate.

“No, now it gets really odd,” Hermione said.

“I won’t lie. You just frightened me,” Ron said, gulping. “Now what?”

“That night, at the stroke of twelve, something very strange happened in the royal nursery. The nurse woke with a start to see the queen come silently into the room, pick up her baby, and begin to nurse him. After a while, she put the baby back into his cradle, tucking him in carefully, then, after petting the deer, who lay in the corner of the room, she left,” Hermione said.

“So… it was the transformed step-daughter?” Ron said uncertainly.

“No,” Hermione said. “It was the queen.”

“So… she wasn’t really dead?” Ron tried again.

“No, she was very much dead,” Hermione said.

Ron opened and closed his mouth half a dozen times as though he was searching for how to even form a question, so Harry took pity on him.

“But that’s not how being a ghost works,” Harry said, and Ron nodded emphatically.

“No, ghosts can’t handle objects or pick up babies like that, they certainly can’t breastfeed a child, and they generally speaking don’t hang about in the first place,” Hermione said. “Again, though, Muggles don’t understand all that.”

“But the nurse did see her?” Ron said.

“Yes, and it all unnerved her so much, for the queen was supposed to be sick in bed, that she asked the guards at the door if they had seen anyone, and they said no,” Hermione said.

“And the nurse quit her job and got a nice cottage in the country and that was that,” Ron said.
“No, she stayed on, but she said nothing, and every night at midnight the queen returned to play with her child and feed him as well as pet her brother the deer,” Hermione said.

“Uh-huh,” Ron said. “You lot are bonkers. Dead people wandering in out of the nursery and no one says anything?”

“Actually, finally, the queen said something. One night she sighed and said, ‘Is my baby well? Is my deer well? Two more times before I say farewell,’” Hermione said in basically the same eerie voice she had used for the talking rivers, which seemed a bit like cheating. Still, Harry thought, she couldn’t have a completely bottomless reservoir of eerie voices, so that was fine.

“That really wasn’t whom I was expecting to say something,” Ron said.

“But the nurse does finally tell the king what she saw and heard, and he—” Hermione began.

“—was out hunting and couldn’t be bothered,” Ron broke in.

“No, for once that wasn’t the case. Instead, he was shocked and horrified, and he decided to wait by his child’s bedside with the nurse at midnight to see what would happen,” Hermione said.

“Well, at least that makes a bit of sense. What did happen?” Ron asked.

“At midnight, the queen entered, fed the child, petted the deer, and then said, ‘Is my baby well? Is my deer well? One more time before I say farewell,’” Hermione said.

“But didn’t the king try to talk to her or something?” Harry asked.

“No, he was too stunned,” Hermione said. “Remember, he’d thought his wife was alive and well in her room, and he’d just seen her ghost.”

“Fine, I’ll cut the poor bloke a bit of slack on that, but apparently time is running out and someone needs to do something,” Ron said. “What happens the next night?”

“The king and the nurse returned, and once again at twelve the queen appeared, but this time the king spoke, saying, ‘You can be no one but my own dear wife!’” Hermione said.

“A bit on the obvious side of things, but still, better than nothing,” Ron said. “And what happened?”

“She said, ‘Yes, I am your wife!’ and suddenly became a living woman again,” Hermione said.

Harry actually had to thump Ron on the back to get him to remember to breathe again.

“That is not what happened!” Ron said very loudly and quite abruptly from his new spot sitting on the floor.

“It is,” Hermione said. “Speaking to her and actually admitting who she was apparently reversed her death.”

“That makes absolutely no sense at all! What about her body, wherever it was stashed? What about the fact she’s apparently been dead for several days? What about the Laws of Magic that say no spell can awaken the dead? What about it wasn’t even a spell that killed her but just outright, plain, simple murder so even an antidote doesn’t come into play? What about a single shred of basic sanity in this one!” Ron said, turning purple as he was running out of air.

“Do you need me to thump you again?” Harry asked.
“No, that bloody hurt!” Ron said, rubbing his shoulder. “But what about all that?”

“It’s a story, Ron,” Hermione said. “It’s supposed to be a happy thing, so—”

“Just go with it. I know,” Ron said, rubbing his temples. “So she suddenly becomes human again, and then what? The earth spins backwards and a bunch of dinosaurs walk in the room and start playing football?”

“No, she told the king everything that had happened to her, that her stepmother and stepsister had murdered her and that they were both disguised and in her bedroom right now,” Hermione said.

“Oh, that is not going to end well for them,” Harry said.

“The king had them arrested, and after a trial they were sentenced to death. The stepdaughter was sent into the woods to be torn apart by wild animals, just as the stepmother had hoped would happen to the queen when she was a child, and the stepmother herself was burned at the stake as a witch,” Hermione said.

“But that doesn’t work,” Ron said. “That much I remember from Binns.”

“It doesn’t work on real witches, at least not usually, unless they’re unconscious or something, but again, Muggles don’t know that,” Hermione said. “We pretty much covered that in the ‘The Wild Swans.’”

“Fine, fine, I can’t keep them all straight. Anything else to end this lovely little tale?” Ron asked.

“Once the stepmother was dead, the spell on the deer was broken, and he became a human again,” Hermione said.

“Well, at least they got something right,” Ron said. “When a witch or wizard dies, their spells usually do stop working.”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s right,” Harry said rather quietly. He was thinking of Dumbledore and the moment the spell keeping him immobile had been lifted, telling Harry that the Head Master had truly died.

Hermione seemed to pick up on his mood and gave him a rather sad smile, but Ron just said, “What?”

“Nothing,” Hermione said. “Then the brother and sister lived together happily ever.”

“With the king and the baby, right?” Ron said.

“Yes, with the king and the baby,” Hermione said.

“Well, at least it did sort of have a happy ending. If you leave out being burned alive and torn to pieces, that is,” Ron said.

“So, what have we learned about Polyjuice from all this?” Hermione asked.

“That Muggles are completely in the dark about it,” Ron said.

“Not completely,” Hermione said. “They do know that it’s possible for magic to make someone look like someone or something else.”

“Okay, I’ll give them that, but they don’t have the vaguest idea how to go about it,” Ron said.
“True,” she said. “On the other hand, wizards who do know first-hand precisely how Polyjuice works and then choose to completely ignore it, ditching it because it’s not especially yummy and risking all of us being captured by Death Eaters and tortured to death have rather less of an excuse for their actions.”

“Um, you may have a point there,” Ron said, looking uncomfortable. “I didn’t mean to put us at risk, but I guess I did. Sorry?”

Harry quickly said, “Oh, it’s done with. Let’s forget it.”

He shot a hopeful look to Hermione who gave a lopsided smile and said, “Fine. Water under the bridge.”

Ron looked relieved, but then she added in a perfectly serious voice, “On the other hand, if you ever do anything like that again, I may have to use Ginny’s Bat Bogey Hex on you. Goodnight, Ronald.”

With that, she went off to bed in her nook of the tent.

“You don’t think she means it, do you?” Ron asked.

“Mate, I would not push it,” Harry said seriously.

“Tetchy, isn’t she,” Ron said.

“You do realize I’m five feet away behind a thin cotton curtain, right?” Hermione said in quite a conversational tone from her bed.

“Um, goodnight!” Ron said nervously, blowing out the candle, then muttering quietly under his breath, “toast martyr.”

Harry lay awake in the darkness for a while. They were no nearer to another Horcrux, their tempers were fraying, and the endless loop of traveling, searching, failing, and traveling again was wearing on all of them. He wondered how much longer it would be before the tension did real damage. His brow knit together in concern, but then he heard Ron’s usual, steady snore of elephantine proportions, and Hermione suppressing a giggle behind her curtain. Perhaps they would be all right yet.
“No,” Ron said firmly.

“I didn’t even ask anything yet!” Hermione said, hands on her hips as she stood by the door to the tent.

Harry rolled his eyes behind their backs and wondered what on earth they were squabbling about this time. His main guesses were food, the Horcruxes, food, visiting the Burrow, food, the relative importance of Quidditch in the scope of the universe, and possibly food, not necessarily in that order.

“You don’t need to ask,” Ron said, waving his hand as though he were swatting away a fly. “I know you well enough to know what you want to do, and I’m not doing it.”

“Oh, I don’t even need to speak anymore,” Hermione said, turning an angry red. “Have you become a Legilimens or am I simply that predictable?”

“On this, yes, you’re predictable,” Ron said. “I am not drinking that concoction again.”

“What concoction?” Hermione said, looking completely confused.

“Polyjuice. I’ve had it with that swill! I don’t care if we need to search the neighboring village for some ruddy artefact like Slytherin’s toenail clippings or Hufflepuff’s second best soufflé pan. I’ll do it in my own face or not at all. That last bloke tasted of something I had to scrape off the bedpans in the Hospital Wing,” Ron said, throwing himself on the couch with a sense of finality.

“I was going to ask you to get the spare valise down from the top of the cupboard because you’re taller than I am and I can’t find the stepstool I usually use to get up there,” Hermione said in a tightly controlled voice.

“Oh,” Ron said, deflating slightly. “Okay, that wasn’t what I thought.”

Harry took a steadying breath and decided to chalk this one up to his second guess: Horcruxes.

“Have you happened to see the stepstool?” Hermione asked.

“Um, I think I took it into the kitchen to check the top of the refrigerator when I misplaced my shoes. It’s under the sink,” Ron said.

“Why would you put it under the sink of all places?” Hermione said, exasperated.

“Seemed like a good idea at the time,” Ron said shrugging. “So we don’t need to look around here for relics of the founders or something?”

“Not at the moment,” Hermione said. “I picked this spot because it was out of the way, not because of any particular association with the Horcruxes. I think it might help if we took a day or two just to think what our next move should be.”

“So we’re out of ideas,” Ron said, grimacing.

“No, we are most certainly not out of ideas,” Hermione said, still looking angry. “I’ve got a few dozen possibilities, but as none of them is standing out especially, I thought prioritizing our options would be sensible.”
“Sorry,” Ron said with a mock bow from his seat, “I should have said we’re out of any good ideas.”

“Please feel free to contribute to the pool of possibilities at any time,” Hermione said icily.

“Home,” Ron said at once.

“Immediately to be apprehended by Death Eaters and have your parents face possible execution as blood traitors?” Hermione said, glaring at him.

“We don’t know that!” Ron yelled. “For all we know, they’re already dead or something. Can’t we just pop in under the Cloak and see if they’re at least okay?”

“We’d have heard something on the wireless if there had been an attack on the Burrow,” Hermione said, sounding less angry. “It’s so dangerous, I don’t think we can do it in good conscience. It’s not worth it if it means risking their lives, Ron.”

Ron seemed like he wanted to say something, but instead he simply sighed and looked morose again.

“I suppose you’re right,” Ron said. “I’m hungry. Is there anything left to eat?”

“Two donuts that haven’t gone stale yet, a couple pears, and half a packet of crisps,” Hermione said.

“Are they jelly donuts?” Ron said hopefully, and Harry wondered for the millionth time how he could switch between moods so quickly.

“One is, yes,” Hermione said. “Take it. It’s in the paper sack by the sink.”

Ron left, and Harry and Hermione exchanged worried glances. Ron was still experiencing far more of the Horcrux’s mood altering properties than either of them was, but most of the time it didn’t last too long. Harry was starting to wish they’d brought another person with them, maybe Luna or even Neville, just to make it so the three of them weren’t constantly in one another’s face. On top of that, Harry had wanted to the jelly donut himself, and he was now feeling grumpy himself.

“The other donut is chocolate dip,” Hermione said as though she completely understood what he was thinking. “Feel free. I’ve already had a cinnamon one.”

Maybe it was the chocolate, Lupin’s old remedy for Dementors, but Harry began to feel better as soon as the donut passed his lips.

“Where’d you get these?” Ron asked, his mouth still full and his lips smeared in sugar.

“A bakery in the town yesterday,” Hermione said, looking a bit guilty.

“You stole them?” Ron said conversationally without the least bit of accusation in his voice.

“Oh, I hate being a thief!” Hermione said, and Harry was surprised by just how vehemently she said it. “I would have put Muggle money in the till, but there were so many people there I was afraid I’d bump into someone and the Cloak would fall off and then where would we be.”

“Hungry,” Ron replied, wiping his mouth with his fist, “and possibly sighted. We don’t have any other choices I can see, though, unless we’re going through dustbins, which we’ve done often enough.”

Harry shuddered. While it was true sometimes they’d haunted alleyways behind fairly posh restaurants and managed to cadge a few really decent meals from the rejects of the customers, there was also the possibility of rats popping out of nowhere, and ever since Scabbers, he really didn’t care
for them.

“I suppose,” Hermione admitted, but it was obvious her conscience was still bothering her.

“If it’s any consolation, I highly doubt the police are going to knock down our door over a few donuts and the occasional pie,” Harry said.

“Maybe not, but it’s the principle of the thing. Getting caught or not, it’s still wrong,” she said, then she added with a slight smile, “and you never know just who or what might wind up breaking into a thieves’ lair.”

“That sounds like one of your mad stories,” Ron said, perking up.

“As it happens, there is one about that,” Hermione said. “I take it you want to hear it?”

“Indubitably,” Ron said, licking the last of the sugar from his mouth. Harry noticed Hermione looking away with a blush and rolled his eyes for the thousandth time.

“Yes, well, upon once a time, I mean, once upon a time,” Hermione said, still a little flustered.

“Points off for that,” Ron said.

“An old donkey lived on a farm,” Hermione said. “He had worked very hard for the farmer all his life, pulling his plow, helping him ride into town, and doing all sorts of jobs.”

“Mum could do with one of those,” Ron said.

“What would she do with a donkey?” Harry asked. “It’s not like you farm at the Burrow.”

“No, but I think he’d be company,” Ron said. “With the whole lot of us gone during the year, even the owls, it’s got to be a bit lonely during the day. Donkeys seem like nice, calm, friendly sorts.”

“I suppose so,” Hermione said. “At least she has the ghoul to talk to a bit now, though.”

“Yeah, not much conversation there,” Ron said. “Mostly just ‘Ahhhhahhooooo!’ Gotta get boring after a bit. So we’ve got a hardworking, loyal donkey ready for retirement. What’s his name?”

“Most stories don’t give him one,” Hermione said. “He’s just the donkey.”

Ron closed his eyes for a moment, thinking.

“Floppy,” he finally said, “because of the floppy ears.”

“Floppy the donkey?” Harry said, trying not to laugh. It sounded like a character on a children’s television programme.

“Yeah,” Ron said, nodding. “Floppy.”

“I rather like it,” Hermione said, hiding a smile herself. “However, Floppy was not destined for a leisurely retirement.”

Ron shot her a suspicious look.

“I’m going to want to smack someone, aren’t I,” he said.

“Most likely,” Hermione said. “You see, the farmer who owned him was talking to his wife, and the
donkey overheard him saying he was planning on selling him to a skinner.”

“I don’t think I even need to ask what that is,” Ron said, looking livid. “The nerve! The donkey
slaves for him for years and he goes and something like—like—THAT?!”

Harry could actually hear both the question mark and the exclamation point separately in Ron’s
sentence along with the caps lock word. He could sympathize as he went through a phase like that in
his fifth year. At least Ron was directing his anger towards someone who wasn’t them for once,
though.

“I’m afraid so,” Hermione said, “but the donkey wasn’t having any of that.

“Well, good for Floppy!” Harry said, rather surprised by how upset he sounded as well. Ron and
Hermione looked at him. “What? I think the farmer’s a prat too.”

“So what did he do?” Ron asked.

“He ran away, heading for the city of Bremen,” Hermione said. “He planned to become a musician
there and be world famous.”

“Okay, as plans go, that’s on the unique side, bordering on mad, but good for him for having a
dream,” Ron said, then muttered, “and burning the farmer’s house down into the bargain wouldn’t be
out of place either.”

“I heard that,” Hermione said, “and I can’t condone arson. But I do sympathize with the concept
here.”

“So the donkey took off for Bremen?” Ron said. “Where’s that?”

“Oh, it’s a real Muggle city in northwest Germany,” Hermione said. “It’s fairly large, and when the
story was first told, it would probably have been rather exotic to country folk.”

“Well, at the very least he’s away from the farmer,” Ron said. “What happened next?”

“After a few days, he was walking along the road, and he came upon an old dog who had collapsed
near the verge, panting and puffing as though he had been running a great distance,” Hermione said.
“The donkey asked him what was his trouble.”

“See, I like this donkey,” Ron said approvingly. “He’s nice to the dog. Again, he should live with
Mum.”

“He is rather polite and kind, now that you mention it,” Hermione said. “Actually, he reminds me a
little of Dobby, really.”

“Yeah, selling an old house-elf to a skinner sounds like something a Malfoy would do, too,” Ron
said with a scowl.

“And Dobby got away as well,” Hermione said. “I do hope he’s all right.”

“I have a feeling he’s doing fine,” Harry said. “He’s got more than his own share of magic after all.”

“I suppose,” Hermione said, but she still looked worried. “In any case, the dog explained how he had
herded sheep for his master for years and gone out into the moors to pick up geese for him when they
would hunt. However, now that he was growing old, his master had turned against him and wanted
to kill him.”
“What is wrong with these people!” Ron yelled.

“Calm down, Ronald, it’s only a story,” Hermione said, a look of concern on her face.

“Yeah, but these stories all have a grain of truth to them, don’t they?” he said fiercely. “Can you honestly tell me there aren’t Muggles who would do that sort of thing?”

“Unfortunately, no, I can’t,” Hermione admitted. “They certainly aren’t the majority, though.”

“I should hope not!” Ron said, folding his arms emphatically, then taking a deep breath. “So what happened to the dog?”

“He too had run away, and the donkey told him that he was going to Bremen to become a famous musician, and if the dog liked, he could come along and they could start a band. The dog could kick a kettledrum with his legs, and the donkey would strum a lute with his hooves,” Hermione said.

“Again, that is a nice donkey,” Ron said.

“You’re right,” Harry said. “He actually does sound like Dobby.”

“Granted, Dobby being nice sent you to the Hospital Wing if I recall, but the intention was good,” Ron said. “I’m assuming the dog went with him.”

“He did indeed, with his spirits much restored, and when he grew weary from walking, the donkey let him ride on his back for a bit,” Hermione said.

“That would have stood out rather a lot,” Ron said. “I’d be worried that the two owners might hear about them and try to take them back, but as they don’t want them to begin with, I’m guessing they’re probably not even looking.”

“No, they never really come back into the story again,” Hermione said. “After a few more days, they came across an old cat who was mewing sadly by the side of the road. ‘What’s wrong?’ they both asked, and the cat explained that she had been a good mouser for her mistress for many long years and had kept the mice and rats from the granary. Now, though, she was growing too old to catch them, and her mistress had decided to drown her.”

“I am starting to really hate these people,” Ron said in an almost frighteningly nonchalant tone. “Seriously. These are awful human beings.”

“I take it the cat ran away from home as well?” Harry jumped in.

“Yes, and the donkey and dog suggested that the cat could join their band, perhaps as a singer, and they could go on to Bremen together,” Hermione said. “The cat, very happy with the plan, agreed at once, and they continued down the road to Bremen as quite a merry group.”

“The dog didn’t have a problem with a cat joining them?” Ron said.

“No,” Hermione said. “Quite a few dogs and cats get along, after all, and these two in particular had good reasons to band together, so I don’t recall any versions that say they quarreled.”

“I suppose,” Ron said, but he still looked unconvinced. “It’s a little unusual, you have to admit.”

“If it were one of Aunt Marge’s dogs, I’d agree,” Harry said, “but Fang gets along pretty well with all the cats at Hogwarts, or at least lets them alone. It depends on the dog.”

“And the cat,” Ron said. “Auntie Muriel used to have one that seemed to hate every living being on
“Fair enough,” Harry said, “but the animals in this story all seem pretty calm and reasonable.”

“More than the people at any rate,” Ron said, frowning again. “So the three of them go on to Bremen?”

“Yes, but along the way they met a rooster,” Hermione said.

“Wait, there’s a fourth one?” Ron said, looking surprised.

“Yes. Why is that so strange?” Hermione asked.

“Because these stories almost always have sets of three in them,” Ron said. “Three bears in the story about the porridge that cools against all the rules of science, three architecturally challenged pigs, three times the evil step-mother tries to poison the girl who lives with the seven dwarfs—”

“And three times Jack climbs the beanstalk, three goats on the bridge with the troll, three times Rumpelstiltskin spins straw into gold, three kinds of trees in the forest outside the castle with the dancing princesses,” Harry added.

“Hmm,” Hermione said, almost as though she were talking to herself. “The magical qualities of the number three, along with the ability to memorize ideas more easily via a triad particularly in a culture where stories are passed on orally, had long been an established part of the underlying structure of fairy tales. The concept that four is used here instead of three actually is highly unusual. Perhaps it’s meant to underscore the upset of the common order typified by the animals running from their various human masters, or maybe the story itself has mutated in retellings and one of the animals is a later addition, though I’ve never heard it any other way. On the whole, it’s a perplexing deviation the more I think of it.”

“Or bands tend to do better with four members rather than three,” Ron said.

“It could be the musical underpinnings of the story at that, though I’m still not entirely satisfied with that explanation,” Hermione said.

“It worked for John, Paul, George, and Ringo,” Harry said.

“Who?” Ron asked.

“They were a very popular group called the Beatles,” Hermione said.

“Like… bugs?” Ron asked.

“No, it was just a name,” Hermione said, “and it was spelled differently.”

“What’s a Ringo?” Ron asked.

“He was the drummer,” Harry said.

“Whatever,” Ron said, obviously giving up on ever understanding Muggle culture. “So they met a rooster.”

“Yes, and he was sitting on a fencepost and crowing pitifully,” Hermione said. “They asked him what was wrong, and he said that for many years he had crowed at daybreak to wake his masters and bring the sun up.”
“The rooster thought it made the sun come up?” Ron said. “Bit narcissistic, isn’t he?”

“Well, he didn’t know any better, and he took the job seriously,” Hermione said. “Anyway, now that he was growing old, his mistress said that she wanted him made into a soup for her guests who are coming the next day, for it would be fine weather since that is was the day Our Lady washes the Christ child’s little shirts and wants to hang them out to dry.”

“Okay, I followed pretty much all of that until the last extremely weird bit. It’s what day now?” Ron asked.

“It’s a very odd insert in the story, but it pops up in almost every version of it. The upshot of it is if the Virgin Mary wanted to hang out her laundry to dry, it would be sure to be good weather, so the rooster was predicting a sunny day and good travel for his mistress’s guests,” Hermione said.

“So… they’re walking to Bremen from Bethlehem?” Ron asked.

“What? No,” Hermione said. “It’s apparently just something people used to say about good weather, like if it was raining really hard they’d say the old the old man in the sky was snoring if it thundered.”

“Oh. Good, because for a second there I thought they were going to have one awfully long walk,” Ron said. “I take it the donkey, dog, and cat invite the rooster to come along with them?”

“Yes, the rooster agreed and became another singer, and they traveled on very happily down the road to Bremen,” Hermione said.

“Is anyone else going to join them?” Ron asked.

“No, the group stays at four,” Hermione said.

“Good,” Ron said. “I was afraid there was going to be a depressed goldfish next or something.”

“A… depressed… goldfish…,” Hermione said slowly.

“Hey, this one had a semi-suicidal rooster in it who nearly wound up as soup. I think an unhappy goldfish is entirely in keeping with this travesty. Maybe his owner wanted sushi,” Ron said, nodding firmly.

Harry watched as Hermione ran her palms over her forehead, taking a deep breath.

“Anyway, the donkey, the dog, the cat, and the rooster continued down the road together, all of them feeling much better now that they had a goal in life. As night approached, they saw a dim glow in the distance, and when they came nearer, they saw a little house with lights burning in the windows,” Hermione said.

“Wait,” Ron said, interrupting her just as she was using her spookiest voice.

“Yes?” Hermione said with a voice at the edge of patience.

“Would this little house happen to be in the middle of a forest?” Ron asked.

“Actually, yes, now that you mention it,” Hermione said.

Ron looked at Harry sadly and said, “They’re all going to die, aren’t they.”

“What? No! This isn’t one of those cottages,” Hermione said. “Well, it is, but it isn’t!”
“Remind me that if we ever bump into a forest cottage in our wanderings, we head in the other
direction as fast as possible,” Ron said.

“Agreed,” Harry said, then glanced at Hermione, who looked a bit cross at being interrupted yet
again. “So, ehm, what did the animals do?”

“Yeah,” Ron said, going back into an attitude of intense attention. “What’d they do?”

“Well, as the tallest, the donkey went up to the window very cautiously and peered in to see who
might be there,” Hermione said.

“And what did Floppy see?” Ron asked.

It must have been the rather adorable name that melted Hermione because she smiled a bit before
saying, “Robbers!”

“That isn’t so bad. At least it isn’t a cannibalistic witch or homicidal bears,” Ron said with a shrug.

“The donkey returned to his friends and explained what he had seen, but he also mentioned that the
table in front of the four robbers was laden with the most amazing, rich, wonderful food,” Hermione
said.

“Food?” Ron and Harry said simultaneously.

“Yes, a whole feast’s worth,” Hermione said. “Since the four humans were robbers to begin with,
the animals decided to get the food for themselves, for all of them were very hungry.”

“Which is an issue with the cat and the rooster in particular,” Ron said.

Hermione rolled her eyes but continued onward, saying, “They hatched a plan to take the cabin for
themselves.”

“Hatched? I thought the rooster was a boy,” Ron said.

“Not literally hatched,” Hermione said, and Harry suspected that she might be about to explode.

“Okay, so how do a donkey, a dog, a cat, and a rooster outwit four robbers?” Harry said quickly.

“Well, they all got outside the window. Then the dog jumped on the donkey’s back, the cat on the
dog’s back, and the rooster on the cat’s back in a tall tower,” Hermione said.

“So, like a totem pole?” Harry asked.

“Yes, precisely!” Hermione said, very pleased.

“A what?” Ron asked.

“Certain Native American tribes take felled tree trunks and carve them with images of people or
animals that tell a story or represent culturally important concepts or history, then set them upright as
decoration. And most commonly, there’s an eagle or bird at the top, just like the rooster!” Hermione
said. “I wonder if there was some sort of cultural exchange between the Pacific Northwest and the
area of Germany around Bremen during the time period of the creation of the story. It really is a
fascinating parallel that I’d never caught before at any rate. Well done, Harry!”

Ron was now glaring daggers at Harry, who quickly added, “Oh, um, just saw a documentary from
the BBC about those things a few years ago is all.”
“So what happened after they all jumped on one another’s backs, making poor Floppy probably slip a disc or something?” Ron asked, still sounding a bit sulky.

“They decided to try out their music,” Hermione said, and she actually giggled. “Of course, they had no instruments, and honestly I’m not really sure how the donkey could have played a lute without any opposable thumbs anyway, so instead they all sang.”

“Sang?” Ron asked.

“More specifically, the donkey brayed at the top of his lungs, the dog barked as loud as he could, the cat screeched and caterwauled, and the rooster crowed loud enough to wake the dead, all four of them at once,” Hermione said.

“Oh, that could definitely be a top ten hit on the Wizarding Wireless,” Ron said.

“I wouldn’t doubt it with some of the things out there, but the robbers, who were naturally paranoid to begin with, were terrified by the strange, unearthly noise. ‘It’s a ghost!’ one of them cried, and they all ran out of the cottage pell-mell into the darkness,” Hermione said.

“Bit of a stretch to think it’s a ghost, and not all that bright to go running through the woods in the dark,” Ron said.

“If you’ve ever seen a Muggle horror movie, though, that’s about what they all do,” Hermione said. “Something horrible pops out of the shadows and they automatically run to the stupidest, least safe place possible.”

“Really?” Ron said.

“I’ve never actually seen one,” Harry said, shrugging. “Part of the Dursleys’ attempt to keep out anything magic related.”

“Oh! When we get back, I’m making you both watch the whole Friday the 13th series,” Hermione said, grinning. “You won’t sleep for a week! I didn’t.”

“Yeah, that sound like, uh, fun,” Ron said, though his expression clearly said otherwise. “Anyway, the robbers vacated the house, so what did the animals do?”

“Why, they waltzed right in and ate all the wonderful food left on the table, having a simply marvelous meal,” Hermione said.

“Now that part I like,” Ron said, smiling.

“After they’d eaten their fill, each chose the place he or she liked best to sleep. The donkey found a comfortable pile of hay in one corner, the dog slept just behind the door, the cat curled up on the hearth next to the glowing embers, and the rooster flew up to the ceiling rafters and huddled in for the night, warm, safe, and dry,” Hermione said.

“There’s going to be a problem,” Ron said immediately. “This is too happy, and it sounds too much like that Goldilocks story.”

“What?” Hermione said.

“They find a house, they eat, then they pick comfortable beds,” Ron said, counting the events off on his fingers. “The robbers are going to come back next, aren’t they.”
“Actually, yes,” Hermione said, very surprised. “I’d never noticed that parallel before!”

“See? I pay attention too,” Ron said, throwing what Harry thought was a rather unnecessarily nasty look at him.

“Yes, well done,” Hermione said, who also seemed to have noted that. “Anyway, the robbers, when they had regained their right minds, realized they must have acted like fools and that all their ill-gotten gains were still in the cottage, so they sent one of their members back to find out what had really happened.”

“Poor bloke,” Ron said. “I almost feel sorry for him. Probably drew the short straw.”

“Why do people even do that?” Harry said.

“I don’t really know, but it’s been around for centuries,” Hermione said. “It’s probably a holdover from a religious ceremony of some sort.”

“Wait,” Ron said, staring at her. “You don’t actually know?”

“No, it’s only an educated guess,” she said.

He turned slowly to Harry and said, “She doesn’t know.”

Harry gave him an odd look and said, “So?”

“There is something Hermione Granger does not know!” Ron said. “I’m declaring this a national holiday!”

Hermione rolled her eyes as the boys laughed so hard they were rolling on the floor.

“It’s not all that funny,” she mumbled to herself. “If you’ve quite collected yourselves?”

“Oh, right, the returning robber,” Ron said. “What happened to old Short Straw?”

“He went into the house, not seeing any of the animals as it was quite dark,” Hermione said. “However, the cat was awake. The robber saw her eyes glowing in the firelight and thought they were lit coals, so he took his pipe out of his pocket and bent down close to her to light it from what he thought were the flames.”

“That is not going to end well,” Ron said.

“Well, it depends for whom you mean,” Hermione said. “The cat screeched and slashed at him with her claws, waking the other animals. Then the dog bit him in the leg, the donkey kicked him in the back, and rooster shrieked blue murder as the robber ran screaming back into the night.”

“How is murder blue?” Ron asked. “Wouldn’t it be more logical to scream red murder?”

“Actually, it’s a borrowing from the French *morbleu*, which means to cry out in alarm or surprise, which itself is a corruption of *mon Dieu*, literally ‘Oh my God!’ also an expression of distress, but the similar sound of *morbleu* to *mort bleu*, or blue death, helped the phrase translate as blue murder in English,” Hermione said.

Ron and Harry gave her looks of stunned disbelief.

“Remember, I spent the summer in France once,” Hermione said almost apologetically.
“Yeah, most people who summer in France spend their time eating food nobody can pronounce and lying about on the beach getting tan,” Ron said, “not looking into the etymology of ‘blue murder.’”

“Well, everyone needs a hobby,” Hermione said.

“So was that the end of the robber?” Harry asked.

“Not quite,” Hermione said. “He went back to the rest of the thieves and said that they couldn’t return to the cottage because a horrible pack of monsters had taken up residence there. A terrifying witch with red eyes had slashed at him with her fingernails—”

“That’d be the cat,” Ron said.

“—an ogre with a knife had stabbed him in the leg—”

“That’s the dog biting him, I think,” Ron said.

“—a giant with a club had walloped him in the back—”

“The donkey kicking him,” Harry supplied.

“—but worst of all, a judge had screamed out from on high ‘Hang them all! Hang them all!’” Hermione said.

“I suppose that would have to be the rooster, but how you get that out of cock-a-doodle-doo I don’t know,” Ron said.

“To be fair, how do we get cock-a-doodle-doo out of it either?” Harry said.

“Fair point,” Ron said. “Throw in his guilty conscience and I’ll let it pass. I take it the robbers gave up the cottage as a bad show?”

“Yes, and they never returned again, leaving the really quite cozy cottage to the four animals,” Hermione said.

“Didn’t they continue on to Bremen?” Harry asked.

“No, though they often practiced their music and talked about going, but what they had really wanted was a home, and that was what they now had, so the four of them lived quite happily ever after,” Hermione said.

“Even though it started pretty horrible,” Ron said, “I’m happy about how it ended for Floppy, Rover, Puss-Puss, and Cackles.”

“Rover, Puss-Puss, and Cackles?” Harry said in disbelief as Hermione giggled again.

“What, you’ve got better names?” Ron said. “They had a rough go of it. The least we can do is call them something other than dog, cat, and rooster.”

“Fine by me,” Hermione said. “So the moral of the story is thieves never prosper.”

“Well, if we ever come back to the tent and find it occupied by an exceptional nice donkey and his poor abused animal friends all on the lam from their homicidal owners, I’m more than willing to share whatever we’ve got with them,” Ron said, beginning to yawn, “particularly since that’s pretty much nothing.”
“I suppose, but I still don’t like stealing,” Hermione said. “I’m keeping a list of all the places where we’ve taken things, and after the war is over, I’m finding a way to pay them all back properly if I can.”

“That’s fair,” Harry said. “I’ll pay my bit.”

“Yeah, if we all survive, I’m in as well,” Ron said, but the words and his tone both made Harry’s blood run cold for a moment. Hermione kept silent, but the words had obviously affected her too.

“Well,” Harry said after an awkward silence, “I suppose we should turn in.”

“Good idea,” Hermione said, obviously happy someone had broken the deafening quiet. “I’m really knackered.”

“Same here,” Ron said. “Good night.”

“Night,” she said as she went to her partitioned bedroom.

Harry got into bed and was just about to drift off when he heard Ron say, “Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think we’ll ever actually find what we’re looking for? Or should we, you know, sort of be like the Bremen town musicians and figure out we’re safest where we are and just wait the whole thing out?” Ron said.

“I don’t think waiting it out is an option,” Harry said. “If we don’t finish this, the ending won’t be a happily ever after for anyone.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Ron said, but he sounded more than a little unconvinced. “Night.”

Harry’s dreams that night were of four animals, but the donkey was a stag, the rooster a rat, and the cat a wolf while the tired farmer’s dog took on the shape of his godfather, safe and warm in the Shrieking Shack. He wondered what they would have had to say about their endless quest for Horcruxes and the growing fear that it would be useless, that they should just stay right here and hope someone else would shoulder the burden instead.

“No,” Harry said to himself even in his dream. “We have to go on to Bremen. There’s no real rest here.”

In the dream, the stag looked at him, slowly changing into a donkey with sad eyes, which in turn became Dobby’s concerned gaze, but Harry still knew what they had to do.
“That could have gone better,” Ron said, pouring mud out of his boots all over the tent floor.

“It also could have gone much worse,” Hermione pointed out, hanging her coat on the rack by the door and carefully toeing off her filthy boots.

“Whose ruddy idea was it to search the moors of Yorkshire in the middle of a bloody downpour in November?” Ron said, shivering as he let his coat flop to the floor.

“Yours,” Harry pointed out bluntly, not particularly in the mood for his friend’s ill-temper when everyone was equally uncomfortable.

“Oh, right,” he said. “I forgot.”

“At least we know Hufflepuff’s cup isn’t hidden in that particular spot,” Hermione said.

“No, just a truly impressive amount of mud,” Ron said, then sneezed forcefully. “I don’t suppose we have dinner tonight, do we?”

“Actually, yes,” Hermione said. “I’ve got beef stew and biscuits cooking in the kitchen. Can’t you smell it?”

“Nope,” Ron said. “My nose is all stuffed. I think I’m coming down with a cold or summat.”

Harry finished taking off his own shoes and coat and stowing them away. He watched while Hermione went over to her bag and began burrowing through it until she pulled out a bottle of Pepperup Potion.

“Here,” she said. “This should still be in good order.”

Ron grunted and took a spoonful as Hermione proceeded to put Ron’s boots away neatly and used the Scouring Charm to get rid of the mud that had been tracked in. In another few seconds, her trademark bluebell flames were crackling away in a jam jar on the table, sending warm but eerie light around the room. Three bowls filled with piping hot stew, which Harry noted looked much better than Hermione’s original forays into cooking, were soon on the table with biscuits beside them.

“Good,” Ron said, grabbing a spoon. “I’m starved.”
“Possibly a thank you is in order?” Hermione said, sounding rather ill-tempered.

“Oh, yeah, thanks,” Ron said. “It does smell good.”

Mollified, Hermione nodded and began to eat as well. Harry joined in, and the stew really was as good as it looked, hot and thick and feeling wonderful after the cold, wet day.

“This is exactly what we needed,” Harry said, and Hermione beamed at him as though she’d received top marks on a test from McGonagall.

“Yeah, mostly,” Ron said, looking dreamily into the middle distance. “Mum’s has a bit of rosemary in it though, I think, and the biscuits could be lighter, but you’re close this time. You’ll get it eventually.”

“Why don’t you get it eventually?” Hermione said, snatching the rest of the biscuit out of his hand. “And I’m more than willing to eat this myself if it isn’t up to your exacting standards!”

Harry prepared for yet another row, but as he was thoroughly enjoying the stew, he felt less bothered by it than usual. It really was quite good.

“I don’t need to learn this stuff,” Ron said, looking with longing as the biscuit disappeared into Hermione’s mouth. “I have other things to do. Mum cooks or you do, or Merlin help us, Harry.”

Harry was uncomfortably knocked out of his pleasant feigned deafness on that one. He’d had to cook for the Dursleys since he was old enough to look over the stove, and in spite of Aunt Petunia’s constant reminders not to burn anything, he was more than passable at most basic things. He gave his friend a very large quantity of stink eye as Hermione turned even redder in the face, not that Harry was starting to match her.

“These other things of yours to do would include what?” Hermione asked.

“Thinking,” Ron said, which Harry had to admit was a vague answer.

“About?” Hermione said.


“Yes, but Harry and I do that too and we contribute to helping to keep this place in decent order,” Hermione said. “The very least you can do is pick up after yourself instead of dumping boot-water all over the floor for someone else to clean up.”

“But one way or another it does get cleaned up,” Ron said. “Just like the food gets cooked.”

“And the Pepperup Potion gets brewed and the coats and boots get put away and the laundry gets done,” Hermione said, folding her arms. “Almost all of it by me. It really is my fault, I suppose. I just can’t bear living in squalor, and I don’t think you actually care one way or the other.”

“Not really, no,” Ron said, shrugging. “Cook and clean if it makes you happy.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Hermione said.

“Then don’t. It’s not like it’ll make any real difference. Who cares?” Ron said, and Harry shuddered a little at the look that came over Hermione’s face, which Ron seemed to completely miss.

“Right then. I won’t,” Hermione said, her voice dropping about three octaves. Harry was surprised the stew didn’t freeze solid.
“Okay,” Ron said, oblivious to the wrath that was coming at him in silent waves from Hermione as he threw his spoon back into his empty bowl. “I’m full and sleepy, so I’m going to bed. Night all.”

Ron got up, leaving his dishes sitting precisely where they were, glinting in the lights of what served as their kitchen. Harry noted Hermione seemed to be almost physically restraining herself from removing the mess, but she was winning the battle.

“Are you tired as well?” Hermione asked Harry in a carefully controlled tone that did not bode well.

“Rather, yeah,” Harry said, though he was actually nervous about speaking at all.

“I am too,” Hermione said, nodding decisively. “Yes, I think—I think I’ll turn in as well.”

She stood from her spot and stared down at the dishes, her fingers actually twitching in the air before she turned abruptly and went to her little nook where she slept. Harry stared at his own dishes forlornly, not sure if leaving them or washing up was going to be taking someone’s side. Eventually he decided he wanted to eat off something clean the next morning, so he quickly cleaned only his own bowl and spoon and crept off to bed feeling as though he might have done something wrong and hoping the next day didn’t begin with an explosion.

By morning, though, Hermione was already gone long before dawn.

“But… what are we going to eat?” Ron asked, staring at the messy table.

“Dunno,” Harry said. “Any stew left?”

“Yeah, but it’s been out all night,” Ron said, eyeing the pot dubiously. “It smells rather off.”

Harry wrinkled his nose in agreement before remembering something. “I think there are a few apples left in the cupboard.”

“Oh. That’ll do,” Ron said, and there were indeed two apples left. Harry was almost certain there had been three last night, but he said nothing.

After a very brief breakfast, Harry and Ron just stared at one another for a while.

“Fine, so, where do you think we should look next?” Harry finally said.

“Haven’t a clue,” Ron said. “The Horcruxes could be anywhere from Addis Ababa to Zanzibar.”

“I think they’re probably at least in Europe somewhere,” Harry said.

“Those aren’t in Europe?” Ron asked, looking defeated.

“Africa, both of them,” Harry said.

“Then what’s the capital of Croatia?” Ron asked.

“Uh, Zagreb, I think?” Harry said.

“Thought it was Zanzibar,” Ron said, picking at his very depleted apple core. “I’m guessing there isn’t a little country between France and Spain called Addis Ababa either then.”

“Nope,” Harry said. “I think we could try Ireland, though. It’s not far, and while it’s not an obvious choice, it’s still pretty close by.”
“Maybe,” Ron said, looking at the door. “You think she’ll be back after breakfast?”

“We weren’t planning on moving today, so I don’t know,” Harry said.

“Right,” Ron said, then drew a deep breath. “Well, day off then, I say. What do you fancy doing? Quidditch practice, a few rounds of Exploding Snap, maybe get something in on the wireless, lay about and do nothing at all?”

Harry shrugged, and they sat there for a while.

“Any Pepperup Potion left?” Ron asked. “I’m still a bit off.”

“Probably in her bag,” Harry said, carefully avoiding Hermione’s name.

“Yes,” Ron said, standing suddenly and striding over to the little beaded evening bag. “I’ll just have some of that, then, to keep the symptoms down.”

Things really hadn’t gone well the last time Ron had tried that, but before Harry could open his mouth to suggest this might not be the best of ideas, Ron had already undone the bag’s clasp. Harry clapped his hands over his ears in near agony as horrible sounds came from the bag’s nearly bottomless depths, and Ron, panicking, dropped it and ran to the other side of the tent, a look of sheer terror on his face.

“What in bloody hell is that?” he managed to scream above the noise. “A banshee?”

“I think it’s Yanni!” Harry yelled back.

“Who’s torturing him?” Ron screamed.

By now, Harry had managed to crawl across the floor to the bag and close it again, blessedly ending the shrieking.

“Do you think anyone else heard that?” Ron asked, glancing at the door like he expected a crew of Death Eaters to appear at any moment.

“No,” Harry said firmly. “Hermione’s put enough Silencing Charms on the tent to keep any noise from escaping. I don’t care how miffed she is, she wouldn’t remove those.”

Ron looked uncertain for a second, but seemed to decide eventually that Harry must be right.

“I’m going for a walk,” Ron finally said a bit too loudly, as though the alarm had unsettled his hearing. “I’ll be back by lunch.”

Harry nodded and plopped himself down on the couch. He spent the next hour pondering possible spots the Horcruxes might be. Ireland really wasn’t impossible, but then there wasn’t any decisive connection to Voldemort or the Hogwarts founders there so far as he knew. Then again, he wasn’t all that clear about where Helga Hufflepuff had originally come from, or Slytherin either for that matter. Seamus would know, he thought, but that was a dead end. Of course, Hermione would too, but that wasn’t possible either just now. Perhaps they should try something more obvious, like some forgotten spot in the Forbidden Forest or in Diagon Alley. They were possible, he supposed, but where? It was like looking for a wand in a mountain of twigs.

Harry must have drifted off somewhere after thinking Voldemort’s scavenger hunt was pretty much hopeless and maybe going to Fiji or Samoa to search wasn’t really any crazier than what they’d been doing. As it was, he woke when Ron slammed himself down on the couch beside him. More
specifically, though, the smell woke him.

“What in the name of Godric Gryffindor happened to you?” Harry said, holding his nose.

Ron, dripping from head to foot and covered in mud and what appeared to be other less savory things, glared at him.

“Take a wild guess,” he said.

“How did you get so wet?” Harry asked tentatively. “It’s not even raining, is it?”

“No, it’s not,” Ron said. “However, if you fall into a bog, you tend to get soaked even in fair weather.”

“You fell in a bog,” Harry repeated.

“More specifically, I fell into a bog that has apparently been used as a toilet by the local farmers’ pigs since time immemorial,” Ron said.

“Crikey, you don’t half stink,” Harry said, coughing. “You’d better get outside and hose yourself off before the whole tent needs airing for a solid week.”

“No!” Ron said defiantly. “This is all Hermione’s fault, so she’s going to come back and clean it up!”

Harry took a deep breath, then immediately regretted that decision as the hellacious smell wafted into his lungs and made him nearly lose his breakfast, small as it had been.

“Ron,” he said, “you do realize you sounded like a right git last night, right?”

“That’s only your opinion,” Ron said. “I’m tired of Hermione telling me to clean up after myself.”

“Because you never do unless she tells you to, and even then most of the time it doesn’t get done at all unless she does it,” Harry said. “When was the last time you washed your own socks?”

“I dunno. August?” Ron asked.

“Or wiped your feet on the mat when you came in the tent?” Harry said.

“But she can clean it up in no time,” Ron said.

“So can you,” Harry pointed out. “She’s right, you know. You really do sort of expect to be waited on like the Hogwarts house-elves followed us out here.”

“Yeah, well, she’s the one who can’t stand the mess,” Ron said.

“Right now, I can’t stand it either,” Harry said, waving a hand by his nose in an attempt to breathe without his lungs exploding in protest. “If we all live here, we should at least all try to keep the place comfortable enough to be livable. And lay off her cooking, will you? It’s not her fault you grew up with the Julia Child of the wizarding world as your mum.”

“Who’s Julia Child?” Ron asked.

“A Muggle woman who was a really well known chef,” Harry said. “She could cook almost anything and make it look appetizing.”
“But everyone’s mum cooks like that, don’t they?” Ron said, looking shocked. “I mean, they can just do that automatically, right? It’s in their genes, like liking the color pink and knowing how to French braid and things. Hermione’s just not trying hard enough.”

Harry stared at his friend in disbelief.

“Hermione’s right. You really are an idiot,” he finally said, getting up and leaving the tent so he could avoid passing out from Ron’s reek.

Lunchtime came and went, and Hermione did not appear. Harry chanced a bit of Polyjuice Potion he still had leftover in a flask in his pocket and went into town to scavenge lunch. He managed to cadge a whole hamburger when it fell out of someone’s paper sack as he left a take away spot. Granted, he wasn’t terribly hungry with the stench of the bog still clinging to his nose, but that passed quickly enough once he took a bite or two. Two decent meals in less than twenty-four hours: that had to be a record. He decided to return to the tent, hoping things would be in better shape.

Sadly, this hope did not bear any resemblance to reality.

“Um, Ron?” he said in as controlled a voice as he could.

“Yeah,” his friend responded.

“What in the name of Merlin’s knickers happened here?” he asked.

There was an unidentifiable mess on the ceiling that looked like it might have been cabbage at some point but was now a blackened pile of glue. A small lake, not unlike the one Fred and George had left behind for Umbridge to deal with in fifth year, had taken over the dining and living areas so that the couch and chairs were currently half their height up in muddy water. Enormous scorch marks decorated the canvas walls in three seemingly random places. Finally, to top it all off, a very large though thankfully peaceful water buffalo was grazing in the middle of the tent, contentedly chewing on what Harry suspected was his own pillow.

“I tried to clean up, cook dinner, and get rid of the stench,” Ron said.

Harry surveyed the damage.

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“Okay, so you obviously said ‘wingardium leviosa’ wrong, explaining the buffalo,” Harry said.

The buffalo lowed loudly in agreement.

“At least it didn’t land on my chest,” Ron said miserably. “I’m just off from my cold and being hungry and upset and… for pity’s sake, Harry, give me a hand before she comes back!”

As the buffalo began chewing on the corner of the dining room table, Harry opened his mouth to agree, but at that exact moment, Hermione walked through the tent door.

“I hope things didn’t go too badly, but you did rather deserve—” she stood stock still a foot into the tent, finally squeaking out, “it.”

Harry and Ron looked at one another.

“That’s a buffalo,” Hermione said, her face a mask of shock. “There is a buffalo eating the kitchen table. It is a buffalo, isn’t it? I haven’t gone mad?”

“It’s a buffalo,” Harry admitted. “Um, Hermione, why don’t you take a little walk outside for a few
minutes or hours or something and let Ron and I clean this up, yeah?”

“Okay,” she said in the voice of someone clinging to the edge of sanity. “I’ll do that then. Yes. A walk. A buffalo. I can take a buffalo, I mean, a walk.”

As she turned around and exited the tent like a sleepwalker, Harry and Ron began attempting to put everything right. It wasn’t a perfect success, but they managed to make the swamp vanish, unstick the cabbage, and open the tent flaps to get some air in. The buffalo was another matter. Regardless of what they did, it simply would not vanish or otherwise return to wherever it had come from. Harry found himself desperately wishing for the Room of Requirement, but eventually he managed to enlarge the tent door to three times its usual side and then he and Ron carefully lured the massive creature outside. Once it was out on the moors, it decided it would be fun to run about for a while, and the pair of them left the buffalo to a good evening constitutional. By the time Hermione wandered back into the normally sized door again, the tent was, if not sparkling clean, at least not the home of a miniature swamp and a very large ruminant.

“Um, hi?” Ron said sheepishly.

Hermione looked slightly shell-shocked, peering about cautiously as though she expected the buffalo to suddenly pop out from behind the refrigerator.

“Yes, it’s, I guess, yes,” Hermione said, carefully sitting on the edge of the couch and trying not to notice there was a largish bite missing from one of the cushions.

“Um, so, that didn’t really go too well,” Ron said.

“No,” Hermione said. “No, I would say that was a fair statement.”

“So maybe you’d better just do all the cooking and cleaning from here on out because I’m an inept idiot,” Ron said quickly.

Harry was relatively sure this was the worst possible thing Ron could have said, and Hermione did appear to be vibrating slightly, but when she spoke, she seemed too calm.

“I am going to tell you a story,” she said.

“Oh, good,” Ron said, smiling in relief and apparently thinking this was a good sign.

Harry, for his part, suspected that the story might center around a witch who ax-murdered a slovenly red-haired wizard and left the bits somewhere in a swamp, but he gave her his full attention.

“Once upon a time,” Hermione began, but as Ron opened his mouth to interrupt as usual, she gave him a look so chilly that Harry honestly thought he saw snowflakes, and more tellingly, Ron closed his mouth with a quiet pop, immediately disabused of his earlier optimistic attitude, “there lived an ant and a grasshopper.”

“Whose aunt?” Ron asked, then clapped his hand over his mouth before mumbling around his fingers, “I’m sorry! I can’t help it!”

“I am beginning to believe that really is the case,” Hermione said, rubbing her temples as though a headache were coming on, which it well could be with the faint traces of mire and the buffalo’s generous “gifts” still wafting through the air. “I mean the insect. Both the ant and the grasshopper lived in a large, lovely field, and it was summer.”

Ron kept his fingers over his mouth and nodded vehemently to show he was listening.
“Every day, the ant would run about, gathering food and laying it aside for winter or digging tunnels to expand the nest. She worked from dawn until dusk, and the grasshopper would laugh at her,” Hermione said.

“Why?” Ron asked, and Harry gave him a warning look that this might have been a step too far.

“No, it’s a perfectly logical question to ask,” Hermione said. “The grasshopper spent all of his time playing his fiddle and eating the grass in the field, never once thinking about tomorrow or doing any work at all. He thought nothing of the future and regarded work as something only other animals did, particularly animals who were boring. He considered the ant foolish because, while the grasshopper had fun all day, every day, the ant toiled away, and he thought that was stupid of her.”

“And the ant doing all this heavy lifting is a girl?” Ron asked skeptically.

“The vast majority of worker ants are actually female, the precise opposite found in hives of bees,” Hermione said. “A few males exist, of course, in every ant colony; otherwise, the species would be incapable of reproduction. However, the majority of the working ants one sees running about and carrying heavy loads are wingless females.”

“I think I am beginning to see a parallel,” Ron said quietly. “Okay, so what happened?”

“Time passed, as it does, and very soon the winds of autumn blew through the field. The grass died with the frost, and the grasshopper was left with nothing at all to eat,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said. “I guess he should have thought of that.”

“Meanwhile, the ant and all of her fellow workers were snug in their nest below ground with their queen, their storerooms filled for the winter, and having quite a jolly time of it now that their work was done,” Hermione said.

“Do ants actually do that?” Ron asked.

“Generally speaking, yes, they do lay aside provisions, and the ants themselves can have rather stunningly long live for insects, with queens sometimes living as long as thirty years, but the typical female ant usually lives about two or three years,” Hermione said.

“And the males?” Harry asked.

“Normally they die in a few weeks,” Hermione said.

Harry had an uneasy suspicion Hermione was perhaps savoring that bit of information a touch too much at the moment.

“Okay,” Ron said, his voice cracking a bit. “So the girl ants are having some sort of insect-based Christmas party in their underground bunker full of food and frolic, and the grasshopper is…?”

“Slowly starving to death from his own inability to take care of himself,” Hermione said.

“Do I want to know what happens next?” Ron asked.

“Well, there are actually two different endings to the story. This is a very old one, one of Aesop’s again, but we think the oldest version is that the grasshopper goes to the ants and begs to be let in for the winter,” Hermione said.

“And do they give him a place to kip and a bite?” Ron asked.
“No,” Hermione said. “They tell him they have only enough for their own, and that those that worked all summer can play all winter. Then he goes off into the winter snow and freezes to death.”

“Oh,” Ron said, looking sad. “Uh, what’s the other ending?”

“The grasshopper asks to be let in, apologizing for his behavior and saying he’s learned his lesson,” Hermione says. “The ants take pity on him, in part because they always liked his music, and they invite him in for the winter, letting him play his fiddle while they dance away the winter.”

“That was nice of the ants,” Ron said, smiling. “I feel a bit sorry now for the ones I’ve stepped on.”

Hermione gave him a horrified look.

“Only accidentally!” Ron quickly explained. He did add after a moment, though, “In full disclosure, Bill was the one with the magnifying glass and the tendency towards mass ant-icide.”

Hermione sighed and Harry briefly wondered if SPAW, the Society for the Promotion of Ant Welfare, was now in the offing. However, she only continued on.

“In the summer, the grasshopper left the ants, but whether he learned anything at all from his time there or if he shirked his work and hoped to be saved again through the kindness and toil of others is anyone’s guess,” Hermione said. “The end.”

“I’m a grasshopper, aren’t I,” Ron said miserably.

“Possibly,” Hermione said.

“If I try to be a little more Hermione-ant-like, do you think you can manage to maybe put up with us,” Ron asked. “We, um, we really don’t seem to be able to manage without you.”

Hermione sighed again, but she gave him a tired smile.

“I’ll show you a few tricks,” she finally said. “We’ll all take turns with everything, and everyone cleans up their own mess.”

“Unless it’s an accidental buffalo in the dining room,” Harry added wisely. “Then we might need to pull together on that.”

“If an emergency of that caliber arises again, yes, I think co-operation would be in order,” Hermione said, then, with a jerky intake of breath, she started laughing.

“What?” Ron asked.

“How on earth did that ever happen?” she finally got out between breaths of air. “I mean, seriously, how?”

“Apparently it really is ‘leviosa’ and not ‘leviosar.’ Flitwick wasn’t kidding,” Ron admitted, then he started to laugh too, and Harry joined them in another second.

Elsewhere, out on the moor, a police car was stopped in the middle of a country lane, its headlights trained on a gigantic water buffalo that was peacefully wandering along the road, chewing its cud and mooing to itself contentedly.

“Jack, do you see…?” said one officer to the other.

“Gert, that is not a hallucination. I’m calling it in,” said the second.
By the next morning, a remarkably cleaner tent was quickly packed up and transported to a location near Bristol, and the buffalo had been moved to a nearby zoo, where it spent its life quite happily with a few others of its own kind in a nice paddock. Sadly, though, the buffalo’s earlier ravages were not without consequences. Ron had to do without a pillow for a few days because Harry had cadged his when Ron wasn’t looking. Ron decided very wisely not to argue the point.
Hermione tells the story of Aladdin, but in installments (because the original is pretty much a novella).

Yes, I'm actually splitting this into more than one chapter, both because it's what Scheherazade would have done and because, at about a third complete, this is already over 19 pages long. Also, there's a very, very minor crossover with "Shadowed Lives" Chap. 21 here if you squint a bit (though you really don't need to read that at all to get this chapter completely).

Harry was starting to suspect the founders of Hogwarts had purposely wandered through every obscure hamlet and uninhabited valley in Great Britain purely so that centuries later three Gryffindors could drive themselves half-bonkers looking for some obscure belonging that now contained one-seventh of Voldemort's soul. While his experience with Professor Trelawney didn’t make him all that keen on seers in general, somehow it seemed like there was just no possible way that their sheer misery at the endless chase they were on couldn’t have been the result of someone’s idea of a bad joke.

They’d just finished scouring a field outside of a tiny village named St. Somethingorother, Harry could no longer remember the exact name, which had supposedly once belonged to Godric Gryffindor’s maternal grandmother. For a brief moment, they’d all become very excited when Hermione had found what appeared to be a Medieval dagger with gold and red filigree work, hidden under a large rock shaped rather like a lion’s head. Unfortunately, upon closer examination, it had turned out to be a plastic letter opener. They’d also sighed in unison and pretty much on key as it had gotten to be something of a habit.

Ron, who had tolerated a slightly larger portion of Polyjuice than he normally would swallow, volunteered to find something to eat in town while Harry and Hermione went back to the tent, currently concealed via its usual bevy of charms and enchantments in a hay field. Ron was, Harry thought, at least trying to contribute to making dinner since the disastrous buffalo incident, even if he was more inclined to pinch supper than to make it. Harry didn’t particularly care either way as there was a little more peace, not to mention more food. For a whole week, they’d had a minimum of two decent meals every day, and that had to be a record.

"There has to be some sort of end to all of this, doesn’t there?" Hermione said as they crossed the threshold into the tent. Her hair was turning from grey back to brown even as Harry watched, and he could feel his own nose shrinking a bit as he dug in his pocket for his glasses.

"Does there?" Harry asked, surprising even himself with how down-hearted he sounded.

"Dumbledore wouldn’t have left you a task you couldn’t possibly finish," Hermione said, but she
looked uncertain. “I think he probably intended to give you more information about it, though, before he was—”

“Murdered by Snape,” Harry finished for her. “Yeah, I don’t think he saw that one coming, but I do wish he’d been a little more specific beforehand just in case.”

Hermione nodded in agreement and sat down on the couch, removing the now too small shoes from her feet and rubbing her soles. Harry could actually hear her joints cracking. He took off his own trainers, which thankfully were the correct size for both himself and the fellow he’d changed into, and flopped into one of the kitchen chairs.

“I think we might need to give up on Gryffindor for a bit,” Hermione said. “Maybe we should concentrate more on Helga Hufflepuff.”

“The cup, most likely,” Harry said. “Probably in a pub somewhere.”

“That’s not impossible,” Hermione said, but she didn’t sound at all convinced. “I was just trying to think, if I had something very precious that I wanted to hide, where would I put it?”

“Australia,” Ron said immediately as he entered the tent. “That’s what you did.”

Hermione looked pensive as Ron put two paper sacks filled with what turned out to be curry on the kitchen table.

“I suppose I did at that,” Hermione said. “I don’t know, though. I sent Mum and Dad as far away as I could so that they couldn’t be found by anyone. I don’t think You-Know-Who would want bits of his soul that far away.”

“He might,” Ron said, shrugging. “I can’t get into his mind. Maybe they’re in Antarctica or the Himalayas or on the ruddy moon for all we know.”

Harry thought about this as Ron took the cardboard boxes out and lined them up on the table. It really didn’t seem like there was any end to the possibilities. Dumbledore had thought Voldemort might keep the Horcruxes close by, but then he hadn’t been sure, had he? What if they really did need to go somewhere else, somewhere that no one would ever think of?

“Maybe we’re going about this wrong,” Hermione finally said.

“You think?” Ron said, and Harry was glad for the sake of the fragile peace that Hermione wasn’t looking at him at the moment he rolled his eyes.

“We’re doing the looking, but maybe we should make him do it,” Hermione said.

“You mean You-Know-Who?” Ron asked.

“Can’t we just say the stupid name?” Harry said.

“Oh, let it go,” Hermione said. “Yes, that’s what I mean anyway. What if we let him somehow know that someone not only knows about the Horcruxes but is finding and destroying them one by one?”

“Well, the diary, yes, and Dumbledore did the ring,” Harry said. “We’ve got the locket, but he haven’t destroyed it.”

“But he may well not know about that,” Hermione reasoned. “Wouldn’t he possibly be tempted to go check on the other ones to be sure they were still where he left them? Couldn’t we possibly find
out somehow where he might go? Track him?"

“It’s a thought,” Ron said slowly. “It’s a good thought.”

“It is, but there’s a problem,” Harry said. “Once he does find the Horcruxes haven’t been touched, he’ll most likely move them again or put even worse enchantments on them, probably both. We’d need someone on the inside to tell us his movements, too, and we don’t have anyone. Worse, in order to leak what we’re doing, we’d have to expose ourselves, and I’m not sure we’d survive that.”

“Or our families,” Ron said, the brief moment of hope he’d experienced immediately snuffed out.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “It’s a good idea, but I think there’s just too much that could go wrong.”

Hermione looked crestfallen, but said, “You’re probably right.”

“It really was a good idea, ‘Mione,” Ron said consolingly, “and a fresh one. At least we’re still thinking, yeah? So maybe we’ll come up with the answer yet.”

Hermione nodded, taking a bite of butter chicken in consolation.

“Speaking of good, this is excellent, Ron,” she said, and he beamed at her.

Harry noted that she didn’t ask how he’d gotten it or where, and he was glad of it. He’d never had much in the way of curry before. Uncle Vernon hadn’t liked what he called “foreign food,” preferring steak and kidney pie or fish and chips and the like. It was really quite good, Harry thought.

“It’s not bad,” Ron said. “Not sure where it comes from, though. China? Somewhere in the Middle East?”

And Hermione giggled a little.

“What?” Ron asked.

“Oh, it’s just there’s a story with almost exactly the same problem of oddities of place in it,” Hermione said.

“A story, eh?” Ron said, settling in with his chicken tikka masala.

“Yes, well, it’s really a story inside of a story if you want to be technical about it,” Hermione said. “It’s part of the Arabian Nights.”

“What’s that?” Ron asked.

“Oh, a collection of stories told by a girl named Scheherazade,” Hermione said.

“Bless you,” Ron said.

“You did that the last time I mentioned her during the ‘Three Billy Goats Gruff’! That’s her name,” Hermione said.

“Right! The one who told part of a story each night to her husband so he wouldn’t kill her off like all his other wives,” Harry said. “I remember now.

“Yeah, yet another weird Muggle mating ritual,” Ron said, shuddering. “I’m surprised you lot haven’t dwindled out by now. How did that bit go again?”
“His first wife had either tried to kill him or had committed adultery, possibly both depending on the story, so he went rather mad and started marrying girls, then killing them the next morning so that none of them would have time to betray him,” Hermione said.

“It does make a weird, warped kind of sense, I suppose,” Ron said, looking a bit sick.

“If someone has enough power to avoid being prosecuted for serial murder and has absolutely no moral compunction about killing innocent women simply because they’re the same gender as his first wife, I suppose it does,” Hermione said with a grimace. “Eventually Scheherazade, whose father was a high ranking official, asked to be married to him to stop the carnage because of her plan.”

“To string the bloke along with a partial story each night, hoping to keep his attention long enough to keep herself alive until the following night?” Ron said.

“Exactly,” Hermione said, “and it worked, too. She told the stories for a thousand and one nights, then, having had two children by him, she pleaded for her life, and he let her live.”

“That was big of him,” Ron said sarcastically. “And the story you’re thinking of is one of the ones she came up with?”

“Possibly,” Hermione said. “It’s also possible that it’s a French counterfeit that was inserted into the other stories at some point when the rest of them became popular in Europe. It’s very difficult to tell.”

“I’m one hundred percent sure that what I’m eating is not French,” Ron said firmly.

“No,” Hermione said, grinning. “It’s from Glasgow.”

“Come off it!” Ron said, fork partway to his mouth.

“Chicken tikka masala definitely is,” Hermione said. “Sometimes appearances can be deceiving.”

“It sure doesn’t taste like haggis,” Ron said, poking at it suspiciously. “So this story could be French or not?”

“Possibly. It’s never been really proven that it’s an impostor, but there’s a lot of evidence pointing that way, including the fact there aren’t any Arabic versions found that seem to predate the French so-called translation,” Hermione said. “Anyway, Scheherazade started the tale by saying that it took place in a faraway land called China.”

“Wait, China?” Harry said. “I thought this was supposed to be in Arabia?”

“Scheherazade is in what would have been Arabia, yes, but she places the story in China in most of the versions, especially the oldest ones we can find, even though most illustrators and storytellers depict the story happening in a non-specific Middle Eastern country,” Hermione said.

“So, once upon a time, in China, there lived—,” Ron provided hopefully.

Hermione gave him a withering look for stealing her line but said, “There lived a boy named Aladdin, son of Mustafa the tailor.”

“He has a name at least, and he isn’t named after a vegetable or a piece of millinery work or something, so that’s a good start,” Ron said. “This Scheherazade might have been on to something.”

“May I continue?” Hermione said. “It’s rather a long tale.”

“Go on,” Ron said magnanimously as he ate the Scottish chicken tikka masala.
“The problem was Aladdin was a lazy boy who did nothing but play all day with idle companions in the street and refused to learn his father’s trade or any other,” Hermione said. “This grieved his poor father so much that he died.”

“The father literally dropped dead of disappointment because his son wasn’t studious enough?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“Bit delicate, isn’t he?” Ron said.

“I suppose if he’d had an underlying heart condition exacerbated by stress over his son’s hijinks, it’s actually not impossible that Aladdin’s behavior might have been a major contributing factor to his father’s death,” Hermione said, “though still it wouldn’t technically be Aladdin’s fault.”

“I’m glad dad doesn’t have that, or mum either,” Ron said. “Fred and George would have finished them off for certain.”

“I don’t know about that,” Hermione said. “They were both always ambitious and clever even if they didn’t take school seriously, and they’ve turned out very well.”

“I suppose so,” Ron said, and Harry noted a bit of jealousy in his friend’s voice. “Now, Percy, on the other hand—”

“There you may have a point,” Hermione admitted. “Regardless, Mustafa the tailor died, leaving his widow and Aladdin alone in the world, and very poor into the bargain.”

“That’s sad,” Ron said. “Then what?”

“One day, as Aladdin was playing in the streets, a strange man came up to him and asked if Aladdin happened to be the son of Mustafa the tailor, and when he said he was, the man hugged him and wept, crying, ‘I am your long lost uncle, your father’s own brother!’” Hermione said.

“No, he’s not,” Ron said immediately.

“What makes you think so?” Hermione asked.

“It’s too convenient,” Ron said.

“Well, we’ll see whether you’re right or not,” Hermione said, barely suppressing a grin that made Harry suspect Ron was definitely right. “In any case, Aladdin told the man his father had died, and he wept all the harder, then asked to be taken to his brother’s widow.”

“Wait, is Aladdin’s mother, you know, really hot or something?” Ron asked.

“No, actually the stories say she’s quite homely,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said. “Okay, so he’s probably not pining over some old doomed love affair from his school days or something and using her son as a way to maintain contact with his unrequited romance.”

“Honestly, Ronald,” Hermione said, raising an eyebrow. “What an odd thing to say. Who would do that? Anyway, the man who claimed to be Aladdin’s uncle gave him several gold coins and told him to run home and tell his mother what had happened, and that she should go into the market and buy provisions for a great feast of welcome as he was coming to their home that night.”
“Bit bold, isn’t he? Inviting himself over and telling her to cook something special to celebrate his arrival?” Harry said.

“More than you know,” Hermione said. “The mother immediately told Aladdin that his father had not had a brother, but when she saw the gold, she reconsidered and said that there had indeed been a brother, but she had thought he had died long before she married Aladdin’s father.”

“Or she just wants a big dinner,” Ron said.

“Possibly, as they were starving,” Hermione said.

“I can’t really blame her, then,” Ron said. “At this point if some bloke walked up to me on the street claiming to be dad’s long lost brother and he happened to have a sack of fish and chips with him, I’d go along with it at least until the vinegar was gone. So what happened?”

“She went to the bazaar and bought wonderful things, then borrowed pots and bowls and pans from her neighbors and cooked a sumptuous dinner,” Hermione said.

“She had to borrow pots and pans?” Ron said.

“Yes, they were that poor,” Hermione explained.

“Wow,” Ron said, looking glum. “I hope I’m wrong and this bloke’s on the level. They need a break. Poor homely woman with pseudo-Percy as a son and no husband and no pots.”

“Again, we shall see,” Hermione said, but Harry noted the rather sweet smile she gave Ron. “The uncle showed up, dressed in the finest clothes Aladdin and his mother had ever seen, and he knelt to kiss the spot where his brother had once sat, and wept over his brother’s bronze bowl that he said he remembered from his childhood, and offered prayers and beat his breast in sorrow over his passing.”

“Laying it on a bit thick isn’t he?” Harry said. “Kissing the floor?”

“He’s faking it,” Ron said, folding his arms angrily. “She had to borrow the bowls from the neighbors, so he can’t be remembering it from his childhood.”

“Well spotted,” Harry said.

“The mother noticed as well, but she hoped the bowl was so like one her husband had once owned that he could be forgiven for confusing them,” Hermione said.

“Uh-huh,” Ron said. “Grasping a bit, isn’t she.”

“Perhaps. After dinner, the man asked Aladdin what trade he practiced, and the boy hung his head in shame as his mother took her turn at weeping and explained that he was an idle good-for-nothing,” Hermione said.

“Bit harsh, I suppose, but accurate,” Ron said.

“The uncle was deeply disturbed and said he would set Aladdin up in whatever business most took his fancy, get him a shop and new clothes as well as stock, and introduce him to the businessmen of the city,” Hermione said.

Harry and Ron exchanged glances.

“Pull the other one,” Ron said.
“The odd thing is, that’s just what he did,” Hermione said. “He bought a storefront and stocked it with fine goods, gave Aladdin a suit of beautiful clothes, and provided introductions to the merchants of the great city.”

“Right,” Ron said suspiciously. “Then what?”

“About a week later, he took Aladdin for a walk on a warm day, saying he wanted to show him the very finest houses and mansions, which were on the outskirts of the city along the river. They passed many beautiful houses, each finer than the next, and Aladdin was greatly taken with their grandeur. However, eventually, they reached the end of all the buildings, and his uncle began to lead him deeper and deeper into the wilderness,” Hermione said.

“Uh-oh,” Ron said. “This kid is none too bright, is he?”

“Not especially,” Hermione said, “at least, not from what we’ve seen so far. At long last, they came to a barren piece of wasteland, and Aladdin said, ‘Uncle, is it not time we went home?’ and the man struck him so hard across the face that the boy was thrown to the ground.”

“Whoa, that’s bang out of order!” Ron said. “He’s a bit of a prat, but that was a perfectly civil question.”

“The uncle realized at once that he had slipped, for he apologized but said, ‘Mark me well, Aladdin, you must follow all my commands as though I were your own father, and do not question me. Go, get kindling,’” Hermione said.

“He’s not planning on roasting him or something is he?” Ron asked, looking ill again.

“No, not that,” Hermione said. “Aladdin brought back the kindling, and the uncle, who was actually a magician, lit a fire and cast herbs into it while murmuring an incantation, and a large iron ring was revealed in the barren rocky ground, looking like a handle going down into a stone cellar door.”

“Yet another negative example of magic, I’m guessing,” Ron said.

“Yes, though at least for once it’s not a witch,” Hermione said. “The magician told Aladdin to call aloud the names of his father and grandfather, and then to pull the iron ring from the ground. Astounded, Aladdin did so, and when he pulled the ring up, which seemed as though it weighed nothing to him, it opened a great hole in the ground.”

“A subterranean chamber that only someone with the right parentage can open,” Ron said. “That seems rather familiar, doesn’t it? There isn’t a great ruddy snake in there by any chance?”

“No,” Hermione said, her eyes quite wide. “There do seem to be some parallels with the Chamber of Secrets at that, which, if the stories about Slytherin are true, would actually well predate the known versions of the story and suggest it really is authentic! On the other hand, though, it’s not so much Aladdin’s ancestry that opens the door as his lack of it, as you’ll see. It’s certainly still an interesting similarity, though.”

Ron gave a smug grin at Harry and folded his arms behind his head, relaxing against the sofa cushions.

“So, what did the wizard do next?” Harry asked.

“He told Aladdin to go down into the tunnel. He said there were great riches in the rooms beneath, and Aladdin could take all he wanted, but first he must bring him back a lamp that was sitting in the furthest chamber,” Hermione said.
“A lamp? That’s it?” Ron asked.

“That was all,” Hermione said. “Aladdin didn’t want to go, though, and the wizard became quite angry and threatened to beat him until at last Aladdin agreed. The wizard gave him a ring made of iron to keep him safe as he went to get the lamp.”

“The same one from the door in the ground?” Ron asked.

“No, this was the sort you wear on your finger,” Hermione said. “Usually iron is thought to be protection against fairies in some cultures, so perhaps that was being referenced here as well.”

“So he gives him a ring to keep him safe and throws him into the pit?” Ron asked.

“Not quite. He also told him not to touch anything else in the rooms until after he touched the lamp or else he would die,” Hermione said.

“Oh, that’s comforting,” Ron said. “And then he tossed him into the pit?”

“Basically, yes,” Hermione said.

“So what was down there?” Harry asked.

“Aladdin couldn’t believe what he saw, for the cavern was lit from the glowing piles of gold that stood in tall stone jars as far as he could see,” Hermione said. “Then came piles of silver and all sorts of magical objects from all around the world, and finally a great forest filled with trees bearing fruits that Aladdin had never seen before that glowed with their own fire. It was all so eerie and otherworldly, though, that Aladdin heeded the advice of the magician and touched nothing at all.”

“Let me get this straight. There’s gold and silver and magical gadgets all over the place, but all the wizard wants is a lamp?” Ron asked.

“Yes, and when Aladdin found it, all the way in the back of the cave and sitting on a little wooden table, it was actually very battered and ordinary,” Hermione said.

“Something fishy is going on here,” Ron said.

“There’s an underground cave full of amazing stuff,” Harry said. “I’d say something fishy was going on regardless of the lamp.”

“True,” Ron said. “So Aladdin grabs the lamp. Then what?”

“He realized that his supposed uncle must have been telling the truth about it being safe to take things after he had the lamp; otherwise, if it would kill him, Aladdin wouldn’t be able to bring him back what he asked for,” Hermione said.

“Good bit of reasoning,” Ron said. “He’s smarter than I thought.”

“Perhaps so,” Hermione said. “He began to stuff his pockets with some of the fruits from the trees, as well as gold and silver coins, until all of them were as full as they could be. Then he ran back to the steep stairs that led to the world above.”

“The fruits seem like a waste of space, but I suppose he could always come back later for the rest,” Ron said. “How’s the uncle fairing?”

“He was very glad to see that Aladdin had returned, and he told the boy to throw him the lamp and then he would help him climb out of the cave,” Hermione said.
“Uh oh,” Ron said.

“Yes, Aladdin saw a flaw in that logic as well,” Hermione said. “He instead said that if his uncle helped him out of the cave, he would then hand him the lamp.”

“He really isn’t a total idiot,” Harry said.

“Yes, but the uncle might be,” Hermione said. “The two of them argued back and forth until finally the wizard, who was of course no relation to Aladdin at all and was using him solely because he wanted the lamp and he could get it only if it were handed to him by someone to whom he was not related in any way, became so furious that he closed the door of the cavern, leaving Aladdin alone in the dark to rot.”

“Cutting off his nose to spite his face,” Harry said.

“Or cursing off your nose to spite your acne, if you’re Eloise Midgen,” Ron said.

“Poor girl. I do hope Madam Pomfrey figures out how to fix that at some point,” Hermione said. “I mean, she did at least reattach her nose, but it’s still a bit, well…”

“Crooked,” Ron finished. “It lists to the north no matter which way she turns, which is really weird, frankly.”

“Regardless, I still says she’s a very nice girl,” Hermione said firmly.

“I believe you. She’s a Hufflepuff, isn’t she?” Ron said with a shrug. “They’re usually nice. It’s sort of their trademark.”

With a small sting, Harry thought of Cedric Diggory, who really had been a decent sort, what with sharing information and treating him fairly. He realized he didn’t know many Hufflepuffs that well. Between Cedric and Tonks, though, he wondered if he might have been giving them short shrift.

“Anyway, Aladdin is stuck in the dark, buried alive,” Ron said with a shudder. “Now what?”

“For three whole days, nothing at all,” Hermione said.

“Three days underground with no food or water?” Ron asked. “Wouldn’t he be dead?”

“A lot of that would depend on when and what he’d last consumed as well as his constitution and a variety of other factors, but it would certainly be a very dangerous situation,” Hermione agreed.

“Why didn’t he just eat some of the fruit he picked?” Harry asked.

“He tried, but he found that each one was as hard as a stone and not edible at all,” Hermione said.

“That’s rotten luck,” Ron said.

“It was, but then he got quite a piece of good luck. Depending on the version, Aladdin either was ringing his hands in despair or clasping them in prayer, and he accidentally rubbed the iron ring the counterfeit uncle had given him, which was still on his finger,” Hermione said.

“And?” Ron asked.

“And a genie suddenly appeared in front of him,” Hermione said.

“A genie?” Ron asked. “What’s a genie?”
“It’s this sort of immortal spirit that’s connected to an object, and they’re supposed to be quite powerful. Whoever has control of the object, in this case Aladdin, also has control over the genie, and the genie must do whatever that person says,” Hermione said.

“A bit like a house-elf,” Ron said.

“A bit,” Hermione said, “but genies are supposed to be very intimidating looking, very large and sometimes blue or green or other unusual colors, and for some reason illustrators always seem to have them appearing out of clouds of billowing smoke.”

“Yeah, if Dobby were about thirty feet tall, bright blue, and showed up surrounded with eerie mist all the time, he’d probably seem a bit less cuddly,” Ron agreed.

Harry tried to imagine that for a moment and very nearly managed it, but he absolutely couldn’t picture Dobby without his tennis ball eyes or the squeaky voice greeting him with, “Harry Potter sir!” No, even at seventy feet tall, Dobby would still be Dobby.

“So, what did Aladdin do?” Ron asked.

“He asked the genie who he was, and he responded, ‘I am the slave of the ring. I must do anything the master of the ring commands me within my power,’” Hermione said, trying to drop her voice several octaves and succeeding in making herself gag a bit before muttering, “oh, drop it. I’ll use my own.”

“And he wished himself back home, right?” Ron asked.

“Close,” Hermione said. “He wished for the genie to get him out of the cave, which he did, putting him safely outside of it and then disappearing.”

“And then he rubbed the ring again and told the genie to carry him back home since he was nearly dehydrated to death and it was a really long walk, right?” Ron said.

“No, actually he walked home on his own,” Hermione said.

Ron looked at Harry in confusion, and Harry only shrugged.

“I don’t know why he did it that way. Maybe he was just so frightened from seeing the genie at all after being locked in pitch blackness for three days that his mind wasn’t working all that well,” Hermione said.

“Okay, fine, I’ll let the poor Muggle have a pass on that one,” Ron said. “So he went home?”

“Yes, and his poor mother was overjoyed to see him as she had been nearly out of her mind with worry not knowing where he was,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, I bet Mum would be the same way if we just randomly showed up on the Burrow’s doorstep,” Ron said with a wistful sigh. “Did she give him anything to eat?”

“He asked her for something to eat and drink, but she replied sorrowfully that they had no food or money left in the house, and she had been so worried about him that she had spun only a little flax, not enough to trade for food,” Hermione said.

“Rotten luck,” Ron said, looking glum.

“But then Aladdin produced a few coins from his pockets and told his mother to buy whatever she
liked,” Hermione said.

“Oh yeah! I’d forgot about that,” Ron said. “That ought to give them a good dinner.”

“Indeed so, and while the mother asked Aladdin where he had gotten such riches, he told her there was no time to explain and if he did not eat soon, he would perish,” Hermione said.

“Normally I’d say he was over-reacting, but after three days without food or water, I’m guessing that’s probably pretty accurate,” Harry said.

“Most likely so. In fact, I’d assume his mother had already given him some water; otherwise, he probably wouldn’t be able to speak,” Hermione said. “In any case, she went out and bought food enough for both of them, and they ate, then Aladdin slept for a whole night and a day.”

“I’d say the bloke earned it,” Ron said, shuddering. “Buried alive like that in total darkness, he’s lucky he didn’t go out of his head completely.”

Harry silently agreed with him. It did sound like a horrible way to die. At least the Killing Curse gave off a good bit of light with it.

“Yes,” Hermione said, sounding unnerved herself. “That’s rather what being petrified by the Basilisk was like.”

Harry and Ron both looked at her.

“Wait, you were conscious during all of that?” Ron said, his mouth dropping open.

“Conscious isn’t quite the right word,” Hermione said. “I could hear some things, like Madam Pomfrey talking or people coming and going in the hospital wing, but I couldn’t see anything at all, of course. I was quite pleased when you and Harry turned up. I could tell you’d found the bit of paper in my hand, so I knew it wouldn’t be long until you figured it all out.”

Now Harry felt guilty. Neither he nor Ron had gone to the hospital wing at all other than their first glimpse of Hermione after her run-in with the giant snake and again in an effort to thwart Professor McGonagall that led to finding the ripped page.

“It must have been dead boring,” Ron said sympathetically.

“Yes,” Hermione said, but her tone suggested that boredom hadn’t exactly been her highest concern. “Yes, it was at times, I suppose. Well, on with the story. When Aladdin awoke, he told his mother all about his false uncle, the cave full of wonders, the battered lamp, and the genie that had appeared when he rubbed the ring. His mother was shocked, of course, for she had very nearly thrown out the seemingly worthless lamp while her son was sleeping, and now it seemed to her and her son that if that was what the magician had wanted most, then it must be worth more than all the silver and gold put together, though neither could see why.”

“Good point,” Ron said. “If the magician wanted it so badly, it must do something other than, you know, be a lamp.”

“It would seem so. Aladdin recovered over the next several days, and a few weeks later, the coins began to run out. One day, the mother took out the lamp and began to clean it, thinking perhaps it was made of gold or had writing on it or something of the sort to explain its value so they could sell it to buy more food, but no sooner had she begun to rub it than a great cloud of smoke appeared and a genie came forth from the lamp,” Hermione said.
“Seriously?” Ron said. “The same one?”

“No, this one was much larger and looked even more intimidating and frightening,” Hermione said.

“Those things are as common as garden gnomes in this story,” Ron said, shaking his head. “So I take it the magician wanted the lamp to get the genie?”

“Exactly,” Hermione said.

“So to get a genie, he gave Aladdin a ring with a genie, so he could get the lamp with another genie,” Ron said. “What was he, a collector or something?”

“It is odd,” Hermione admitted. “The story doesn’t say that the magician realized that the ring actually had its own genie, though.”

“But he never figured that out the whole time he had it? Didn’t he ever rub his hands even accidentally or something?” Ron said.

“Maybe he wasn’t in the habit of wearing it,” Hermione said. “And really, do you go around randomly rubbing all your belongings just to see if they have a genie in them?”

“I might now,” Ron said. “That umbrella over there looks a bit enchanted now that I think of it.”

“It does sound a little like a Portkey, doesn’t it?” Harry said. “An ordinary object with unusual power?”

“Oh, yeah,” Ron said, instantly gloomy again. “Damn things just won’t leave us alone. For all we know, that umbrella really does have old You-Know-Who’s soul stuck in between its ribs.”

“I rather doubt it,” Hermione said. “It’s like Dumbledore said. He wouldn’t have used ordinary objects. It would have been far wiser, of course, as they wouldn’t call attention to themselves, but it isn’t in line with his level of vanity.”

“It’d be weird if we found part of his soul tucked into the Muggle crown jewels or the Minister of Magic’s orb of office or something loads of people walk past every day,” Ron said.

“It would be, though he’d never use the crown jewels since they’re Muggle, of course,” Hermione said.

“No,” Ron said, “they’re not.”

“What?” Hermione asked, shocked.

“No, they’re goblin-made, well, some of the bits are anyway,” Ron said. “For centuries there were presents given to the royals from the wizarding world and vice versa, and quite a lot of them ended up in the collection of crown jewels.”

“Really?” Hermione and Harry said in tandem, both stunned.

“Oh, yeah,” Ron said. “This was before the Statue of Secrecy, obviously. Then Oliver Cromwell came in and melted down a bunch of pieces and sold off jewels and things, which made the goblins absolutely furious, of course, and didn’t exactly endear old Ollie to the wizarding world either.”

“But… were they enchanted at all?” Hermione asked.

“A few pieces. One of the crowns was supposed to make the wearer able to speak the language of
anyone in the room with him, and I think a couple of the christening things were supposed to give protection against the plague or summat,” Ron said.

“That’s… that’s incredible,” Hermione said breathlessly. “How did I never know about this?”

“We don’t talk about it much after what happened with the state crown of Mary of Modena,” Ron said, looking a bit embarrassed. “See, the Minister of Magic decided to try to reconnect with the royals after Cromwell died, so he commissioned the goblins to make a spectacular crown for her coronation.”

“So what happened?” Harry asked.

“Well, the Minister of Magic might have forgiven the destruction of the gifts, but the goblins hadn’t. They made a crown all right, a jolly pretty one at that, full of diamonds and pearls and the like that were supposed to be enchanted with a charm to make the queen extra smart,” Ron said.

“That sounds rather like Ravenclaw’s diadem,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, same general idea,” Ron said. “But they didn’t actually follow through on it. Not only weren’t the gems enchanted, they weren’t even real. Right smack in the middle of the coronation, all of them vanished as sort of a massive insult from the goblins to the royals, and the royals blamed the Minister of Magic, though he claimed not to have known about it. Most likely he really didn’t. To save face, the public were told that the gems in the crown had only been hired and had to be returned after the ceremony, though everyone who saw them disappear knew better.”

“I imagine that would have been massively embarrassing,” Hermione said.

“It might have been worse than that,” Ron said. “The royals were furious, of course, but then it turned out that Mary of Modena had twelve pregnancies, and only one of her children lived past age ten. They came to the conclusion that the crown was cursed, though the goblins denied it.”

“And were they telling the truth?” Harry asked.

“Who knows?” Ron said. “But it helped get the Statute of Secrecy passed, I can tell you that.”

“Maybe we really do need to look at the Tower of London, then,” Hermione mused. “It’s the sort of thing You-Know-Who would probably think was a good example of magical superiority or some such rot.”

“I’d be up for London again,” Ron said, then looked at Harry.

“I don’t see why not as we’ve tried stranger places,” Harry said. “But the second genie?”

“Oh, I’d nearly forgot!” Hermione said, slapping her forehead. “Yes, the second genie appeared when the mother rubbed the lamp, and she went into a dead faint when she saw him. The genie saw Aladdin, however, and asked, ‘How may I serve you, O Master?’”

“Wait, I thought you said the mother rubbed the lamp?” Ron said.

“I did,” Hermione said.

“Then why isn’t she the master of the genie instead of Aladdin?” Ron asked.

“Oh, take a wild guess,” Hermione said. “I’ll give you a hint. It involves millennia of patriarchy and the negating of women’s right to own property, often including themselves into the bargain.”
“Ah,” Ron said. “I thought it might be because she was out cold on the floor.”

“Well, there is that aspect as well, I suppose,” Hermione said. “Aladdin looked at the genie and asked him to bring them something to eat.”

“As requests go, that’s a pretty decent one,” Ron said. “I’m starting to wish we had one of those around here. So what’d the genie bring them? Sandwiches?”

“Actually, the genie produced twenty servants each carrying an enormous solid gold platter filled with food: bread, fruit, meat, cheese, all of it delicious,” Hermione said.

“The bloke doesn’t do things by half, does he?” Ron said. “Twenty gold platters full of food?”

“Yes, it’s a little excessive. When Aladdin’s mother awoke from her fit, they ate as much as they liked and stored the rest, and none of it went bad either,” Hermione said. “Then they hid the golden platters, and when at last the food ran out, Aladdin would take one platter to sell in the market and use the money to keep them well fed for a long time.”

“They got to keep the platters?” Ron asked.

“Yes, why wouldn’t they?” Hermione asked.

“Well, if I go into the Leaky Cauldron or Madam Puttifoot’s or something and order some food, I don’t go home with the dishes it’s served on, now do I?” Ron said. “Didn’t they belong to the genie?”

“As far as I can tell, nothing really belongs to the genie. Whatever Aladdin asks for, he gets,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but it’s got to come from somewhere, doesn’t it?” Ron said. “You can’t just conjure gold, or food for that matter.”

“True, but Muggles don’t know that,” Hermione said.

“Okay, I’ll give them a pass on not understanding the principles of what can and can’t be created with magic, but I hope Aladdin at least said please and thank you to the genie,” Ron said.

“I’m afraid he didn’t,” Hermione said.

“I’m not entirely sure I like this kid,” Ron said, frowning.

“He is rather a trickster character,” Hermione said.

“A what?” Ron asked.

“A character with somewhat dubious moral tendencies who gets what he, or occasionally she, wants by tricking other characters,” Hermione said. “Usually they’re also very clever and have a sharp, possibly scary sense of humor.”

“Eh, a bit, but not exactly then,” Ron said. “Aladdin still hasn’t proved he’s all that clever yet, and I’m not seeing too much of a sense of humor.”

“Yet,” Hermione said. “This is a very long story, after all.”

“Yeah, I’m thinking we may have to call it a night ourselves pretty quick,” Harry said, glancing at his watch from Mrs. Weasley. “It’s half past midnight.”
“Oh, is it?!” Hermione said. “I guess I’ll just need to tell you the rest of the story tomorrow night, then.”

“Yeah, guess we’ll keep you alive until then,” Ron said, winking at Harry, “but it better be a good one, right?”

“Your wish is my command, O master,” Hermione said in the fakest genie-voice she could muster, then hit Ron over the head with a cushion, “and that’s the only time you’ll ever catch me saying that!”

Harry chuckled to himself as he and Ron both bedded down for the night while Hermione took up her usual station behind her curtained alcove. The king in the story might have been a homicidal maniac, but Scheherazade had a point about spreading her stories over a few nights to keep herself alive. He really did find himself looking forward to the next night’s tale, and judging by the fact Ron was smiling in his sleep (and drooling), Harry guessed he wasn’t the only one.
Fic: Alad(insane!)din: Night 2

Chapter Summary

Hermione continues the story of Aladdin and his wonderful lamp... and his ring because everyone always seems to forget that.

Chapter Notes

For notes, please see chapter one.

Alad(insane!)din: Night 2

The next morning, Harry, Ron, and Hermione moved their camp closer towards London, but not all the way there. Remembering their inexplicable run-in with Death Eaters right after Bill and Fleur’s wedding, all of them, even Ron, were inclined to caution. Instead, they spent the night about an hour’s journey by car outside of London along the Thames. It was cold, but the feeling of having some sort of plan, this as it might be, gave them a renewed sense of purpose. Even the Horcrux glowed less intensely, as though it was keeping its opinions to itself.

“Okay, we’ve put up loads of defensive charms, checked the city maps, gotten supplies from a shop, and so far nothing off has happened,” Ron said. “Can we have the next bit of the story?”

“I suppose so,” Hermione said, looking at the scarce remains of the sandwiches they’d had for dinner. “Let’s see, when we last left off, Aladdin had ordered the genie to bring food, which he’d done.”

“Yeah, on golden platters no less,” Ron said. “Then he was going to sell them for more money, though you’d think people would wonder where this poor kid was grabbing all this expensive stuff. Oh, and we discussed trickster characters and how Aladdin both is and is not one.”

Harry nodded, rather impressed at his friend’s recall, and a glance at Hermione showed she felt the same way.

“Well done,” she said, and Ron beamed. “So Aladdin did indeed sell the gold platters, one by one, but he had no idea of their true worth, and he sold them to the first dealer he found, who was not an honest man at all and gave him only one coin for each of them when in truth they were worth several hundred.”

“Oh, now that is rotten,” Ron said, visibly upset. “Cheating the poor kid like that just because he didn’t know any better.”

“It was,” Hermione agreed, “but one day Aladdin met a different buyer first and offered him one of the platters, and when the man realized that Aladdin had been cheated, he offered him a fair price. Then he introduced him to some of the others who worked in buying and selling precious metals and gems, and he learned a great deal from them and began to take life a bit more seriously.”
“I suppose that’s a good thing,” Ron said, sounding rather unsure.

“Then one day he did something truly stupid,” Hermione said.

“Oh, good!” Ron said, perking up.

“How is that good?” Hermione asked.

“It makes for a better story,” Ron said. “If he went about doing serious and responsible things all the time, it wouldn’t be much fun to listen to.”

Hermione seemed to consider this for a moment, then shrugged and said, “I suppose it wouldn’t at that.”

“So what did Aladdin do?” Ron asked.

“The palace guards came through the city, telling all the people to clear the streets and close their windows for the princess was going to take a bath,” Hermione said.

Ron looked at Harry.

“Just how bad did this girl stink if they had to clear the roads for her?” Ron asked.

“She didn’t stink!” Hermione said, then seemed to reconsider. “To be fair, probably most Muggles during the time period didn’t bathe terribly often, so by modern standards the whole city might be a bit, well, unpleasantly fragrant. But that’s not why they’re clearing the streets.”

“If you say so, but if they’re making this big a deal about the girl taking a bath, it doesn’t seem like it’s a frequent occurrence,” Ron said.

“Well, probably no,” Hermione admitted. “The idea was that the princess was not meant to be seen by ordinary people.”

“So why’s she taking a bath starkers in the middle of the road for?” Ron said.

“She’s not!” Hermione said, and Harry was concerned steam might come from her ears even without Pepper-Up Potion. “She going from the royal palace to the city’s bath house! They just don’t want anyone to catch a glimpse of her, even fully clothed, as she goes from home to the baths and back again.”

“Why doesn’t the palace have a bathtub?” Ron said. “What kind of rinky-dink pseudo-Chinese semi-Middle Eastern capital city is this if the king doesn’t even own a lousy bathtub?”

“Plumbing was different back then,” Hermione said. “Also, he’s not a king. He’s a sultan.”

“Right, because the Chinese were known for having loads of sultans,” Ron said. “They really are deeply confused, the people in this story.”

“Oh, just let it go, Ron,” Harry said. “It’s not Hermione’s fault that whoever wrote the story didn’t understand the finer points of ancient plumbing and what Chinese people called their rulers.”

“I suppose,” Ron said. “So the princess is going to take her once-a-decade bath, which really should take a while I would think. What’s that got to do with Aladdin?”

“He decided he wanted to see what the princess looked like, so he hid in the bath house and peeked through a hole in the door,” Hermione said.
“Oh, for… he’s a peeping Tom!” Ron said, appalled.

“Pretty close. Some versions of the story stipulate that he only saw her fully clothed, though, before she went into another chamber to bathe, but she’d definitely taken off her veil so that her face was visible,” Hermione said.

“Uh huh,” Ron said. “Somehow I’m not buying that.”

“Honestly, I’m probably not either,” Hermione said. “The original versions of some of the Arabian Nights were pretty, well, intense.”

“So, was she pretty without her, um, veil?” Ron asked.

“Dazzlingly beautiful, and Aladdin was completely thunderstruck as he’d never seen an unveiled woman before except his mother, and she was very plain,” Hermione said.

“Wait, he’d never seen a woman’s face before aside from his mum’s?” Ron asked.

“In that country, wherever this is supposed to be, women only went about with veils over their faces, which is actually a fairly important point later in the story,” Hermione said. “It’s supposed to be a way of preserving their modesty.”

“Did the men wear veils over their faces too?” Ron asked.

“No. Remember that the magician said that Aladdin looked just like his father when he met him?” Hermione said.

“Okay, so why are the women walking around in veils all the time but not the men? Doesn’t their modesty need protecting?” Ron asked.

What followed was a highly confusing half hour during which Hermione went into the concept of the male gaze, Eastern and Western double standards in female dress versus male dress, a diatribe on modern fashion in all corners of the worlds and its bizarre demands on the female form, and (about here Harry had mentally checked out so completely that he wasn’t entirely sure he was getting this part at all) the history of women’s hats. Finally, Hermione stopped, and Harry woke up enough from his stupor to check whether Ron was still conscious.

“Right!” Ron said abruptly, as though he’d just missed his cue. “Uh, dowries are bad!”

Hermione stared at him.

“Dowries are good?” he tried again.

“I wasn’t even discussing… oh, never mind. The long and short of it is Aladdin saw Princess Badroulboudour without her veil and fell madly in love with her, and I mean that nearly literally.”

“The princess what?!” Ron said.

“Her name is Badroulboudour,” Hermione repeated. “In Arabic it means ‘full moon of full moons.’”

“So the Chinese people speak Arabic,” Harry said.

“Yes, the Chinese people speak Arabic,” Hermione said with a long suffering sigh.

“Full moon, huh? Kind of fitting for a girl he met in a bath house,” Ron said.
Harry immediately burst out laughing while Hermione rolled her eyes and put her head in her hands.

“Oh, come on, I had to say something or Fred and George would have disowned me when I got back,” Ron said. “It was too easy.”

“Yes, so after the poor girl had been leered at against her will by a crude boy who was actually committing a crime,” Hermione said, which rather shut up Ron and Harry, “Aladdin went back to his mother, acting very much like he was ill.”

“Serves him right, I suppose,” Ron said. “What’s he got?”

“According to his mother, insanity,” Hermione said. “He told her what he had done, and she quaked in fear that at any moment the door would burst in and they would both be put to the sword or worse for the insult to the sultan’s daughter.”

“Wait, why would they kill the mother?” Ron asked. “What did she do?”

Hermione just looked at him.


Hermione nodded, then said, “And to add insult to injury, he told his mother that he wanted to marry the princess, and if she didn’t go to the sultan and beg him for his daughter’s hand in marriage to her son, he would die of grief.”

“Bit melodramatic, isn’t he?” Harry said. “He’s seen one girl once for about ten seconds and he’s ready to die over her?”

“Apparently,” Hermione said.

“Why’s he sending his mum to ask the king, er, emperor, no, wait, the sultan about the princess?” Ron said.

“That’s the way these things were handled, and still are in some places. The mother is the one who puts forward her son’s proposal of marriage to the prospective bride’s father,” Hermione said.

“Blimey, that wouldn’t have ended well for Bill with Mum talking to Mr. Delacour about Fleur,” Ron said, shuddering. “She probably would have gone behind his back to talk to Ted Tonks instead.”

“Possibly,” Hermione said, and Harry noticed a rather unpleasant glint in her eye.

Harry could never quite understand why she and Ginny hated Fleur so much. It must be one of those girl things. Rather like why Cho hated Hermione. Actually, aside from Lavender and Parvati, he wasn’t sure he could think of any two girls who were fast friends at Hogwarts. Even Luna and Hermione seemed at odds most of the time.

“So Aladdin asks his mum to go to the sultan to ask about marrying Princess Bad Droopy Drawers?” Ron said, immediately breaking the tension.

“Princess… Bad… Droopy… Drawers,” Hermione said, enunciating each syllable as though it was her last link to sanity.

“Or whatever her name was. That one’s harder than Turniphead’s was,” Ron said. “Back me up on this, Harry.”
“It’s definitely the hardest one so far,” Harry said, wishing he could stay far out of the line of fire here.

Hermione sighed again, but went on.

“The mother refused to go to the sultan unless she brought a fitting gift with her, and Aladdin brought out the fruits he had picked in the underground chamber where the lamp had been,” Hermione said.

“That was weeks, maybe months ago, wasn’t it?” Ron said. “What would the sultan want with a pile of rotten fruit?”

“It turned out it wasn’t fruit at all,” Hermione said. “From his time speaking with the jewelers and goldsmiths and other craftsmen who worked in fine and expensive things, he’d come to realize they were actually gems.”

“Gems?” Ron asked. “Growing on trees?”

“Magic trees,” Hermione pointed out, then added, “magic trees that don’t follow any of the actual rules of magic, of course, but yes, they were gigantic rubies and sapphires and diamonds and emeralds and pearls and topazes, all of them the size of oranges, and all of them of the highest possible quality.”

“No wonder he couldn’t eat them when he was stuck down there three days,” Harry said.

“Pearls aren’t gemstones,” Ron said.

“What?” Hermione said.

“Pearls. They’re not actually gemstones. Not actually stones at all, really. They’re just a bit of dust that gets stuck in some bivalve’s craw and gets covered in nacre, so basically, they’re big lumps of hardened clam spit,” Ron said.

Harry stared at him.

“Okay, the science on that is a bit off, and technically pearls actually are classified as gemstones, though you’re right that they aren’t really stones, but I’ve never heard pearls referred to as ‘lumps of hardened clam spit’ before,” Hermione said, giving Ron a very curious look. “Where on earth did you find that out?”

“A book,” Ron said, looking immensely pleased with himself. “When we were trying to help Harry breathe underwater, there was one book that went into pearls and their uses in potions. Nothing to help the situation, but it sort of stuck with me.”

Hermione looked impressed, and Harry had to hand it Ron. This time, he’d managed to keep his foot completely out of his mouth and had referenced reading and researching and retained the information. Aside from declaring his undying love, it was probably the next best thing at getting Hermione genuinely interested.

“Okay, so what does Al’s mum do with the small fortune in gigantic precious stones or hardened clam spit?” Ron asked.

“It still took quite a bit of convincing, and eventually Aladdin threatened to kill himself if his mother didn’t go to the palace and win him the princess,” Hermione said.
“Over a girl he saw stepping into the bath once and never even talked to?” Ron said. “That’s outright mad.”

“I tend to agree, but it worked and his mother went to the sultan, even though she was terrified,” Hermione said.

“Why terrified?” Ron asked.

“She was afraid he might kill her for being presumptuous and suggesting his daughter marry a common boy from the streets,” Hermione said.

“Okay, I can see that,” Ron said. “But she did go to the palace?”

“Yes, with the jewels in a basket that was covered in an old rag so that she wouldn’t be set upon in the streets,” Hermione said.

“Smart,” Harry said.

“Yes, but she didn’t take the cloth off when she went to the sultan’s general audience, so no one knew what she had,” Hermione said.

“What’s a general audience?” Ron asked.

“Oh, each day for one hour any citizen of the city, rich or poor, high or low, could go to the palace and request the sultan’s judgement on a problem or question,” Hermione said.

“That seems pretty fair,” Harry said. “At least he tried to be fair.”

“He did, but so many people showed up at each one that he never got through more than a handful, and dozens were turned away,” Hermione said. “Aladdin’s mother was one of them. Each day for weeks she came home again, carrying the gems and not having been able to speak to the sultan.”

“Poor thing,” Ron said, looking sympathetic. “She’s probably getting passed over because she looks poor.”

“That’s precisely what it was,” Hermione said, “but eventually the sultan asked his vizier about the old, tattered woman he’d seen attending so many of the audiences, and the vizier said he knew nothing about her but would bring her forward if it would please his highness.”

“So the sultan at least kept his eyes open,” Harry said. “I feel a little optimistic that the poor woman isn’t going to wind up dead at any rate.”

“Aladdin’s mother hoped the same thing when she was brought before the sultan’s throne. She prostrated herself before him on the floor, and said, ‘O great sultan, I am only a poor widow. I beg of you a boon.’ ‘And what is that, good woman?’ ‘That no matter what I may ask you, that you will not kill me,’” Hermione said.

“Gets to the point, doesn’t she?” Ron said.

“Yes, but it worked. He agreed not to kill her, even swearing to it, and she said, ‘I have but one son, and he is all my joy, but he languishes for love of your daughter. He begs her hand in marriage from you, and he sends this poor gift as a small token of his great passion for her,’” Hermione said. “Then she took the cover off the basket.”

“She got the theatre of it down right,” Ron said.
“It certainly seemed that way. The people in the room had responded to her by laughing at first, but when the jewels were revealed, each of them glowing with inner fire, those who had mocked her were struck silent, and the sultan’s eyes grew large when he saw them,” Hermione said.

“How big are these diamonds and things?” Ron asked.

“Oh, maybe the size of a Bludger each,” Hermione said.

“Okay, that’s pretty impressive, but he’s not going to just sell his daughter to some kid he’s never even seen, is he?” Ron asked.

“Not exactly,” Hermione said. “The sultan asked the woman to rise and said that he would consider her son’s suit, but he required a greater gift for his daughter, which greatly upset the vizier, for his own son was already betrothed to Princess Badroulboudour.”

“Wait, she’s already engaged?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“Well, that should end that, shouldn’t it?” Ron asked, looking confused.

“One would think, and the vizier was silently furious, but the sultan realized that if the boy had jewels like this, perhaps a better match could be made,” she said.

“But… shouldn’t someone ask Droopy Drawers?” Ron said.

“Badroulboudour, and no, she probably had no say in her impending marriage to the vizier’s son or to Aladdin,” Hermione said. “The sultan would get to decide who she married.”

Ron shook his head in disgust, then said, “I don’t think I like patriarchy very much.”

Harry scored yet another mark in Ron’s column as Hermione smiled at Ron.

“I quite agree,” she said. “The sultan, however, had not entirely forgotten the vizier. He called the man aside and said that he would allow the vizier’s son three months to come up with a gift equal to the one of Aladdin’s mother. Then he turned to the woman and told her that he accepted her proposal but that he needed three months to put together various presents and furniture for his daughter’s dowry.”

“So he lied to her,” Ron said.

“Pretty much, yes,” Hermione said.

“And he took the diamonds and stuff,” Ron said.

“Yes.”

“What a prat,” Ron said.

“Yes,” Hermione agreed. “Aladdin’s mother, however, did not suspect she had been tricked and went home to tell her son of his remarkable good fortune.”

“Did anyone bother to tell the princess any of this?” Harry asked.

“Probably not,” Hermione said. “Aladdin was rapturously happy for two months, but one morning he awoke to great rejoicing in the city. When he asked people why they were hanging garlands of
flowers and preparing rich meals, they responded that today was the wedding day of the princess to the vizier’s son.”

“So he managed to come up with a whole basket of Bludger-sized jewels in only two months?” Ron asked.

“The story doesn’t actually say that. It’s implied that the sultan was hoping that everyone would just forget about the insignificant boy who had dared ask for the princess’s hand,” Hermione said.

“Nice,” Ron said. “So what’s Aladdin do?”

“He was beside himself with sorrow over the betrayal and wept most of the day, though his mother silently thought this might all be for the best, but then he remembered the genie,” Hermione said.

“Which one?” Harry asked.

“The one of the ring,” Hermione said.

“Okay, so what did he ask for this time?” Harry asked.

“When the genie appeared, Aladdin asked him if the princess and the vizier had yet, um, well, completed the formalities of the marriage,” Hermione said, blushing.

Ron looked confused.

“The what?” Ron said. “Like, had they signed a contract or something?”

“No, no, that was already done, the ceremony was over,” Hermione said a little quickly.

“Then what was he… ooooh,” Ron said, the light dawning. “Right. So had they?”

“The genie said they had not, but it was only a matter of minutes,” Hermione said.

“Am I the only one who finds it incredibly disturbing that the genie is able to just know that?” Harry said, looking a bit ill.

“No, you’re not,” Ron said. “That’s the second Peeping Tom in this story. This poor girl’s got no privacy at all.”

“No, she really doesn’t,” Hermione said, “and it’s about to get worse.”

“Do I even want to know what Aladdin asks the genie to do?” Ron said.

“He told them to pick up the bridal bed with the newly married couple still in it and put it in his own bedroom,” Hermione said.

“Nope, turns out I didn’t want to know,” Ron said. “This is just plain weird. So what does he do when Mr. and Mrs. Vizier arrive despite being highly busy with other business at the time apparently?”

“They were both rather stunned at having a giant genie break into their room then pick up the bed and carry it through the air in the darkness, then set it down in an unknown, poor house, so they were terrified,” Hermione said.

“That really would be horrible,” Harry said, “especially if they didn’t know anything at all about magic.”
“Summoning Charm,” Ron suddenly said. “It’s like when Harry summoned his broom during the first task in the Triwizard tournament. Same general idea anyway.”

“I suppose so,” Hermione said. “I guess if someone had been sitting on your broomstick at the time, he or she would probably have been pulled along as well.”

Harry did his level best at trying to keep Ron from making any crack regarding sitting on a broomstick and what the couple had most likely been up to, but he had a feeling that this one was going to be a lost cause.

“Heh, broomstick,” Ron said with a laugh that was nearly as bad as anything else he could have said, and Hermione put her face in her hands.

“Yes, do let’s go back to age twelve,” she mumbled.

“Um, okay, so, what then?” Harry said, trying to get the story back on track.

“When they arrived, Aladdin told the genie to take the bridegroom to the woodshed behind the house and lock him in with the rats,” Hermione said. “Aladdin left the princess in the bed and climbed in beside her and went to sleep.”

Harry and Ron exchanged looks.

“Went to sleep?” Ron asked.

“That’s what the story says,” Hermione said.

“Nothing else?” Ron asked.

“There are obvious implications that can be drawn, but the story itself says he went to sleep,” Hermione said.

“Good, because otherwise Aladdin would really need to be brought up on charges for that,” Ron said. “Well, actually, he should already be accused of two counts of kidnap, but you know what I mean.”

“I do indeed, and I heartily agree,” Hermione said. “The next morning, just before dawn, Aladdin called up the genie again and told him to take the bridegroom from the woodshed, put him back in bed with the princess, and deliver the bed back to the bridal chamber without anyone else being the wiser.”

“And what did the sultan say when they told him what happened?” Harry asked.

“They didn’t say anything at all,” Hermione explained. “They were both in too much shock.”

“I can’t say I blame them,” Harry said.

“Yes, but the sultan did,” Hermione said. “The rest of the wedding guests were perplexed about why the couple looked so horrified and wouldn’t speak, and the sultan found it insulting, but he decided to be patient and wait to see what the next day would bring.”

“And what did it?” Ron asked.

“Aladdin did the exact same thing that night, with identical results, and sent the couple back the next morning even more terrified,” Hermione said.
“I’m really not getting what his plan is here other than maybe killing them both with sheer terror,” Harry said.

“I’m not sure he really had a plan at this point, but when the sultan saw that the couple were still in the same state or worse, he told the princess’s mother to speak with her,” Hermione said.

“I’m guessing there have probably been quite a number of those horrified mother-daughter conversations the morning after a wedding back in the day,” Ron said.

“Most likely there were, but not in this case. The sultana tried to get her to speak, but she simply wouldn’t open her mouth and looked about her with wide, terrified eyes,” Hermione said.

Harry couldn’t help feeling sorry for the poor girl, but Ron was looking confused.

“Sultana? There’s a talking raisin in this now?” Ron asked.

“What? No! No, a sultana is the name for the wife of a sultan. I’m fairly sure the raisins were named after them, not the other way around,” Hermione said.

“Oh, good,” Ron said. “This story is weird enough without anthropomorphic dried fruit.”

Hermione looked at him for a long minute as though she were trying to figure out if he were in earnest or not, that took a breath and continued on.

“The sultana,” Hermione said, pausing after the word as though now even she found it odd, “returned to her husband to report that the princess was still unable to speak, and he said he would give the couple one more night, then if neither of them would explain their behavior, he would kill them.”

“Nice guy,” Ron said. “Wild guess? The genie kidnaps them again?”

“Yes, and everything went just as it had the previous two nights. After they were returned in the morning, the sultan came crashing into the bridal chamber and demanded that one of them tell him what was going on or they would be executed,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, that’ll put them right at ease,” Ron said.

“Finally, the princess spoke to her father alone, for they were quite close in affection,” Hermione said.

“Except for the whole threatening to kill her part,” Ron said.

“Yes, well, I suppose every relationship has its ups and downs,” Hermione said, though it sounded very sarcastic. “At last she told him of the awful demon who stole the bed each night and took away the bridegroom and the strange man who would get in her bed, though she could not describe him as it was always so dark. The sultan thought this sounded like madness.”

“I can see that,” Harry said.

“Yeah, but he won’t kill Droopy Drawers for that, will he?” Ron asked, looked concerned.

“No, but he decided to test her strange story by having the vizier question his own son about what happened. The groom did indeed give an identical account to that of the princess, except he explained he was kept in a horrible prison filled with rats each night as well,” Hermione said.

“As plans go, this one wasn’t lousy,” Ron said. “Well, unless they’d both come up with the story
ahead of time, but still, the sultan does seem to have a few working brain cells here.”

“Yes, and he came to the conclusion that a demon had cursed the marriage, possibly because he had
gone back on his word to the mother who had brought the jewels to his palace. Being the sultan, and
with the full approval of the vizier’s son and his own daughter, he had the marriage annulled on
grounds on non-consummation, and the wedding feast came to an abrupt end,” Hermione said.

“Abrupt end?” Ron asked. “Wouldn’t it have been going on four days by that point?”

“Yes, but a royal wedding could be celebrated for weeks,” Hermione explained.

“Blimey. Mum would have had kittens if Bill and Fleur’s wedding went on that long. She barely
made it through that mess as it was,” he said. “Where would everyone have slept? The bill for the
food would have been more than Dad makes in a couple years!”

“It was a way of showing off how wealthy the sultan was, to be sure,” Hermione said, “and that was
the usual thing back then, but it must have been extremely expensive.”

“Especially since it didn’t work,” Harry said.

“No, it didn’t,” Hermione said, “but the sultan didn’t have to wait very long for another opportunity
for a wedding. Aladdin waited until the full original months were up, then sent his mother back to the
court of the Sultan to collect on his promise.”

“Something tells me it’s not going to be that simple,” Ron said.

“Of course not. Nothing is easy in this story,” Hermione said. “The sultan saw her and, remembering
his promise and the possible consequences that his visited his daughter’s nuptials when he went back
on his word, he decided to try to find a way to undo the damage.”

“Why does this sound suspiciously like he’s going to tell her do something impossible?” Harry
asked.

“Because you’ve figured out the sultan’s character,” Hermione said. “The sultan decreed, ‘O worthy
woman, I cannot allow my daughter to be taken away from me and forced to live in poverty in an
unequal marriage. Therefore, let your son prove his love for her by a gift to me of forty golden basins
full of the same sort of jewels you have already given, carried by eighty slaves, all dressed
handsomely, and when he has done this by tomorrow’s audience, then I shall consider his suit.”

“He wanted what?” Ron asked, sounding horrified.

“Eighty slaves carrying forty gold basins filled with gigantic jewels just to consider the situation,”
Hermione said.

“He’d asking for people?” Ron asked. “That’s just sick!”

“Again, long ago, it wouldn’t have been unheard of, but yes, it’s very disturbing,” Hermione said.
“Granted, he didn’t think Aladdin would be able to do it.”

“But he could,” Harry said. “With the genie, that’s possible, right?”

“As it turned out, yes,” Hermione said. “The mother went home, hoping her silly son would see
reason now, but he merely sent her out to buy provisions for dinner, and no sooner was she gone
than he rubbed the lamp and that genie appeared.”
“So the lamp genie is for really ridiculously hard stuff, like making gems appear out of nowhere, while the ring genie just kidnaps people and moves them around?” Ron asked.

“That seems a fair assessment,” Hermione said. “The ring genie got him out of the cave and transported the princess and the vizier’s son back and forth, but the lamp genie provided all the food that never spoiled and the golden plates. And yes, he does provide the eighty slaves, forty golden basins, and all the jewels as well.”

“So when ol’ Mum comes back from the market?” Ron said.

“Yes, there were eighty more people in the house, and she was stunned, still not realizing just how Aladdin was managing this in spite of having seen one of the genies before,” Hermione said. “The next morning, when it came time for an audience with the sultan, she returned with the whole group of them, who bowed low before the sultan and extended the golden basins in offering before him.”

“Bet he liked that,” Ron said unpleasantly.

“He did indeed as the jewels were the finest he had ever beheld and the slaves dressed so richly and with such handsome faces they might all have been kings,” Hermione said. “So, with the vizier’s blessing, he urged the woman to bring her son forth that he might embrace his new son-in-law and heir to the throne.”

“Didn’t he care at all what the fellow was like? Whether he knew how to rule or what kind of person he was?” Ron asked.

“He assumed, as a great many people do, that if someone has money, he or she is obviously intelligent and trustworthy,” Hermione said, “which is of course just this side of lunacy. By that logic, the Malfoys would be the smartest and kindest people in Britain and Lucius would make a wonderful Minister of Magic.”

Harry and Ron both shivered simultaneously as it was precisely the sort of thing Voldemort would do if he could, though Lucius would only be his puppet.

“Right, so the mother ran home to tell Aladdin the good news,” Hermione said, sounding like she wanted to move on from that image. “Aladdin was thrilled, and as soon as she left the house, he called on the genie of the lamp to prepare him to meet his father-in-law-to-be. When the genie appeared, it asked, ‘O master, what would you have me do?’ and he responded, ‘I want a bath.’”

Ron snorted. “A bath? Seriously, that’s the best he can come up with?”

“Well, it’s where he started. By the time he was through, Aladdin had the best bath of his life, the most splendid suit of clothes ever worn, and a stunning horse to ride, along with a line of yet more slaves, plus female slaves to wait on his mother, who would be carried to the palace in a sedan chair and given many dresses of fine material as well. He also requested 10,000 gold coins split between ten bags, and he ordered the slaves to throw six bags of coins into the crowds to win the support and loyalty of the people as he journeyed to the palace,” Hermione said.

“That’s quite the make-over, bath and all,” Harry said.

“What did he do with the other four bags of gold?” Ron asked.

“Gave them to his mother as a present for her to do with as she liked,” Hermione said. “She hid them.”

“I can’t say I blame her,” Ron said. “Still, he does know how to make an entrance, doesn’t he?”
“The sultan thought the same thing as the entourage road up to the palace steps,” Hermione said. “However, he had one more condition before he would allow Aladdin to marry the princess.”

“He wanted the moon?” Ron asked. “A few dozen unicorns? The head of Merlin?”

“No, he wanted a palace for his daughter to be built, a truly grand one, worthy of someone of her blood,” Hermione said.

“It sounds more like he’s playing for time,” Harry said.

“How so?” Ron asked.

“Think how long it would take to build a gigantic palace,” Harry said, “getting it ready from the ground up, painting it, furnishing it, hiring people to take care of it, everything. With the tools they had back then, it would probably take the better part of a decade.”

“True,” Ron said. “He’s stalling so he doesn’t have to marry his daughter off to Aladdin.”

“He probably was,” Hermione said, “especially as it was the vizier who had whispered the idea in the sultan’s ear, most likely in hopes that somehow his own son would still marry the princess instead. However, if that was their plan, then it backfired spectacularly.”

“Wild guess. He used the genie as a contractor?” Ron asked.

“You’ve guessed correctly. Aladdin went home, rubbed the lamp, and asked the genie to build him the most spectacular palace ever seen on a stretch of land not far from the sultan’s home. It was to be built of the most expensive, beautiful, and rare stonework. He was very specific about what he wanted to, including all the outbuildings, the bedrooms, the kitchens, the dining rooms, the music rooms, a treasury filled with bags of money, and fountains and furniture for each season and servants and horses and guards and gardens and carriages and stables and fine clothes and everything you can possibly imagine.”

“He doesn’t ask much, does he?” Harry said with a snort.

“And on top of everything, the most wonderful room of all was to be a perfect square with six windows in each wall. The walls were to be made of alternating layers of gold and silver bricks. The lattice work of each window, with one exception, was to be covered in emeralds, rubies, and diamonds of unexcelled beauty and in the most exquisite patterns, but the last window was to be left free of any adornment,” Hermione said.

“Okay, that’s odd,” Ron said. “What’s he planning on doing with the one window in the middle of the giant explosion of wealth?”

“He has a plan, as always,” Hermione said. “Then Aladdin commanded the genie to have the palace finished by dawn of the next day.”

“There’s got to be some kind of limit on this thing’s power,” Ron said. “It’s way too much to ask for.”

“But the genie managed it, exactly as Aladdin had asked for and even more splendid, and when the sultan awoke the next morning and looked out his window, he saw the palace with a great red carpet extending from its door to that of the sultan,” Hermione said.

“This genie needs a vacation in Majorca,” said Ron, shaking his head.
“Probably, but Aladdin didn’t even say thank you,” Hermione said.

“You know, I wonder just how much magic Dobby can do,” Ron said, looking at Harry. “I mean, if a house-elf really wanted to, would he be able to pull off something like that?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, pondering the question. “That sounds like an awful lot for anybody, but I think he’s a lot more powerful than people might think from just looking at him.”

“Whether he is or not, his real worth is in his heart, not what he can do,” Hermione said. “He’s remarkably brave and a steadfast friend.”

“He is,” Ron said, nodding. “He’s a good sort.”

Harry nodded in agreement. He missed Dobby, even if the elf’s friendship sometimes seemed a bit too much like hero worship to be entirely comfortable. Still, he was utterly trustworthy, and he hoped he was staying safe at Hogwarts.

“The genie showed Aladdin around his new home, and he was well pleased. The sultan, too, from the distance, was stunned at how beautiful it was, but the vizier’s face darkened. He told the sultan that no one could have accomplished such a feat on their own without the use of sorcery, but the sultan only laughed at him and said he was envious because his own son had proved a laughing stock,” Hermione said.

“And exactly how does he think Aladdin did manage to build something in one night that makes Hogwarts look like a pigsty?” Ron asked.

“He had no idea,” Hermione said, “but he assumed Aladdin hired a great many people who worked very hard and very quietly because he was such an excellent commander.”

“Or the vizier is right,” Harry said.

“He was, but the sultan didn’t even entertain the idea. Instead, he bade the sultana to prepare the Princess Badroulboudour for her wedding that day, and a procession that included Aladdin’s mother and many slaves and finally Aladdin himself progressed from the new palace to the sultan’s by way of the red carpet. The princess was officially presented to her new husband, and great rejoicing and festivities were held for many days in honor of the nuptials,” Hermione said.

“And they all lived happily ever after?” Ron said.

“No, because that isn’t the end of the story,” Hermione said. “However, it’s the end for tonight. It’s nearly one in the morning!”

Harry glanced at the watch the Weasleys had given him on his seventeenth birthday and saw she was right. It really had gotten late.

“I’m not tired,” Ron said with shrug. “You can keep going if you want.”

“Thanks, but I think my vocal chords would like to not explode,” Hermione said, and she did sound rather raspy.

“Oh,” Ron said, looking embarrassed. “Sorry. I guess we could all do with a rest.”

“I’m all in, and tomorrow we’re supposed to check the Crown Jewels, remember?” Harry said.

“Tower of London. Check,” Ron said, looking not particularly happy, but then it seemed he had an
idea. “Hey, while we’re there, can we eat a decent dinner out?”

Harry and Hermione looked at one another, then back to Ron.

“I don’t see why not, as long as nothing horrific happens,” Harry said.

Ron’s face immediately fell.

“Now that you’ve said that, you know it will,” Ron said dismally.

Harry gave him a good punch to the shoulder and told him cheer up, but he hoped that he hadn’t just inadvertently jinxed them all.
The trio came through the tent’s flap in near total silence. Harry suspected Ron wanted to say something since the telltale twitch at the corner of his mouth was there, but none of them had enough energy left after the disastrous day to do anything other than walk directly to the couch, collapse onto it, and stare into the void. A full hour passed during which Harry wasn’t sure whether he and the others had moved from torpor into actual sleep or not, but eventually one of the constants of their trip resurfaced in the form of Ron’s stomach growling loudly.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “Can’t help it.”

Hermione nodded dully, and Harry suddenly remembered he actually had a stomach himself, and that it was as empty.

“Anything left?” Harry asked, keeping words to a minimum.

“I think some rice, maybe a few kippers, and a tin of pickled beets,” Hermione said. “I intended to pick up something while we were out, of course, but…”

“But that wasn’t what happened,” Ron finished. “What did happen involved far too much running for my taste. I’m all in.”

“Yes, that wasn’t in the plan,” Hermione said tiredly. “Then again, neither was a confrontation with the Muggle police department.”

“How was I supposed to know they’d think a wand was a potential weapon?” Ron asked.

“Well, it basically is,” Harry pointed out. “They were actually right about that for once.”

“I’m wondering just how much the Muggle Prime Minister and Scrimgeour managed to communicate with each other before the Ministry fell,” Hermione said. “It’s almost like they really were on the lookout for wands.”

“Now that you mention it, it did sort of seem that way, didn’t it?” Ron said. “Bully for them if they are.”

“Yeah, but not when it’s us,” Harry said.

“I suppose we must have looked pretty suspicious, though,” Hermione said, “skulking around the Tower of London, probably spending far too long looking at the crown jewels, but it’s not like we had a choice if we were going to check if one of them was a Horcrux.”

“And they’re not,” Ron said. “Another one of my ideas winds up being useless.”

“Not useless,” Hermione said firmly. “It was an excellent idea. It just didn’t turn out to be right is all.”
“Yeah, it was a really good failure,” Ron said sarcastically, but he seemed slightly mollified that Hermione thought it had been worthwhile.

“I still don’t understand why we couldn’t Apparate out of there, though,” Harry said.

“It seemed like it had some sort of protective magic around it, like Hogwarts,” Hermione said, considering. “I wonder if magical prisoners were ever kept on the grounds. Ron, have you ever heard anything about that?”

“No,” Ron said, “but I suppose it’s possible. We could still use other spells, though, so the protection wouldn’t be that useful really.”

“Unless that part of the precautions has eroded over the year,” Hermione said. “I wonder how long they’re going to be looking for those three Muggles we looked like.”

“Not at all, I think,” Harry said. “I’m pretty sure I got at least two of the officers with a Memory Charm, possibly three.”

“And I know I got a pair of them,” Ron said.

“I think we’re safe then as I got another two,” Hermione said, then frowned, “unless of course we were all hitting the same two multiple times.”

“Nah,” Ron said, but he looked a little uncertain, “otherwise there’d be a big to do about a silver otter, terrier, and stag running about in one of the nation’s most important landmarks, right?”

 Conjuring Patronuses had been their last resort, but it looked like it had worked out all right in the end. After they had been detained with their wands (which Ron had tried rather creatively to explain away as being kebab sticks from their lunch), they had tried to make a run for it by using a variety of jinxes and hexes that allowed them to leave without causing too much damage, but when they’d been cornered by one particularly vigilant fellow, all three of them had called on their Patronuses, and he’d wound up knocked for a loop and unconscious, but thankfully unhurt. Then they’d run for blocks before risking Apparition again to where their tent was currently hidden under a bevy of protection spells in a run-down, abandoned building on rather dodgy looking street. Somewhere along the way, the Polyjuice had worn off, and they had come “home” looking like themselves again, exhausted but thankfully not followed.

“So ends our attempt at stealing the crown jewels,” Harry said, stretching against the cushions on the couch. “I suppose the up side of all this is we’re going to have fairly amazing stories to tell our children someday in the future.”

“Speaking of stories,” Ron said, looking at Hermione with a bit more energy, “care to tell us what happened to dear old Al?”

Hermione looked bone tired, Harry thought, probably far too tired to tell stories, so he quickly added, “You can always hold off until tomorrow night, you know.”

“Thank you,” she said, smiling appreciatively. “I do think I might like just to forget about today for a while, though, so I’ll at least give it a try.”

“Oh, good,” Ron said, grinning and wriggling back against his own seat. “So, Aladdin married Princess Bad Droopy Drawers and was living in the gigantic and fabulous palace that the lamp genie had built him, which really does sound like it should be the end of the story.”

“It sort of does, doesn’t it, and many retellings do leave it there, but it isn’t actually the end. Aladdin
was very happy with his wife and his riches, and he was very generous with all the people of the city, so they quickly learned to love him,” Hermione said.

“What about his wife, since she really didn’t have a say in all this?” Ron asked.

“There isn’t anything about her being unhappy at least, and she never does seem to figure out that Aladdin was the one who kidnapped her and her first groom for three nights straight, or if she did recognize him, she said nothing about it,” Hermione said.

“You know, when you think about it, that kid’s had a really rough time of it in this story,” Ron said. “Some bloke peeping on her in the bath, her father marrying her off to two different men without asking her, getting kidnapped by a demon on her wedding night three different times. She should probably be in counseling of some kind.”

“That’s very true,” Hermione said. “I wonder if the difficult situations she’s been put into are meant to parallel Scheherazade’s perilous challenge here. They do both experience hardship through powerful men who treat them as objects, so there are similarities.”

“Yeah, and nobody can spell either one of their names into the bargain,” Ron said.

Harry looked at Hermione, ready to see her about to roll her eyes at Ron’s point, but was surprised to see her thinking hard.

“Actually, I’m having a rather difficult time with spelling both of them myself at the moment,” Hermione said with a shrug.

“That’s saying something,” Harry said.

“More like borderline frightening,” Ron said, looking alarmed. “You really are tired.”

“I suppose that might explain it,” Hermione said. “I’m normally a fair speller.”

“If by ‘fair’ you mean ‘capable of spelling the name of every plant in Sprout’s greenhouses off the top of your head,’ then yeah, you’re fair,” Ron said. “Okay, so they’re happy. That should be it.”

“But it wasn’t, because Aladdin still had two enemies,” Hermione said, “and neither of them had forgot him.”

“Who? The guy who stuck Aladdin in a cave and ran off?” Ron asked.

“You’ve got it in one,” Hermione said, obviously delighted. “That man, who was indeed a magician, still lusted after the lamp, and after he returned home to Africa, he cast spells to see if there was any other way he might be able to retrieve it.”

“Africa?” Ron asked.

“Yes, but the story isn’t specific about what country, though,” Hermione said.

“Didn’t he try to pass himself off as Aladdin’s uncle?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“And Aladdin is Chinese, right?” Ron asked.

“Apparently, as that’s what the story says, though most of the details sound a great deal more like the Middle East,” Hermione said.
“Couldn’t exactly have been much of a family resemblance, could there?” Ron said. “It’d be about as likely as Dean being Cho’s long lost brother.”

Hermione paused for a moment, considering that.

“Unless there was an adoption involved or the magician only moved to Africa from China and was actually Chinese, despite being called the African magician from this point on in the story, someone really should have caught that point,” Hermione said, looking disturbed.

“Oh Aladdin and his mum were just really desperate for money and weren’t going to question anything too closely,” Harry suggested.

“Or that,” Hermione said. “In any case, the magician soon found out through his spells that not only was the lamp no longer in the Cave of Wonders, but the same lazy and stupid boy he had abandoned there to die now had it and had discovered its secret, becoming wealthy beyond his wildest dreams.”

“I’m guessing he’s not the sort to shrug and let that be, what with the whole attempted murder thing,” Ron said.

“Indeed he was not,” Hermione said. “He desperately wanted the genie as his own.”

“Then he really shouldn’t have given away the ring with the other genie in it,” Ron said.

“Again, he doesn’t seem to know about the genie of the ring. In fact, the way the rest of the story goes, I’m pretty certain he didn’t,” Hermione said.

“And that’s why you should never just chuck stuff out without checking it first,” Ron said, nodding firmly. “I think I’ve found the moral of the story.”

“ Seems a bit unlikely,” Harry said, but to his surprise, Hermione was looking astonished.

“We’ll get to that in a moment,” she said, eyeing Ron quizzically. “The magician immediately rushed back to China, intent on stealing the lamp, and that’s when Aladdin’s other enemy comes into play.”

“And that would be?” Ron asked.

“The vizier, who could never forgive the sultan for marrying the princess to Aladdin instead of his own son,” Hermione said. “He was always looking for some way to discredit him, and he began to suspect Aladdin may have been the one who foiled the earlier wedding. In addition, he was still convinced Aladdin was guilty of using sorcery to build his palace.”

“He’s not wrong there,” Ron said.

“So the vizier brought up to the sultan the incomplete window in the magnificent room that was the centerpiece of Aladdin’s marvelous home, and the sultan called his son-in-law to him and asked him why this one thing had been left imperfect in the whole of the palace,” Hermione said.

“You know, that’s been bothering me too,” Ron said.

“The vizier thought that Aladdin might have run out of magic or perhaps might use magic again in order to make it like the other fifteen magnificent windows with diamonds and rubies and emeralds. But what Aladdin did next surprised both the sultan and the vizier,” Hermione said.

“He turned bright purple, grew wings, whistled a collection of fourteenth century carols, then threw himself out the window?” Ron suggested.
Harry stared at him.

“That was random,” he said.

“So is everything else in this story apparently,” Ron said. “Fair is fair.”

“No, he did not transform into a giant purple finch with a penchant for Medieval music,” Hermione said in a tone that sounded so much like McGonagall it was almost frightening. “Instead, he told the sultan that he had left the window unfinished so the sultan himself could have the pleasure of completing the palace and therefore play a part in its glory.”

Ron and Harry looked at each other.

“So he’s basically saying he wants his father-in-law to give him loads of diamonds, emeralds, and rubies to finish off a window in his house, and the sultan should be really happy about that?” Harry asked.

“Yes, and the odd thing is, he was,” Hermione said.

“He was?” Ron said, looking completely confused.

“I suppose all the splendor of Aladdin’s wedding and home and treasures probably made the sultan feel rather insignificant in comparison, and this would be a way of proving he too had power and wealth and influence,” Hermione said.

“Oh-huh,” Ron said. “He’s a loony.”

“And how did the building project go?” Harry asked.

“Not well,” Hermione said. “He searched the kingdom for months and used up all the gems Aladdin had given him into the bargain, and he still couldn’t come up with anything close to enough jewels to finish the window. Eventually, he had to go to Aladdin and admit he couldn’t do it.”

“I’m feeling oddly sorry for him at the moment,” Ron said, then squinted. “Nope, it’s passed. Go on.”

“Aladdin returned all the gems to his father-in-law and said he would finish the window himself, and the next morning, when the sultan returned, the sixteenth window was indeed as splendid as the others,” Hermione said.

“He used the genie,” Ron said.

“Of course, not that the sultan knew that, though the vizier suspected it more strongly than ever,” Hermione said.

“And how did the sultan react to that?” Ron asked. “If finishing the window was making him feel powerful, and now he couldn’t but Aladdin could in no time at all with no effort, I’m guessing that wasn’t exactly great for his ego.”

“No, it wasn’t, though the sultan praised Aladdin for his wealth and wisdom, but he probably did feel more than a little angry under all that, which might explain why he behaves as he does when we next see him,” Hermione said. “In any case, by this time, the magician had made his way back to Aladdin’s city.”

“In Afri-Chi-Middle-East-istan,” Ron said.
Harry snorted loudly.

“Or wherever,” Hermione said. “He disguised himself in old clothes, then bought several brand new lamps.”

“He didn’t seriously think Aladdin would have sold the lamp and he could pick it up in a shop, did he?” Ron asked.

“No, that’s not his plan. Besides, Aladdin’s lamp, if you recall, was very old and battered and dented,” Hermione said.

“And it probably has a fair few rub marks on it as well by now,” Harry chimed in.

“Most likely,” Hermione said. “The magician waited until he heard that Aladdin was off on a hunting expedition, then he went through the streets, crying, ‘New lamps for old! New lamps for old!’”

“I think I see where this is heading,” Ron said.

“Probably. The people in the streets were laughing at the crazy man who was giving away perfectly good lamps in return for old ones, but a few were suspicious. When they asked him why he would do this, he claimed he was fulfilling an oath he had made, and that satisfied them. Soon the streets were full of clamor as he went on trading lamps,” Hermione said.

“That’s a weird oath,” Ron said. “That’s like promising to swap old manky shoes for new ones or something. Why would people even think he’d do that?”

“I grant you, it’s certainly odd, and I’ve never heard of one similar, but there you have it,” Hermione said. “People love the idea of getting something for nothing.”

“I guess if Fred and George have a buy one, get one free sale again, I should probably look a bit closer, then,” Ron said suspiciously.

“With those two, that’s probably wise,” Hermione agreed. “Anyway, a maid in Aladdin’s house heard the commotion and found out about the lamps, then went to her mistress, laughing about the silly man in the streets. Then the princess remembered seeing a battered old lamp sitting on a shelf in the bedroom, and she told the maid to fetch it and bring it to the man to swap it.”

“Aladdin never told his wife about the lamp?” Ron said.

“No,” Hermione said.

“And he also didn’t bother taking it with him when he left to go hunting?” Harry added.

“No,” Hermione repeated.

“What an idiot,” Ron and Harry said almost simultaneously.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “The maid did as she was told, and the magician recognized the lamp at once. He gave her a new lamp in return, and after she ran back to her mistress with what she thought was a much better lamp than the priceless one she had given away, the magician ran down the nearest alley, threw off his disguise, and rubbed the lamp.”

“That’s not going to end well,” Ron said. “What did he wish for?”

“He wished that he and Aladdin’s palace and everyone and everything in it should be carried at once
“That’s actually not as dire as I thought,” Ron said. “I figured he’d wish Aladdin dead or something.”

“No, though that would have been sensible from a purely pragmatic viewpoint,” Hermione said. “Now that I think of it, the genies never actually harm anyone in the story. They move them about or frighten them or lock them up, but they don’t kill people. Perhaps they can’t.”

“It seems like,” Ron said. “I don’t think house-elves are allowed to kill people either, if it comes to that.”

“Possibly,” Hermione said. “If so, it shows another parallel between the story and the magical world.”

“So the genie did what the magician asked?” Harry said.

“Yes, in a single instant the whole palace disappeared along with all of its treasures and the princess and the servants inside of it,” Hermione said.

“Well, she’s at least familiar with that particular sensation,” Ron said.

“You know, she really should have put two and two together at that point if she hadn’t earlier,” Hermione said.

“But no one in this seems terribly bothered by extra brains, so I’m guessing she doesn’t,” Ron said.

“If she did, she never said anything about it,” Hermione said. “The sultan, however, who had a perfect view of the palace from his bedroom window, glanced outside and noticed it was missing. He immediately flew into a panic, sending his soldiers to look at the place where the building had been, and when they reported back that no sign of it could be found, he was enraged.”

“Did he finally figure out Aladdin wasn’t the most brilliant and speedy architect and builder of all time and had used magic?” Ron asked.

“Yes, though he of course assumed it was evil sorcery, just as the vizier told him. The moment that Aladdin came back into the city from his hunting trip, the sultan had him arrested and dragged into the palace. ‘What hast thou done with my daughter, vile sorcerer!’ he cried out, and it was only then that Aladdin realized the palace and his wife were gone,” Hermione said.

“Hard way to get the news,” Harry said.

“Yes, but further bad news was on the way, for the sultan decreed that Aladdin should be beheaded for using magic and abducting the princess,” Hermione said.

“Yep, he never got over that window thing,” Ron said, nodding.

“Probably not, but I think the disappearance of his daughter was most likely the last straw,” Hermione said. “However, the people of the city, remembering the generosity and kindness Aladdin had always showed them, climbed over the walls of the sultan’s palace and into the courtyard where the execution was to take place, rioting and chanting that if Aladdin was killed, they would kill the sultan in return.”

“I guess he was at least pretty smart about that, then,” Ron said. “Did it work?”
“Almost,” Hermione said. “The sultan agreed to let Aladdin live for another fortnight so he could hunt for the princess. At the end of that time, if she was not returned unharmed, Aladdin would still be executed.”

“Well, it bought him some time,” Harry said.

“True, but he still had no idea where the princess and the palace had gone,” Hermione said. “Remember, no one had seen the African magician without his disguise.”

“I suppose he could always put an advert in the local paper: ‘Lost: one gigantic palace with loads of treasure and a very hot princess with a name that’s nearly impossible to pronounce. If found, please return to original spot or I’ll wind up separate from my head,’” Ron said.

Harry laughed and even Hermione giggled a bit before continuing on.

“No, Aladdin began to wander through the wilderness, looking for any trace of the princess or the palace, but he couldn’t find anything at all. After a few days, in a fit of despair, he came to a river and considered throwing himself in and drowning rather than facing the humiliation of execution,” Hermione said.

“Suddenly it’s a lot less funny,” Ron said, frowning.

“Then as he was about to jump in the river, he accidentally tripped and fell down the riverbank instead,” Hermione said.

“Well, that’s just embarrassing,” Ron said.

“Yes, but it was also lucky since when he got up and dusted himself off, he accidentally rubbed the iron ring that was still on his finger,” Hermione said.

“No, he didn’t,” Ron said with utter certainty.

“Yes, he did,” Hermione said defiantly. “It’s right in the story!”

“I assumed the ring was in the palace since that’s where he was stupidly keeping his lamp,” Ron said. “Otherwise, wouldn’t he have just rubbed the ring immediately like any sane person would do?”

“He forgot about the ring again,” Hermione said with a shrug.

“This kid is completely hopeless,” Ron said.

“Gotta admit, I agree,” Harry said. “On a scale of stupid, that’s both Crabbe and Goyle combined.”

“We can try to chalk it up to his being distraught, but it does seem remarkably forgetful at the very least,” Hermione agreed. “In any case, the genie of the ring appeared again at once and asked what Aladdin wanted him to do.”

“Handy fellow to have about,” Harry said.

“Yes, this ring is a lot more useful than a certain other one that drives the wearer mad with power, even if it does make him invisible into the bargain,” Hermione said.

“What?” Harry asked.

“Oh, right, the Dursleys wouldn’t have let your read Tolkien, I suppose,” Hermione said, giving him
a deeply pitying look. “He wrote a book about a magic ring that made its wearer invisible, but was actually a trap by an evil character to enslave the wearer and make him the ruler of the world. You really should read that. It’s wonderful.”

“Sounds a bit too much like real life at the moment, what with the ring and the evil wizard and taking over the world,” Harry said, then noticed Hermione was frowning. “What?”

“No, I’m just realizing suddenly how much Aragog had in common with Shelob,” Hermione said. “That’s a bit strange, isn’t it?”

“You mean Mosag,” Ron said.

“No, the spider in the story was named Shelob,” Hermione said. “Mosag was Aragog’s wife.”

“Yeah, that was her name when Hagrid first brought her into the forest from some faraway land,” Ron said. “He didn’t care for the name, though, so he renamed her after his Great-Aunt Mosag. She didn’t seem to mind. He told me about it once after Aragog died, reminiscing and trying to get me to think spiders weren’t all horrible. Fat chance.”

Hermione stared at him for a full minute before she finally shrieked, “Are you telling me that Legolas actually exists?!”


Harry watched as Hermione looked like she was about to explode.

“Are you okay?” Harry asked carefully.

“Perfectly!” she said with a wide grin on her face. “Oh, do I have research to do when we get back to Hogwarts!”

“Must be some sort of a dessert,” Ron said to Harry as Hermione pulled a notebook and pen out of her bag and started writing at a furious pace. “Judging by the amount of enthusiasm, one with chocolate in it.”

A few seconds later, Hermione relaxed a bit and collected herself once again.

“Yes, sorry, where was I?” she asked.

“The genie appeared from the ring,” Harry said.

“Right,” she said. “Aladdin immediately told the genie to bring back his wife and his palace, but the genie said he couldn’t do that.”

“Why?” Ron asked.

“Because the genie of the lamp had done it, and the genie of the ring was much less powerful and couldn’t undo one of his enchantments,” Hermione said.

“That’s rotten luck,” Ron said. “So now what?”

“Aladdin asked if the genie could at least tell him who was now in possession of the lamp, and the genie explained completely about the magician and how he had got the lamp and where he was,” Hermione said. “As you might expect, Aladdin was furious.”
“I’d say he has a right to get a bit testy over this, yeah,” Ron said.

“Aladdin asked if the genie could instead take him to his wife, and that the genie could do, so Aladdin ordered the genie to take him to there at once,” Hermione said.

“There are weird rules for genies,” Ron said. “Ringo can’t undo Lampy’s work, but Ringo can take Aladdin there?”

“Ringo and Lampy?” Hermione said in disbelief.

“What?” Ron asked. “We’ve got to call them something. Genie of the lamp and genie of the ring are too much of a mouthful. Lampy’s obvious, and you said a fellow named Ringo was a drummer in some weird all-insect Muggle band, so that should be fine.”

“Great, now I’m picturing a highly powerful magical being dressed in the military costumes from the cover of Sergeant Pepper,” Harry said.

“What?” Ron said, completely confused.

“Never mind,” Hermione said, shaking her head. “Before Aladdin knew it, the genie was setting him down beside the palace, and the princess was standing at a window, delighted to see him.”

“And they lived happily ever after?” Ron asked.

“No, not yet,” Hermione said. “The princess explained that the magician had told her that Aladdin was dead and that she should marry him instead, but of course she had rejected him.”

“Crikey, this kid does have a time of it, doesn’t she? Now a crazy magician fancies her,” Ron said. “What did Aladdin do?”

“He told her not to reject him any longer,” Hermione said.

“Wait, what?” Harry said.

“He told her to put on her most beautiful dress and to invite him to her chambers to dine, pretending that she had thought it over and she had decided to accept him, but that she was to secretly pour something into the magician’s cup that Aladdin would give her which would make the magician unconscious, and all would be well,” Hermione said.

“As a plan, I can see fifty things that could go wrong, but it’s still workable at least,” Ron said.

“It actually did work relatively well,” Hermione said. “Aladdin walked into the nearby village and bought old clothes from a peddler, then went to an apothecary to buy a potion and snuck back to the palace where the princess’s maid was waiting at a back door to receive it and deliver it to her mistress.”

“The same one who swapped out the lamp?” Ron asked.

“Maybe. She probably had a lot of maids,” Hermione said. “People did back then if they were royal or wealthy.”

“I hope she doesn’t swap it for a butter beer or something,” Ron said.

“No, the princess received it and hid it in her dress, and when the magician arrived she made him think she was in love with him, but she insisted that she wished to try an African wine as she had heard they were much better than Chinese wines, and he rushed to get her a bottle of the very best,
but she insisted on pouring it into the goblets herself, which was when she added the potion,” Hermione said.

“You know, that’s pretty well done there,” Ron said. “This girl isn’t half bright.”

“She actually is,” Hermione agreed. “Then she told him it was a custom among her people for lovers to toast one another, and the magician enthusiastically lifted his goblet to toast the princess, took a deep drink, and then at once fell down dead.”

“I thought Aladdin said it would just make him unconscious!” Ron said.

“He did, but he was lying. He thought she might be too nervous to carry it out otherwise,” Hermione said.

“Of all the… if you’re going to have your wife kill someone for you, you should at least be up front about it,” Ron said indignantly.

“I… think I agree?” Harry said uncertainly.

“I suppose it does keep her free of any guilt for his death, but yes, it is horrid,” Hermione said.

“So what did she do?” Ron asked.

“She kept to the plan and had her maid let Aladdin in through the back door,” Hermione said.

“Then she told him off, right?” Ron said.

“No, apparently she said nothing about it,” Hermione said.

“She nothing about things an awful lot,” Ron said, shaking his head.

“She most likely was conforming to the traditional concept of wifely obedience found in most cultures, but some of the versions claim she hadn’t actually realized he was dead and still believed he was only sleeping,” Hermione said.

“Not that I’m all that fussed about his dying,” Ron said. “I mean, he did try to entomb Aladdin alive and then stole his house and kidnapped his wife, so this is very much not a nice person, so I may just let this one pass.”

“Yeah, but it was still rather low not to tell her the truth,” Harry said.

Ron thought for a moment, then said, “Agreed. Okay, Aladdin comes in the back door. Then what?”

“He told the princess to leave the room, then searched the body until he found the lamp tucked into the magician’s shirt. Then he rubbed the lamp, ordered the genie to bring them all home with the exception of the magician’s body, which was left where it was, and in a few seconds they were back where they started,” Hermione said.

“So he still doesn’t tell her about the lamp?” Ron said.

“No, apparently not, though he did vow to always keep it on his person from then on,” Hermione said.

“This guy’s an idiot,” Ron said.

“Yes,” Hermione agreed. “We’ve established that, I think.”
“But do they at least all live happily ever after now?” Ron asked.

“No,” Hermione said.

“Okay, that’s good then, at least they can . . . wait, did you just say ‘no’?” Ron said.

“That’s right,” Hermione said. “The story isn’t quite over.”

“Seriously?” Harry said. “How long is this story?”

“Oh, this is the last bit,” Hermione said. “After the palace returned, the sultan was so happy that of course he didn’t have Aladdin executed.”

“And they all still think he isn’t using magic despite the palace appearing and disappearing and reappearing?” Harry asked.

“I suppose they blamed that on the evil magician,” Hermione said.

“Okay, that’s at least a reasonable explanation, I suppose,” Ron said. “But I still don’t get how this story isn’t over yet.”

“Well, the magician had a brother,” Hermione said.

“You have got to be kidding me!” Harry said. “This is like when Hollywood tries to make a movie go for far too many sequels.”

“Yeah, and we already know Aladdin’s dad wasn’t really the magician’s brother,” Ron added. “Wait, was he?”

“No, the magician was no relation at all to Aladdin, but the magician did have a younger brother,” Hermione said. “They usually met once a year to compare their lives and their magical accomplishments, but when he didn’t show up for their usual appointment, the surviving brother became suspicious. He researched what had happened, discovered his brother had died and that Aladdin was to blame, and he vowed vengeance.”

“So the brother is a wizard too then,” Ron said.

“Yes, it does appear that the pair of them may have inherited their abilities since they share a common talent for magic, even if it’s magic that doesn’t make much sense to us,” Hermione said. “I suppose this could be an example of a Muggle, in this case Aladdin, being able to best a family of pure-bloods. If so, I can see why it wouldn’t have been accepted in the magical world very readily.”

“But I still don’t get how this story isn’t over yet,” Ron said.

“Or at all,” Ron said, “although suddenly I like Aladdin a bit better if that really is what’s going on.”

“It does put a slightly different slant on things,” Hermione said. “In any case, the second magician went to China and found out that there was a certain old holy woman named Fatima who was very highly revered in the city as a miracle worker and for her great piety. He followed her to her home, then pulled a knife on her threatened to kill her if she didn’t exchange clothes with him.”

“Oh, this one’s a real peach,” Ron said. “Threatening to kill old ladies and stealing dresses. Very nice. So what happened?”

“The woman was terrified, so she gave the brother her clothes, which he put on,” Hermione said. “Then he dabbed his face with dirt and mud to match her own dirty face.”

“Why’s she so dirty?” Ron asked.
“Sometimes people do that sort of thing to atone for sin or show that they aren’t bothered by the vanity of the world,” Hermione said.

“So he’s going to pretend he’s Fatima?” Ron asked.

“Exactly,” Hermione said.

“But even with the dirt, won’t some people recognize it isn’t her?” Harry asked.

“Remember, she would be wearing a veil,” Ron said.

“Well remembered,” Hermione said, beaming at him.

“Well, it makes sense I suppose,” Harry said, feeling happier than he thought he could when he was so tired since his best friend was basking in Hermione’s praise. “Then what?”

“Then he killed her anyway,” Hermione said.

“Okay, I strongly disliked the first brother, but this one I just flat out loathe,” Ron said, irate. “That’s horrible.”

“It also sounds remarkably like Polyjuice,” Harry said slowly.

“Yeah, he keeps her alive so he can get a sample from her, changes into her, then kills her,” Ron said, shuddering. “There probably is a real backstory on this one, isn’t there?”

“There certainly could be, but if so, they don’t quite understand how Polyjuice works, as you’ll see from the next bit,” Hermione said. “The next morning, the magician went out, dressed as the holy woman, and all the people of the city crowded around him, hoping to be blessed.”

“Wait, the next morning?” Ron asked. “So he spent the night in the same room with the corpse of the woman he murdered?”

“I’d never really thought of it that way, but I suppose he must have,” Hermione said.

“I hope her ghost let him have it but good,” Ron said.

“If she was really a holy woman, I doubt she’d choose to stay around and torment someone rather than going on to wherever,” Hermione said.

“I would,” Ron said without a bit of doubt. “I think I’d be too tempted to use a few of the tricks Myrtle has done, moaning and groaning at all hours, following people around, just annoying the blazes out of him. He’d deserve a lot worse.”

“I can’t help feeling a bit sorry for Myrtle,” Hermione said, sounding guilty. “Did… did any of us ever thank her for, you know, anything?”

“Like what?” Ron said. “Getting a diary thrown through her head and complaining about it?”

“She did tell Harry about the egg in fourth year, didn’t she?” Hermione said.

“Yeah, and she pointed me towards the merpeople in the lake,” Harry admitted. “You may have a point there.”

“She was also smitten with Draco bloody Malfoy,” Ron said. “I’d say that cancels everything else out.”
“Well, regardless, the magician never mentioned anything about a ghost, and honestly I don’t know why no one found the woman’s body. The magician made sure to wend his way towards Aladdin’s palace, certain that the princess would hear all the commotion in the street and wonder what was happening,” Hermione said.

“Not unlike the lamp swapper,” Ron said. “This girl spends a lot of time listening at the window.”

“She may well have not been allowed to do much else,” Hermione said. “Royal women usually aren’t.”

“Then I can’t really blame her for that rather pathetic hobby, I suppose,” Ron said. “So she hears all the hubbub. Then what?”

“She told one of her eunuchs to go down and ask the woman to come up so that she might learn from her,” Hermione said.

“What’s a eunuch?” Ron asked, looking puzzled.

“Oh!” Hermione said, looking embarrassed. “Ehm, it’s one of her guards, specifically a male one who’s been, ehm, altered, so that he can’t pose her any sort of threat.”

“Like his hands are tied behind his back or something?” Ron said. “That’s fairly stupid for a guard. How is he supposed to protect her?”

“No, not that sort of threat,” Hermione said. “No, it’s so that he can’t, um, well, he can’t commit adultery with the princess.”

“Oh,” Ron said, nodding his head blithely, then stopping. “But, wait, how would…” Hermione, blushing furiously, gave him a look.

“Ohhh,” Ron said, in a rather high voice.

“Right,” Harry said, sounding equally shrill. “Got it.”

“Seriously, you lot are just downright terrifying,” Ron said. “What is wrong with you people?”

“I sometimes ask myself the same question,” Hermione said. “The magician received the eunuch’s invitation and went up to the princess, thrilled that his plan was working thus far.”

“Uh-huh,” Ron said, still looking ill, and Harry heard him mutter under his breath, “poor bloke.”

“The princess asked the holy woman if she would consent to live in the palace so that she would be near whenever anyone in the household had an illness that needed curing or required good advice, and the magician agreed, moving into the smallest and poorest of all the chambers in keeping with the old woman’s humility,” Hermione said.

“Wow, that really is convenient,” Harry said. “Maybe a bit of the Imperius Curse there?”

“Possibly,” Hermione agreed, then shifted her gaze to Ron. “What do you think?”

“Uh-huh,” Ron said in the same not-quite-there voice before quietly mumbling, “that’s bloody barbaric.”

“I think we may have lost him,” Harry said to Hermione.
“Oh dear,” she said, still looking embarrassed. “Why didn’t I just say guard? I think I might have fried his brain.”

“What?” Ron said, looking like he’d just noticed they were there again. “What’s fried? Is it chicken? Did we find chicken?”

“And he’s back again,” Harry said.

“When in doubt, try food,” Hermione said. “Duly noted. In any case, the magician moved into the household, and one day the princess called upon her while she was in the magnificent room with the sixteen windows. She had a headache and wanted the holy woman to heal her.”

“Bit of an over-reaction to a headache, isn’t it?” Ron said.

“I don’t know,” Hermione said. “I’ve had a few while studying for examinations that just about knocked me out.”

“I knew studying was bad for your health,” Ron said.

“It’s not! It’s just that… oh, never mind,” Hermione said. “The magician came into the splendid room, and after looking in amazement at all the beauty of the decorations and gems and silver and gold, the princess asked if it was not truly one of the great wonders of the world.”

“And he said yes?” Ron suggested.

“Actually, the magician said it was very beautiful, but that it lacked only one thing,” Hermione said.


“A minibar that never emptied and a Lamborghini?” Harry suggested.

“Why would she want a tiny bar and a lamb?” Ron asked.

“A minibar is a small refrigerator and snack station in Muggle hotel rooms where they charge about five times the usual price for the convenience of having things temptingly handy, and a Lamborghini is, well, think of a Firebolt if it were turned into a Muggle car,” Hermione said.

“Good call, Harry,” Ron said. “Now I want a tiny bar and a lamb named Nini too.”

“Not a… oh, skip it,” she said. “No, she said that the only thing the room lacked to make it the greatest marvel in all the world was a roc’s egg hanging from the center dome in the ceiling.”

“A rock egg?” Harry asked this time.

“No, the egg of a roc,” Hermione corrected. “A roc is a gigantic mythological bird, usually from Persia, that’s big enough to carry off people or even elephants, so its eggs would be simply enormous.”

“That’s incredibly random,” Ron said.

“It would seem so, but the idea entered the princess’s mind and put her entirely out of sorts, and when she next saw Aladdin, she asked him why he would mock her by building such a beautiful palace by not completing it by hanging a roc’s egg from the ceiling,” Hermione said.

“Because that’s an entirely mental idea to begin with and how could he have come up with it on his
“I’d tend to agree with you, but Aladdin, wishing to do whatever would make the princess happy, brought out the lamp and called forth Lampy, I mean the genie. When the genie asked him what he wanted, Aladdin told him to bring a roc’s egg and hang it in the center of the room from the ceiling on a chain of gold,” Hermione said.

“Do they glow?” Ron asked.

“What, the egg?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah,” Ron said. “Would it be like a lamp or something?”

“Not as far as I know,” Hermione said.

“Okay, for a second I thought I’d found a logical reason to hang a giant egg from the ceiling,” Ron said. “Apparently they just like hanging giant ova from their roof. So were they happy with the effect on their décor?”

“The genie didn’t bring it,” Hermione said. “Instead, he exploded in rage, shrieking so loudly Aladdin thought that his ears would bleed, and looking so fearsome most mortal men would have died at the sight of him.”

“Okay, that wasn’t what I was expecting,” Ron said.

“Yeah, but I’m starting to suspect that’s why the so-called holy woman made the suggestion,” Harry said.

“Precisely,” Hermione said, nodding at him. “The genie cried out, ‘How dare you ask such a thing! To hang the egg of my sovereign lord as a decoration in your home! And without a word of thanks from you for all that I have done! I am right well tempted to make this palace crash down upon the heads of everyone within it, killing you all!’”

“The roc is his ‘sovereign lord’?” Harry asked.

“Apparently so,” Hermione said. “Somehow the magician had found that out and figured that stealing from his master would be the one thing that the genie would take ultimate offense to, and on top of that he was already angry at Aladdin’s lack of gratitude for all he’d done for him.”

“Okay, the genie has a point,” Ron said. “Aladdin has been rude. Still, at least Auntie Muriel didn’t try to kill me when it took me over three months to send her a thank you note for the earmuffs she sent me for Christmas one year.”

“But the genie showed mercy. He said, ‘However, I know you would not have asked for this if it were not for the evil magician, the brother of he who stole your palace, who is now housed within your walls, dressed in the clothes of the holy woman whom he murdered. Because you knew no better and the evil begins with him, I shall spare you.’ And with that he disappeared back into the lamp with a puff of smoke,” Hermione said.

“Oh boy,” Ron said. “Well, the Kneazle’s out of the bag now.”

“Yes, the genie was wise enough to know he was being used to exact revenge, and he refused to play a part in it, especially since the person pulling the strings was a murderer,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but he was also fine with just staying in his lamp and not saying anything about it until
“Aladdin asked for something,” Ron said.

“I’m not sure the genie actually can leave the lamp without Aladdin’s permission,” Hermione said, tilting her head and thinking. “He never does at any point in the story.”

“Okay, fine, so he couldn’t leave the lamp or was in the bath or what have you. So what does Aladdin do now?” Ron said.

“He called his wife to him and told her to bring forth the holy woman because he felt ill. At once, she sent for the woman, and the moment the magician walked into the room, Aladdin stabbed him a sword and he fell down dead,” Hermione said.

“I was expecting more of an epic battle,” Ron said, sounding disappointed.

“Well, if he really was a magician, the best way for a Muggle to deal with him would be a surprise attack, I expect,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, but it’s not much of a story,” Ron said.

“But wouldn’t you say it’s gone on long enough?” Harry said.

“Good point,” Ron said. “Are we getting near the wrap up?”

“Almost there,” Hermione said. “The princess was horrified and screamed, ‘Husband, thou hast murdered the good holy woman!’ but he told her all the genie had said, and when the veil was lifted, the magician’s face was all the proof that was needed. After that, Aladdin called on the genie only when he had great need.”

“And said please and thank you, I should hope,” Harry said.

“I would assume so,” Hermione said. “Eventually, the sultan died, and Aladdin became sultan in his place, and all considered him wise, merciful, and a good ruler, and they all lived happily ever after.”

“And that really is the end?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “What do you think of it?”

Harry and Ron looked at each other for a moment, and then Ron raised his hand as if he were in school.

“Yes?” Hermione asked carefully.

“Whatever happened to Aladdin’s mum?” Ron asked.

Hermione looked startled.

“I have no idea,” she said. “She sort of just disappears from the story. A few versions mention her at the wedding, leading the bride into her new home, but then that’s it. I assume we’d hear if she’d died or something.”

“Maybe she decided to move back to their old house because the new one was just too weird,” Ron said.

“Maybe,” Hermione said. “She seemed terribly uncomfortable with all the nobles.”

“No fool, that one,” Ron said. “I’d say it was suitably mental enough for a good three nights of not
getting killed by someone’s serial killer newlywed husband, though, and then some.”

“Completely,” Harry said. “Also, I’m making a point of thanking Myrtle the next time I see her.”

“Then my job here is done, and I’m all in anyway,” Hermione said, yawning. “It’s definitely bedtime.”

“It has been a very long day,” Harry said. “Any ideas where we should be off to tomorrow?”

“There’s a tiny little village in northern Scotland where Tom Riddle’s mother went to school,” Hermione said. “She was a Muggle, so I’m not sure it would interest You-Know-Who that much, but at least it’s something.”

“Fine by me,” Ron said. “I suggested this one, and look where that went.”

“It’s fine,” Hermione said, taking out her notebook again and flipping through pages. “It was a good idea, even if it didn’t turn out to be a Horcrux.”

“Thanks for that,” he said, leaning over her shoulder to look at the notebook. “Hermione, why does your To Do list start with ‘brush up on Quenya and Sindarin’? What’re those? Advanced defensive magic or summat?”

“Oh!” she said, snapping the book shut. “Just something pleasant to think about when everything’s done with and the world is back to normal.”

Ron shrugged and lumbered off towards his pajamas while Harry smiled over at Hermione, already half asleep himself. Still, he couldn’t help wondering if anything would ever be truly normal again.
“You-Know-Who’s gran was a right little ray of sunshine,” Ron said as he entered the tent, closely followed by Harry and Hermione, all of them shivering from the cold of the northern-most part of Scotland.

“She definitely wasn’t a contender for Mother of the Year,” Harry agreed, taking off the mittens Hermione had knit for him, then blowing on his fingers to warm them back into life.

Hermione nodded, but Harry noticed she looked rather sad as she took off her coat.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Oh, it’s just that I can’t help thinking about how so much of this whole mess we’re in now started generations ago,” Hermione said. “Tom Riddle wasn’t really to blame for a good portion of things since he was under a love potion when You-Know-Who was conceived, so I was hoping there might be some tiny scrap of decency on the Riddle side of things, but it turns out they were nearly as twisted as the Gaunts.”

“Nearly,” Ron repeated, “but not quite. I don’t think the Muggle side were actually into random torture and nailing animals to their doors.”

“I don’t know about the animals, but the bit about torturing others is debatable,” Hermione said with a shudder. “Mary Riddle was simply horrid when she was a girl, and I don’t think she improved much with age.”

Voldemort’s Muggle grandmother, Mary Riddle, whose maiden name had been Bentley, was the latest in their attempts to find some sort of connection for a Horcrux, but the search had once again proved fruitless. Upon breaking into the ancient and prestigious boarding school where Mary had spent her youth, they had vainly combed through her old school records, printed in sloping, old-fashioned handwriting on yellowed paper that seemed likely to crumble at any moment. The story they pieced together from it was disturbingly familiar.

“Yeah, let’s see,” Ron said, counting off points on his fingers. “First, three of the girls in her dormitory left the school under suspicious circumstances due to ‘acquired injuries,’ then there was the case of cheating on exams that she seems to have managed to palm off on someone else who didn’t have as much dosh and who was forced to leave in disgrace, plus that weird note in her file from the one instructor who said she’d been overly interested in poisons right before the unexplained death of the teacher who gave her poor marks. I’d say it’s fair to guess Old Slit-Nose comes from a long line of unpleasantness on both sides.”

“I still don’t see how she got away with all of that,” Harry said.

“Oh, easily enough,” Hermione said. “Her family was wealthy and powerful, and added into the bargain from the class photograph we saw, she was quite beautiful. Those are very strong methods of
“Persuasion.”

“Beautiful?” Ron said with a snort. “Come off it! She looked pretty plain to me.”

“You’re judging by modern standards,” Hermione said. “In the 1890s when the photo was taken, concepts of beauty were rather different from what one sees lauded today.”

“Like what?” Ron asked. “Having slumpy shoulders and an enormous forehead?”

“More like having all of one’s teeth and no scars,” Hermione said, “though a broad forehead and sloping shoulders actually were considered attractive at that point, along with large eyes and very fair skin.”

“Okay, then if that’s the checklist, she hit the mark,” Harry said.

“Not exactly what comes to mind when I think of gorgeous, though,” Ron said.

“Today we tend to see concepts of attractiveness that are dictated by the beauty industry and the fashion world, not just for Muggles but even for witches,” Hermione said. “At least most of their appeal was fairly natural back then, well, except for the bloody corsets. Thank Merlin those are gone at least.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, “they were probably enough to make anyone cranky.”

“So we know Mary Bentley married Thomas Riddle, then a year and a half later gave birth to Tom Riddle, who married Merope Gaunt, who had the last Tom Riddle just prior to her death,” Hermione said, producing a paper and a stub of pencil from her pocket and sketching a family tree.

“That’s a lot of Tom Riddles,” Ron said.

“It’s not at all uncommon in Muggle families for the oldest son to have his father’s name, particularly among families with titles and things,” Hermione said. “Bartemius Crouch did the same with his son, so it’s not like it’s unknown in the wizarding world either.”

“Yeah, but three of them at one time? Wouldn’t they get confused when someone called their name?” Ron asked.

“Well, You-Know-Who never lived with his paternal family, so it wasn’t an issue there, was it? As far as I know, he only ever saw them the one time when he, well,” Hermione drifted off.

“Murdered them,” Harry finished.

“Yes,” Hermione said with a shudder. “Imagine killing one’s father, grandmother, and grandfather in cold blood at what? Age sixteen?”

“I’ve occasionally thought of murdering Percy, but yeah, that’s a bit much for anyone,” Ron said, toeing off his boots.

“Ronald!”

“What? He’s a prat,” Ron said, then added in a mumble, “and no, I don’t mean it, even if he is a git.”

“Do you think it’s worthwhile continuing to poke around on the Riddle side of things?” Hermione asked Harry.

“I doubt it,” Harry said. “Vol… ehm, You-Know-Who doesn’t seem to have taken an interest in
“I suppose you’re right,” Hermione said. “I was hoping he might have seen them as some sort of sick trophies from his first murders, as terrible as that sounds. I doubt we’ll find anything different if we look at Tom Riddle.”

“Wait, which Tom Riddle?” Ron asked. “Tom Riddle or Tom Riddle? Or the other Tom Riddle?”

“Any of them, I suppose,” Hermione said. “It does get confusing.”

“Fine, from here on out, I’m calling the oldest one Thomas, the middle one Tom, and the current murderous nutter gets Tommy,” Ron said.

“You’re calling the Dark Lord ‘Tommy’?” Harry said slowly, giving him an incredulous look.

“What’s he gonna do? Hear me?” Ron said. “We’re already in enough trouble, so I doubt giving him a nickname is going to be the tipping point.”

“I’m fine with it,” Hermione said. “Besides, I’ve taken a look at the Riddle family records, and Thomas, as you’re calling him, is actually the fifth one with that name, so even one, two, and three wouldn’t really be accurate.”

“So why do you think Mary Bentley married Thomas Riddle?” Ron asked, sitting down on the couch. “From the one picture of him from the newspaper article on the murder he wasn’t exactly a handsome sort.”

“More than likely it was arranged,” Hermione said. “Marriages usually were at that social level, and he had the money and name to command a good match regardless of what he looked like, or more importantly, what he behaved like.”

“I thought maybe standards of male beauty had changed too or something,” Ron said. “If slumpy shoulders and a huge forehead were good, maybe a bloke with a handlebar moustache wider than his own head and a nose that looked like a Quaffle could have made him a stunner.”

“Actually, the moustache was pretty common,” Hermione admitted. “I’m not sure whether to say it was good or bad luck that Tom Riddle inherited his good looks from his mum.”

“As desperate as Merope must have been, I doubt it would have made much difference,” Harry said.

“Wait, I thought you meant the other one. He was handsome at Hogwarts, wasn’t he?” Ron said.

“No, I believe that’s Tommy, not Tom, isn’t it?” Hermione said with a grin.

“Oh, yeah, right,” Ron said. “Blimey, if I have a kid, I’m not naming him Ronald.”

“What if you have a daughter instead?” Hermione suggested.

“I’m not naming her Ronald either,” Ron said firmly.

“Probably wise,” Harry said.

“So if You-Know-Who’s, er, Tommy’s gran and grandfather were an arranged marriage, why wasn’t his father married off the same way?” Ron asked.

“Oh, they probably intended to,” Hermione said. “Most likely the love spell interfered with his parents’ plans, which probably made them livid.”
“I almost feel sorry for him,” Ron said. “At the very least he should be able to pick the girl he’s going to marry.”

“As long as she chooses him as well,” Hermione said.

“Well, yeah, that too,” Ron said, nodding. “That’s only fair.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Hermione said, then paused.

“You’ve got that expression on your face again,” Ron said.

“What expression?” she said, and Harry noticed she looked concerned.

“The expression that means you’re thinking of a story,” Ron said.

“Actually, yes, I was rather,” Hermione said in surprise. “There’s one about a girl who’s moved from one arranged marriage to another. It’s a rather long one again, though.”

“The night’s young, I’m not especially sleepy, and I’m bored,” Ron said. “G’head.”

“Yeah, I think I’d rather have nightmares about one of these weird fairy tales than about Mary Bentley’s school exploits,” Harry said, settling onto the couch.

“Fair enough,” Hermione said. “So, once…”

“Upon a time,” Ron said immediately. “I like that part.”

“Yes, I gathered that,” Hermione said, giving him an exasperated frown, “there was a woman who very much wanted a child.”

“A lot of these seem to start that way,” Ron piped up again. “Is this one a queen?”

“No, she’s just an ordinary woman,” Hermione said.

“And what’s her husband do? Steal lettuce from a witch or contact evil fairies or—“ Ron asked.

“Oh, she’s not married,” Hermione said. “There’s no husband in this story.”

“Exactly how is she planning on having a child then?” Ron said, crossing his arms and giving her a disapproving look.

“Several of the versions state she’s an old woman, so it’s possible she’s a widow who was never able to have children, but others state she just simply wants a child,” Hermione said.

“So she’d better get herself a fellow,” Ron said.

“No, that’s not at all what she does,” Hermione said. “Instead she went to see a witch who lived on the outside of the town and paid her six golden pennies to help her.”

“I’m seeing a basic biological problem there if she was planning on going the old-fashioned route,” Ron said. “What did the witch do? Give the woman a baby or something?”

“No, she gave her a barleycorn,” Hermione said.

“Yes, because that’s completely logical and an obvious answer to the problem,” Ron said, shaking his head.
“The witch told her to go home and plant the barleycorn and see what would happen,” Hermione said, “which is exactly what she did.”

“I still don’t see why these people can’t all just go adopt a kid somewhere,” Ron said.

“Well, in many places I doubt a single woman would have been permitted to do that on her own,” Hermione said.

“Patriarchy thing again?” Ron asked, scrunching up his nose.

“Most likely,” Hermione said.

“I dislike the patriarchy,” Ron said firmly. “I think I’ve definitely decided on that now. I’m still not sure I can spell it, but I’m against it.”

Hermione gave him a warm smile that made Ron turn so red that he looked like someone had been drawing on his face with a crayon. To prevent a possible invasion of miniature Cupids, Harry decided to intervene.

“So the woman went home and planted the barleycorn,” Harry said. “Then what happened?”

“It was obviously a magical seed because by the next morning it had already grown into a beautiful yellow and red tulip, though its bud was tightly closed,” Hermione said.

“A tulip grew out of a barleycorn?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “That is precisely what I said.”

“Shouldn’t, you know, a barleycorn have grown out of it? Tulips grow from bulbs, right? They wouldn’t even look the same,” Ron said.

“Tulips are indeed a bulb flower,” Hermione said. “Remember, this is supposed to be magic.”

“Professor Sprout would have fits over the Muggle concept of Herboology,” Ron said. “You can’t plant one thing and grow something else from it! Even Jack’s ridiculously gigantic beanstalk at least came from a bean!”

“Oh, if that’s bothering you, you’re in for a bit of a shock for the next bit, I’m afraid,” Hermione said. “The woman looked at the lovely bud and gave it a kiss, and it immediately opened.”

“Whoever wrote this one needs remedial gardening,” Ron said. “Also, therapy. Snogging a tulip, I ask you!”

“Oh, it gets stranger,” Hermione said. “Inside the red and yellow petals was a tiny little girl.”

Harry and Ron looked at one another in confusion.

“I take it back,” Ron said. “Whoever wrote this needs remedial biology a lot more than gardening lessons. Therapy is still on the to-do list, though. There’s a kid in the tulip?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, “a girl no bigger than the woman’s thumb, so she named her Thumbelina.”

“Well, that’s about par for the mental naming conventions in these things, but can we go back a second to the idea of a barleycorn-tulip-kid?” Ron said.

“It does sound remarkably odd, I grant you,” Hermione said, “but this is Andersen again, and—“
“Oh, him!” Ron said. “Well, that explains it all. The woman’s lucky she’d didn’t have to chop off her own feet and bury them in the flowerpot then.”

Harry snorted in laughter, and even Hermione had a hard time suppressing a grin.

“As I was saying, Andersen was writing during the early Victorian period, and at that point Muggle children were largely kept in the dark concerning the basics of human reproduction. It was fairly common for Muggle parents to tell their children they had been delivered by a stork or even found under a cabbage leaf, so having a child born out of a tulip really isn’t terribly out of line with the acceptable story at that time,” Hermione said.

“A… cabbage… leaf…” Ron said slowly in disbelief. “Did these children never go near a farm or something where they might bump into animals having litters or something? Didn’t they wonder why their mums occasionally got very fat, then became normal-sized again after the cabbage kid showed up? How does that even work!”

“I’m sure eventually the concept crumbled in the face of reality, but even so, much of the general process was kept highly secret, particularly from girls,” Hermione said. “A great many young brides actually went to their wedding nights having no idea what was expected of them.”

“Kind of like Rapunzel and the twins?” Harry asked.

“Precisely,” Hermione said. “Innocence and ignorance were considered the same thing, so a frank understanding of biological, let alone reproductive, facts is probably not going to show up in a Victorian fairy tale.”

“Okay, fine, so I’ll just attempt to accept that this woman has a child via a tulip,” Ron said. “And she’s tiny.”

“Yes, the size of her thumb,” Hermione repeated. “The woman was delighted with her new daughter and made sure she was safe and protected. Every day, the girl grew in grace and beauty until in a few weeks she was a lovely young maiden.”

“That was fast,” Harry said.

“Yeah, how big is she now?” Ron asked. “Aging at that rate, she’s going to be a giant.”

“Oh, she didn’t grow at all. She stayed exactly the same height,” Hermione said.

“That’s going to be dead inconvenient,” Harry said.

“It would certainly seem so, but Thumbelina wasn’t unhappy at all,” Hermione said. “Her mother took a bowl and filled it with water, then wreathed it around with lovely flowers and gave her daughter a tulip petal for a boat and horsehairs for oars, and she rowed about her little pond quite merrily.”

“Okay, even I have to admit that’s a cute image,” Ron said, “possibly bordering on twee, but it’s nice everyone is happy.”

“Yes, but it wasn’t destined to be so for long,” Hermione said. “One night, as Thumbelina was sleeping in her bed, which was made of a walnut shell with a rose petal for a blanket, an old toad hopped onto the windowsill.”

“A walnut shell and rose petal bed?” Ron said. “This sounds like a blueprint for some sort of craft project from one of Mum’s magazines.”
“Did you miss the bit about the toad showing up?” Hermione said.

“No, I just had to put in my thoughts on the overly adorable bed,” Ron said. “So what’s the toad do?”

“The toad saw the lovely girl sleeping in her bed and thought she would make an excellent bride for her son, so she grabbed the walnut shell with her still inside it and hopped away with her back to the river,” Hermione said.

“Aw, the poor thing’s kidnapped?” Ron said. “And by a toad who wants to marry her off to her son. That’s… actually that’s another pretty good example of a biological impossibility. Don’t toads lay eggs?”

“Yes, they do,” Hermione said.

“Well, how’s that going to work with the whole barleycorn-tulip thing?” Ron said.

“It’s a poor match at every level,” Hermione said, “not least of all because it’s arranged without Thumbelina’s consent. The girl slept through the whole abduction and awoke alone, on a lily pad in the middle of the river, and having no idea how she got there and being unable to swim, she was most upset.”

“I’d say so,” Ron said. “Too bad her mum didn’t teach her how to dogpaddle in that flower bowl. Would have been useful.”

“True, but I can’t think she would have ever foreseen this possibility,” Hermione said. “Not long after, the toad returned with her hideous son in tow and said, ‘I have brought you here to be my son’s wife. Just now we are putting together a lovely bridal chamber in the mud for you. I’m sure you will be very happy there.’ The son, for his part only croaked loudly and said nothing else but stared at her with his great watery eyes.”

“Being goggled at by a giant toad while trapped on a lily pad in the middle of the water, unable to escape: that’s nightmare fuel right there,” Harry said. “That’ll probably show up off and on in my dreams for at least the next thirty years.”

On the other hand, Harry silently thought, if it replaced the lingering nightmares regarding Cedric’s murder, he’d welcome a whole slew of toads as a replacement.

“Thumbelina begged them to let her go home to her mother, but the toad became very angry with her and told her she was trapped forever and had better learn to like it, then dived back into the mud with her son, leaving her to weep alone on the lily pad,” Hermione said.

“I’d say she’s got a right to a bit of a sob,” Ron said. “That’s rotten luck.”

“As it turned out, her tears were heard by a school of fish in the river, and taking pity on her, they nibbled through the stem of the lily pad, and Thumbelina found herself being carried down the river by the current, far from the toads and off to she knew not where,” Hermione said.

“Still an improvement over marrying Trevor,” Ron said, “but don’t tell Neville I said it. Have we ever had a story with friendly fish before?”

Hermione tipped her head to the side and thought for a while.

“There’s a Chinese variation of Cinderella that involves a talking fish,” she said, “and I can think of a few other ones we haven’t had, but I believe this is a first.”
“Good old Ashyweeper,” Ron said nostalgically. “The disease-sounding one that started this whole barking mess.”

“Yes, it does rather seem we’ve been at this for years now,” Hermione said rather wistfully. “Anyway, Thumbelina actually began to enjoy her voyage down the little river as it was a bright, sunny day with the flowers in bloom. Soon a friendly white dragonfly happened by, and she took the sash from her dress and looped it around the stalk of the lily pad, and tied the other end to him, and she was soon travelling at a great speed down the river, pulled by the insect.”

“I’m guessing this story gets made into a lot of different picture books,” Ron said. “It seems to have one pretty little image right after another.”

“Now that you mention it, there are a fair few,” Hermione said.

“So, assuming the dragonfly doesn’t go whizzing off into the brush and send Thumbelina face first into a big patch of gorse or something, what happens next?” Ron asked.

“A mayfly was flying along and saw Thumbelina and decided she was very pretty and would make a good wife, so he swooped down and carried her off,” Hermione said.

“A toad first, and now a mayfly?” Ron asked. “Does this girl look like some sort of cross between an insect and an amphibian?”

“No, she’s supposed to be very pretty,” Hermione said.

“So why do various terrifyingly ugly things keep wanting to marry her? Oh, wait! Is this like Hottie McHotterson and the enchanted buffalo-warthog thing?”

“No, it’s not Beauty and the Beast,” Hermione said, barely stifling a chuckle. “They aren’t transformed people; they really are a toad and a bug. But it wasn’t a bad guess. As it was, the mayfly’s friends quite agreed with you that it was a poor match. Once he had carried Thumbelina back to a tree where the rest of the mayflies lived, they laughed at her, saying she was ugly, had no wings, and might as well be one of those horrid humans that bothered them. The one who had kidnapped her felt embarrassed by his choice and dumped her onto the forest floor below, abandoning her.”

“I guess that’s an improvement?” Harry ventured.

“In a way, though Thumbelina now thought she was horribly ugly,” Hermione said.

“Seriously?” Ron asked. “It was a bunch of bugs! What’s their opinion matter?”

“You’d be surprised,” Hermione said. “She’s a naïve little thing and hasn’t had much experience with the world. The idea is less that a bunch of mayflies found her unattractive, but that even the ugly mayflies thought she was ugly, so she thought it must be true.”

“Girls are weird,” Ron said. “Seriously, Harry, how much time did you spend pondering whether or not you were good looking when you were, oh, say ten?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “None?”

“Precisely,” Ron said.

“Yes, but you’re forgetting that culturally speaking a female’s worth as a person is often directly correlated to whether or not she’s regarded as attractive, largely because that would be useful in
procuring a mate, something for which Thumbelina was just rejected,” Hermione said. “That’s certainly the case during the time period this was written. I don’t think there’s a direct similarity for males, so of course they don’t worry as much about being attractive, even in childhood.”

“I’m suddenly finding my sister’s nail varnish collection depressing,” Ron said, looking deflated. “Okay, but she’s free now at least, right?”

“Yes, though she worried about the fate of the white dragonfly as she was afraid that he might die from being tied to the lily pad,” Hermione said.

“There’s another depressing thought,” Ron said sadly. “Poor dragonfly.”

“And even more disturbing, Andersen never does address that part of the story again, so we don’t know what happens to it,” Hermione said. “Honestly, that was one of the bits of this story that I always disliked.”

“Well, if you don’t know, just imagine that it got away then,” Ron said.

“That seems unlikely as it’s Andersen,” Hermione pointed out.

“Oh, right,” Ron said, frowning, but then he brightened up. “Imagine it got away but sustained some kind of a serious foot maiming injury in the process.”

Harry snorted in laughter, but Hermione nodded thoughtfully.

“Yes, that would be entirely in character for him,” she said. “Alright, I’ll just go with that possibility. In any case, Thumbelina, abandoned among the tall grass, was actually rather happy that summer, sleeping in a hammock made of spider webs, drinking dewdrops from the flowers, and singing along with the birds.”

“I suppose if you have to be abandoned in the middle of nowhere, she’s fairly comfortable,” Harry said. “Not much of a complainer, that one.”

“No,” Hermione said. “She actually enjoys her time on her own and is able to live independently throughout the summer in a sort of idyllic paradise.”

“So, knowing Andersen, that can’t last. Well, unless she gets bunions or something,” Ron said.

Hermione rolled her eyes as Harry laughed, but she agreed, “Eventually winter comes, and her bird friends leave, the dew stops, and there’s nothing more to eat, so she begins to wander, looking for some way to stay warm.”

“I have the oddest feeling something is about to happen,” Ron said.

“And, to make matters worse,” Hermione said, pausing dramatically, “she also had no shoes so her feet were freezing.”

“I knew it!” Ron yelled triumphantly, hopping on top of the couch and bouncing on the cushion. “I knew it! Andersen had to put in some weird foot thing at some point!”

“We really do seem to have stumbled upon some bizarre foot-related theme in his work,” Hermione said thoughtfully as Ron and Harry high-fived one another, hooting in delight. “I should do more research on that when I have the opportunity. I don’t know whether anyone has pursued that line of critical theory. It could be fascinating.”
“Or he was a weirdo,” Ron said, pausing in his jumping to flop bonelessly onto the couch, grinning.

“Or that,” Hermione agreed. “In any case, Thumbelina wandered through the snow—“

“Barefoot,” Ron pointed out.

“Yes, barefoot, until she came upon a field mouse’s burrow,” Hermione said. “She knocked timidly at the door, and when it opened, she begged the mouse for a bite to eat.”

“The mouse has a door?” Ron asked.

“Yes, the mouse has a door,” Hermione said with a tired sigh. “We’ve already specified the animals can speak, and the toad was building a bridal chamber in the mud, so this is a case of anthropomorphized animals. The mouse has a door. Learn to cope.”

“Okay, fine, the mouse has a door,” Ron said, shrugging. “It’s not that big of a point. Does he let Thumbelina in?”

“She does, yes, as it’s a female mouse,” Hermione said. “Bit of a gender bias there, Ronald.”

“Oh,” Ron said, looking uncomfortable, then brightened up again. “Well, it’s nice she doesn’t let the tiny barefoot girl starve.”

“The mouse is actually quite kind to her, at least at first, and she enjoys Thumbelina’s company so much that she allows her to live with her all winter in exchange for her doing chores and telling her stories or singing to her,” Hermione said.

“That’s a fair trade, all told,” Ron said.

“And that,” Hermione agreed. “However, it wasn’t long before Miss Mouse mentioned that her wealthy neighbor would soon be paying them a call, and that Thumbelina should be particularly kind and sensitive to him as he was rather easily offended.”

“Sounds like a fun sort,” Harry said.

“It doesn’t bode well, does it?” Hermione said. “She mentioned that he had a very large home and a beautiful fur coat and as much food and wealth as she could imagine.”

“That sounds a bit better I suppose,” Ron said.

Harry shrugged. Whoever this was sounded a bit too much like Lockhart to him still.

“Sure enough, that evening, a mole came around to call,” Hermione said.

“A mole?” Ron said. “Okay, I was going to say that was odd, but if he’s courting the mouse, at least they’re both rodents. I was half expecting a gorilla or a shark or something.”

“A shark?” Hermione said, looking at him as though he’d lost his mind. “How exactly would a shark come walking up to the front door of a mouse’s home in the middle of a field with no water nearby?”
“How exactly does a tulip produce a miniature human child?” Ron countered. “It’s not like the laws of nature apply normally in this thing.”

Hermione considered this for a moment, then shrugged.

“Point taken,” she said. “The mole was indeed a very important person, and what’s more, he knew it. Miss Mouse made sure that Thumbelina waited upon him and treated him with the utmost respect. She was also careful to make sure Thumbelina made no reference at all to the outside world as the mole hated it, along with birds and sunlight and anything else that belonged above the surface of the earth.”

“Why?” Ron asked.

“Partly because he was nearly blind, I suppose,” Hermione said, “but that really doesn’t explain why he would detest birds since he could hear them perfectly well or sunlight since he could feel its warmth. I think mostly it’s because he couldn’t control things above ground, but below ground he was wealthy and powerful and could do what he liked.”

Harry silently amended his picture of the mole as Lockhart. He was starting to sound significantly more like Lucius Malfoy.

“Miss Mouse asked Thumbelina to entertain them, and she sang songs for them and told them stories, and the mole was frankly enchanted by her,” Hermione said.

“Again? It can’t be that she’s stunningly attractive this time since the fellow’s blind,” Ron said.

“No, but she had a lovely voice as well,” Hermione said.

“I suppose,” Ron said, shaking his head. “A mole and a human, I ask you!”

“The mole continued to come by quite often, and he even dug a tunnel between Miss Mouse’s house and his own to visit more easily,” Hermione said. “One evening, as he was strolling with Miss Mouse and Thumbelina through the connecting tunnel, they reached a spot where part of the roof had caved in.”

“Shoddy craftsmanship on the mole’s part,” Ron said. “That’s not going to impress the ladies.”

“There was an explanation, though,” Hermione said. “A swallow had crashed through the tunnel’s roof and was lying dead in the passageway.”

“Also not especially impressive,” Ron said, wrinkling his nose.

“The mole and the mouse were both very rude about the bird, the mole going so far as to kick the corpse and say what stupid and useless animals birds were and that they did nothing of importance, like digging tunnels, and the mouse quite agreed with him, but Thumbelina kept silent. The dead bird made her very sad as she thought it might be one of the ones she had listened to during the summer, and she was sorry that it had frozen to death,” Hermione said.

“Okay, I get that the bird crashing through his roof is going to make him cranky, but kicking the poor thing is taking it too far,” Ron said, frowning. “I’m surprised at Miss Mouse, too. I rather liked her to this point.”

“She was so desperate for his approval that she would agree with practically anything the mole said, I think,” Hermione said. “She seems to be trying to get him to court her still at this point, which seems to have been the case before Thumbelina’s arrival.”
“Even so, making fun of a corpse isn’t right,” Harry said. “There’s something off about this.”

“It does seem that way,” Hermione agreed. “In any case, after they were through with their walk, Thumbelina and Miss Mouse went back to their own home, but Thumbelina couldn’t sleep for thinking about the dead bird lying alone in the passage.”

“Giving her the collywobbles?” Ron asked.

“No, she just felt someone should do something for it,” Hermione said. “Eventually, she quietly got up and, taking her blanket with her, went back down the passage and laid it over the bird to put it to rest.”

“So essentially she buried it?” Ron said. “It’s already underground. Isn’t that a bit redundant?”

“A body sitting about in a cellar is technically underground but I don’t think you’d call it decently buried, would you?” Hermione countered.

“I suppose not,” Ron admitted.

“Really, if she did regard the bird as a sort of friend, I suppose burying him as best she could was the least she could do,” Harry said.

Ron thought about it for a second, then said, “Okay, I get it. She’s being nicer than the other two by a long mile, anyway.”

“Yes, but the most amazing thing is that the bird turned out not to be dead,” Hermione said. “It was only very cold and had an injured wing. The warmth of the blanket revived him.”

“That must have terrified her,” Ron said. “Zombie bird. Or maybe an Inferius. I never really got the difference between the two of those.”

“Actually she was quite happy to have a friend again,” Hermione said. “She’d been rather lonely shut up with just Miss Mouse and the mole for company.”

“Yeah, I’m guessing Miss Mouse is getting a bit jealous as well,” Ron said.

“Most likely, and not without cause,” Hermione said. “Thumbelina continued to go secretly each night to visit the bird and nurse him back to health. The mole had decided to dig a second tunnel rather than repair the old one, so it was quite abandoned. The bird explained that he had been late in flying south for the winter, and he had torn his wing on a thorn bush and plummeted to the ground, unable to move and freezing.”

“Sounds painful,” Harry said, wincing.

“It does, but he did slowly heal under Thumbelina’s care,” Hermione said.

“Does the bird fall in love with her too?” Ron asked reluctantly. “Everybody else does.”

“No, actually,” Hermione said, “though they are friends.”

“Well, that’s something at least,” Ron said.

“Eventually the bird was well enough to fly again, and he asked Thumbelina to go with him to the sunlit lands where it was never winter, but though Thumbelina wanted to see such a wonderful place, she thought of how kind the mouse had been to her and said that she couldn’t leave those who had been so good to her,” Hermione said.
“I don’t know,” Ron said. “Sounds like the swallow is at least a little in love with her.”

“Suit yourself,” Hermione said. “Still, the swallow flew away, and Thumbelina missed him dearly as he was her one friend.”

“Poor kid,” Ron said. “I think she should have gone with the bird.”

“Maybe so, as we’ll see. After a while, Miss Mouse called Thumbelina aside from her chores and said, ‘A wonderful chance has come your way, far more than you deserve. The mole has asked for your hand in marriage,’” Hermione said, giving the mouse a squeaky little voice.

“Saw that one coming,” Ron said.

“You may have, Ronald, but Thumbelina hadn’t,” Hermione said. “She was quite surprised, but Miss Mouse went on and on about what a lucky girl she was and how wealthy her husband would be and how very grateful she ought to be.”

“You know, when I think of people getting engaged, I’m not sure ‘grateful’ or ‘more than you deserve’ are really the terms that should pop to mind,” Harry said. “It sounds like the mouse thinks Thumbelina should be happy with anyone, particularly the mole, regardless of how she feels about him.”

“Precisely,” Hermione said, “and that’s very similar to the betrothal process in the upper class levels traditionally. Usually a much older man would choose a young girl as his bride, or a younger man might have his bride chosen for him by his parents, and as long as he was wealthy and powerful and had a historically important family, it was expected that the girl would go along willingly. Sometimes she did. I doubt Mary Bentley objected to Tom Riddle’s proposal, but then I don’t know if she was really asked.”

“Do you suppose the same holds true for Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa?” Harry asked, still thinking of the parallels between the mole and Draco’s father.

“I would assume so,” Hermione said with ill-disguised dislike. “I’d never really thought about it. I’m sure her pureblood family would have approved of the match at any rate.”

“But if she hadn’t wanted to? Or if he hadn’t?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know,” Hermione said, softening a bit. “I assume it wouldn’t have gone over well. That’s what happened with Thumbelina. She was appalled at the idea of becoming the mole’s wife, not only because she did not love him but because he insisted that she should live only in his home and never see the daylight world again.”

“What’s he going to do? Stick her in a hole in the ground and never let her out again?” Ron asked.

“In this case, that’s literally true,” Hermione said.

“Okay, that’s bang out of order,” Ron said angrily. “So what did Thumbelina do?”

“She told the mouse that she didn’t want to marry the mole, and the mouse threatened to bite her with her sharp little teeth if she didn’t see sense and agree to the match,” Hermione said.

“Also bang out of order,” Ron said. “That’s terrible! They can’t make her marry him, can they?”

“Not exactly, but they can threaten to throw her out into the cold again or attack her,” Hermione said. “It would be much the same thing. Plenty of brides faced those possibilities if they said no instead of
yes, if they were even asked at all. The mouse may well have thought she was behaving for the best for the girl since the match, from all outward appearances, would have been a good one, and Thumbelina’s refusal doesn’t make any sense from a completely pragmatic view.”

“So what does Thumbelina do?” Harry asked.

“Nothing, really,” Hermione said. “Miss Mouse told the mole that the engagement was acceptable to her, though Thumbelina actually hadn’t said that, and the mole arranged for the wedding to take place in the autumn so he could build an even larger and more splendid house and so Thumbelina could finish her wedding gown. The veil was to be spun of silk by six spiders.”

“Spiders?” Ron said queasily. “Okay, that’s the last straw. I really do not like this mole.”

“Neither did Thumbelina, but she saw no recourse for herself. She worked on the dress, though every moment made her sadder. The summer hurried past far too quickly, and one day she woke to realize that it was her wedding day.”

“I still say she should have flown off with the bird,” Ron said gloomily.

“Thumbelina put on her wedding dress and went outside alone to bid goodbye to the sunlight and the world above for the last time,” Hermione said.

“Why does this sound weirdly familiar to me?” Harry said. “I keep trying to place it, but I can’t put my finger on it.”

“I think I know what it is,” Hermione said. “You’re remembering the story of Hades and Persephone.”

“The Greek myth bloke who rules the dead and the spring girl?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said, looking a little surprised. “Precisely.”

“Mum used to tell us some of those stories before bedtime,” Ron said. “We’ve got enough witches and wizards named after the characters in them.”

“I suppose you do,” Hermione said. “In any case, our story deals with a girl who is kidnapped from her mother and forced into a different world, and eventually has a very wealthy character who lives underground try to compel her into marriage, which is extremely similar to the plot with Hades, who is often called the Rich One, and Persephone.”

“That’s it!” Harry said. “They read that one to us at school once when I was maybe seven or so. It’s supposed to explain the change of seasons, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s a nature myth,” Hermione said, “but Andersen almost definitely used it as inspiration here.”

“If I recall, things didn’t go too well for Persephone in that one,” Ron said. “Hades gets to keep her for half the year and her mum has her the other half?”

“Right,” Hermione said. “You’re remembering it very well. When she’s with her mother, it’s spring and summer, and when she’s with Hades, it’s autumn and winter.”

“So if Andersen is using that story as a source, Thumbelina does marry the mole, then,” Ron said, looking downcast.
“Actually, no,” Hermione said.

“No?” Ron said, brightening up.

“No, when she goes outside, weeping over having to say goodbye to the sunlit world, the swallow lands by her feet and asks her what her trouble is,” Hermione said.

“Well done, swallow!” Ron said, practically cheering.

“She told him, and he said that, as summer was now over, he was going back to the south again, and he repeated his offer to let her ride on his back,” Hermione said. “This time, she said yes.”

“Good choice,” Harry said.

“I’ll say,” Ron agreed.

“So in all her wedding finery, she hopped upon the swallow’s back and flew into the sunlight, leaving her veil behind,” Hermione said.

“Good riddance to spidery rubbish,” Ron said firmly. “I wonder what the guests at the wedding thought?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said. “Perhaps the mole married Miss Mouse in Thumbelina’s place instead. They certainly seem better suited to one another.”

“Fine by me,” Ron said. “So where do they go?”

“Anderersen doesn’t spell it out exactly, but the swallow flies over mountains and valleys until finally he comes to a place that’s warm and sunny and full of orange trees,” Hermione said.

“He flew to Florida?” Ron asked.

“I don’t think the swallow could fly across the entire Atlantic Ocean, Ron,” Hermione said patiently.

“Oh,” Ron said, blushing. “Probably not.”

“He also mentions there was a big castle and the ruins of an old temple with toppled white marble columns, so I think he may have intended his readers to assume they were in Italy or possibly Greece,” Hermione said. “That would rather underscore the classical element in the story as well.”

“Nice bit of a tip of the hat to the original,” Ron said. “So what happens?”

“The swallow says that he and the other birds live in nests built under the eaves of the old castle, and while he would love to have her stay with him, he doesn’t think that would be comfortable for Thumbelina,” Hermione said.

“I think he’s the first one to think about what she might like rather than what he wants,” Harry said. “I’m really starting to like this bird.”

“Yeah, he’s a good sort,” Ron said approvingly.

“Instead, he says that there is a garden of beautiful flowers growing wild over the old temple, and perhaps she might like to choose one of those as her own and live there,” Hermione said.

“She seems to like flowers and such,” Ron said. “It’s not a bad idea. Well, aside from being eaten by wild animals or blown away in a thunderstorm, I suppose.”
“Yes, well, leaving the less pleasant environmental factors out of it, Thumbelina picked a lovely white flower, and the swallow landed there and let her climb down. Then he flew away with a heavy heart, for he would miss his friend,” Hermione said.

“Hey, she’s literally next door. He can drop round for tea any time,” Ron pointed out.

“True enough,” Hermione said. “However, Thumbelina soon realized she was not alone on the flower.”

“Oh, Merlin, if that mayfly or some other stupid thing kidnaps her again or eats her, I’m going to dig up Andersen and give him a stern talking to!” Ron said in exasperation.

“No, it wasn’t an insect or any other sort of animal,” Hermione said, hiding a smile at Ron’s emotional investment in the story. “Thumbelina was stunned to see another little person just her own size, a handsome little man who wore a crown on his head.”

“I suppose it would make sense there would have to be more of them somewhere,” Harry said.

“Convenient, maybe too convenient, but I’ll let it pass since she’s had one heck of a life to this point,” Ron said. “Also, I’m glad she’s not about to be eaten. Wait, is she?”

“No, thankfully, the little man was not a cannibal,” Hermione said. “Instead, he looked at her and said, ‘You are the fairest maiden I have ever seen. Will you not tell me your tale?’ Thumbelina told him all that had happened to her. After, he said, ‘I see you are both brave and kind. I am the king of the flower angels, and I believe you would make a most fitting queen. Would you marry me?’”

“Another one?” Ron said.

“Well, at least this one actually asked her,” Harry pointed out.

“True,” Ron said, “and it’s not like he’s a beetle or a slug or something else totally incompatible. But what’s a flower angel supposed to be?”

“I’m not really sure,” Hermione said. “Andersen does use that term specifically rather than a fairy or something similar. It seems like they’re a more spiritual version of a fairy, so the reader is supposed to assume that they’re very good beings. He does also mention that all the flower fairies have wings as well.”

“Okay, so maybe not a perfect fit,” Ron said, “but close enough.”

“Thumbelina must have agreed with you, because she happily accepted the king’s proposal and they were wed at once, with the swallow singing joyously during the wedding,” Hermione said.

“That was fast,” Ron said. “Then again, she was already wearing the wedding dress, so why bother waiting?”

“The flower angels brought Thumbelina beautiful and wonderful gifts, but the most wonderful of all was her own pair of wings that looked very much like those of the white dragonfly from the lily pad,” Hermione said.

“They killed it and gave her its wings?” Ron said, looking horrified.

“I don’t think so,” Hermione said. “I think we’re just supposed to think they’re pretty.”

“Yeah, well, that dragonfly is still bothering me, so bully for her that she got wings, but I hope he got
away too,” Ron said.

“I agree,” Hermione said. “Then the king said, ‘Thumbelina is an ugly name for one so fair. From now on, your name shall be Maia.’”

“He renames her?” Harry asked. “That’s rather disturbing.”

“Again, I tend to agree. It’s not unusual in feminist stories for women to change their names at some point as a part of the heroine’s journey as a way of showing self-determination, but here it’s his choice, not hers, which does cast a sinister shadow over the happy ending. I believe Andersen just wanted to show that Thumbelina was now where she was supposed to be and starting a new life, but it does sound a false note,” Hermione said.

“And it’s rude,” Ron said.

“That too,” Hermione said, “but Thumbelina seems to be quite happy, and she lived happily ever after. The swallow flew all the way to Denmark, though, and sat outside the window of a storyteller and sang of her adventures in a song, and the storyteller listened, and that’s how the tale of Thumbelina came to be. The end.”

Ron and Harry looked at each other for a moment, then Ron took a deep breath.

“Oh dear,” Hermione mumbled. “Here we go again.”

“So what happened to her mum?” Ron asked.

“Though a lot of modern interpretations do somehow have the mother show up again, in Andersen’s version, they’re never reunited,” Hermione said.

“Well, that’s even sadder than the dragonfly,” Ron said.

“Possibly, but I think there might be an undercurrent of punishment here as well,” Hermione said. “The mother didn’t choose to wonder where Thumbelina came from, and it does seem as though she was stolen from the flower angels prior to her birth.”

“Even so, that’s sad,” Ron said. “Then again, it’s Andersen. What should I expect?”

“Foot pain?” Harry said.

“She’s got wings now, so her feet aren’t really even a point anymore,” Ron said, waving it away, then stopping. “Wait, was that the reasoning behind that? She’s finally escaped from the whole foot thing?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said with a surprised blink. “Possibly?”

“I’m going to go with that, then,” Ron said. “And then they lived happily ever after.”

“Or as much as anyone does in these things,” Harry said, though even he had to admit that living in a flowery meadow and getting wings did sound pretty idyllic.

“So, that sort of explains the courtship of Mary Bentley and Thomas Riddle, who is not Tom Riddle or Tommy Riddle,” Hermione said, ticking them off on her fingers. “What it doesn’t do is suggest where we should go next.”

“Sure it does,” Ron said. “I say we try Italy.”
“Italy?” Hermione said uncertainly.

“Why not?” Ron said.

“Because there’s absolutely no connection between You-Know-Who and Italy that I’ve ever heard of?” Hermione said carefully.

“Okay, hear me out,” Ron said. “What if he just picked a spot that really does have no connection to him whatsoever for at least one Horcrux? Maybe he was going for high symbolism and ego stroking with some of them, but wouldn’t it make sense for him to put one Horcrux in a completely random place with no known history with him?”

“It would,” Harry said, “but if he did I’m afraid we don’t have any chance at all of finding it.”

“It’s a nightmarish thought, but certainly possible,” Hermione said, shuddering.

“So, why not at least try Italy then?” Ron said. “There’s loads of wizarding history over there. Maybe we should check the catacombs in Rome or something.”

Harry found himself considered this, which was surprising to him.

“Here’s a thought,” Harry said finally. “I say we take it in turns to pick the next place that we think is likely. Hermione, you picked Riddle’s gran’s school. Ron, if you think there’s a chance that Vol—“

“Tommy!” Ron yelled quickly.

“Fine, Tommy,” Harry said, still wondering why everyone was so afraid of a name, “might have put a Horcrux in the catacombs in Rome, then that’s where we’ll go.”

Ron was silent for a moment.

“It is possible,” Hermione said slowly. “The catacombs do have an entire wizarding section the Muggles don’t know exists, it is a place connected to death, and it’s certainly considered a great honor to be buried there.”

“Okay, then we’ll try Rome,” Ron said, looking slightly stunned that his idea had been picked.

They turned in for bed for the night, but Harry’s mind was uneasy. In truth, Harry had no hope at all that Voldemort had ever been in Italy. He had made the suggestion only so that Ron would be less likely to feel he was being ignored. However, the wasted time was worth it if it kept Ron from becoming too depressed, and the Horcrux seemed to be affecting him worse each day. The story of Thumbelina might have been about a tiny girl who was taken from one adventure to the next, but she’d also eventually run away from the mouse and mole, fed up with a life of others’ decisions, and left them. He hoped Ron wouldn’t someday do the same.
“Well, at least the food is good?” Ron ventured apologetically as they entered the tent, which was currently set up in a back alley of Rome, right between a bakery and a butcher.

“I can’t argue with that,” Hermione said, “but it would be nice if we could do more than smell it.”

Harry silently agreed. They’d cadged a few bits out of bins, as usual, but the scent of the fresh bread and the piles of good meat on either side of them was slowly driving him mad.

“I don’t think You-Know-Who was ever here,” Ron said.

“He might have been,” Hermione said consolingly. “They do say all roads lead to Rome, don’t they?”

“That’d be downright confusing,” Ron said, flopping into a chair. “Also, really inconvenient if you’re just trying to go to the corner shop for some mustard.”

Their search of the catacombs had proved fruitless, even in the wizarding section that was unknown to Muggles. While Hermione had been fascinated by the wealth of history they had encountered, there was no known connection to Voldemort, or even to any of the Hogwarts’ founders. The winding tunnels and tiny chambers arranged in a bewildering collection under the ancient city would certainly have been a perfect place to hide a precious treasure, and Harry suspected that any number of other wizarding relics probably were hidden away down there in undisturbed compartments, but one of Voldemort’s Horcruxes didn’t seem to be among them.

The three of them sat in silence for a while, listening to the noises of the city as night began to fall: the shutters of shops closing, people walking home along the stone streets, the voices of children calling out happily to one another in Italian as they played. Harry couldn’t help thinking it all sounded much nicer than anything they’d seen back home for a long while.

“You might have been wrong about the Horcrux, Ron,” Harry said, “but if we’re going to show up in the wrong spot, at least this is a pleasant one.”

“Much nicer than Mary Bentley’s childhood boarding school,” Ron said, nodding in agreement.

Hermione, however, looked worried. Granted, that was beginning to be her normal expression, but Harry knew something was on her mind.

“Yes, it is quite nice here,” she said, “and warm too, which is lovely almost beyond words, but we can’t make a habit of this.”

“Why not?” Ron said, raising his head from where he’d been resting it on the back of the chair. “It’s miles better than Britain just now.”

“Yes, but we’re not supposed to running away from home. We’re fighting to make home safe
again,” Hermione said quietly. “This is a really tempting place just to sit and wait things out. Too tempting, actually.”

Harry knew what she meant. He was nowhere near as enthralled with history as Hermione was, but even he had a strong urge to wander the streets and soak in the feel of Rome in all its glory. It didn’t hurt that it was a good deal warmer than Britain, and his bones felt like they were starting to thaw from a chill he had nearly forgotten was always present there.

“No Dementors,” Ron said suddenly. “That’s what it is. They aren’t as many here as there are back home.”

“I think you’re right,” Harry said slowly. “We’ve gotten so used to them, we don’t even realize it anymore when they’re around.”

“You do have a point,” Hermione said. “Dementors can show up anywhere, even here, but they’ve been breeding like mad in Britain for the last couple years. The effect of that much horrible, hungry power everywhere, what with the nearly constant fog, probably has created a cumulative negative impact on just about everyone.”

“And now that we’re here, it’s going away,” Harry said, looking sideways at Ron, who seemed more like his old self than Harry could remember in a very long time.

Rome was doing them all good, but Hermione was right. There was a danger in becoming too comfortable. Still, perhaps one more day wouldn’t be so bad? An idea occurred to Harry, and while it was outrageously manipulative of Hermione, he thought that it might just help them recover a bit more before they had to return to battle.

“Hermione,” Harry said, “have you given a thought to the Vatican library?”

Hermione’s eyes seemed to increase three times from their normal size.

“What?” she squeaked out.

“It’s supposed to be a very good one, isn’t it?” Harry said. “Could there be a clue or something in one of the books there? We could probably sneak in using the cloak.”

The look on Hermione’s face was one Harry hadn’t seen since she’d been gazing at Lockhart in second year. Contemplating breaking into the Vatican library was throwing her into something that seemed very akin to outright lust. In fact, she was scaring Harry just a bit, and Ron was actually inching closer to the door.

“I would assume there’s a restricted section in there that would focus on some of the things we could be dealing with, but of course it isn’t open to the general public,” she said, wetting her lips. “Until the wizarding world went into hiding, the Vatican library held an enormous specialized collection dealing with alchemy and a variety of other magical topics. I’m positive all of that must still be in there somewhere.”

“Uh-huh,” Ron said, staring at her lips now. “Sure, that’s right.”

Harry would have bet his last Knut Ron had no idea what she had been talking about.

“So you think it might be worth a go, then?” Harry asked. “We could try tomorrow.”

Hermione looked deeply conflicted, then began muttering to herself, “It’s not like we’re doing it purely for fun, and there could be something, though I don’t know what it would be, but if we
overlook an opportunity to find useful information that would be wasteful, even if it does delay returning to direct battle, and isn’t this a form of arming ourselves properly, or am I letting my own desires outweigh the needs of the many, and what if we get caught, not that it’s more likely here than elsewhere, but then again the moral ramifications—”

“I think we should check,” Ron interrupted. “We might find something.”

“Hmm?” Hermione said, glancing up as though she’d forgotten the other two were there. “Oh, you think so?”

“I do,” Ron said. “It’s got books and stuff, right?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, “it mostly definitely has books and stuff.”

“Then since we’re here, we might as well try,” Ron said.

“Okay, if we’re all in agreement, then we’ll delay leaving Rome for one more day,” Hermione said.

Harry smiled, though inwardly he felt a bit guilty for manipulating Hermione’s bibliophile tendencies, but being here really did seem to be helping them all, especially Ron. They couldn’t fight properly if they were so saturated in despair that everything seemed like a losing battle.

“How will we know when we’ve found what we’re looking for?” Ron asked suddenly.

“You mean a Horcrux?” Hermione asked.

“No, though that’s a fair point as well. I mean, I suppose any one of the five billion pebbles we’ve passed today could have Lord Baldy’s soul wedged inside it and we’d never know the difference, but I actually meant the book in the library. What we will be looking for?” Ron asked.

“Oh, well, I suppose we need to find the Vatican’s equivalent of the Restricted Section first, which should be fairly obvious once we’ve uncovered the various charms and other security measures around it. Then, we’d look for books that don’t fit, things that are out of place thematically,” Hermione said, “sort of like the book version of the ugly duckling.”

“The what?” Ron asked.

Hermione rubbed her forehead in frustration and said, “Looks like I’ve gone and done it again. It’s another Muggle story.”

“Is it weird?” Ron asked, grinning with anticipation.

“I suppose, though there isn’t any magic in it,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said, his smile faltering. “Well, I suppose you can’t have everything. Would you tell us it anyway?”

The simple fact Ron was asking her to tell a story rather than commanding it made Harry absolutely convinced he’d made the right decision in coercing Hermione to stay a day longer, and Hermione’s beaming smile in return made him doubly sure of it.

“Certainly, if you like,” Hermione said, settling herself into a cross-legged position on the couch. “Once—”

“—upon a time,” Ron said along with her, and Hermione merely nodded in response as though he had given the correct answer to one of their long-ago review sessions for N.E.W.T.s.
"There lived a mother duck who was very proud of the seven eggs she had just laid in her lovely nest by the lake in the farmer’s pasture,” Hermione said.

“Seven? That’s a good layer,” Ron said, sounding impressed.

“That’s what she felt too, and all the other ducks from the pond came to visit her as she sat on the eggs while the father duck brought her food to eat. However, something was strange about one of the eggs. It was larger than the others,” Hermione said.

“That’d be uncomfortable under the poor old girl’s bum,” Ron said sympathetically.

“Yes, well, I suppose in a brood of seven, there’s always at least one that’s likely to be a pain in the mother’s posterior,” Hermione said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Are you insinuating something?” Ron said in mock indignation.

“Not at all, not at all,” Hermione said in an equally teasing tone.

“Fine, I’ll say it straight out,” Harry said with a laugh. “Poor Mrs. Weasley has had it rough with the lot of all seven of you!”

“Eight, if you don’t mind,” Ron said seriously. “You’re basically a Weasley too for all practical concerns.”

The sudden declaration from Ron was a bit of a surprise, and Harry felt quite touched by it. He was struck speechless for a long moment, after which a misty-eyed Hermione continued on.

“Yes, well, six of the eggs hatched in the usual time, but the seventh remained still. An older duck came by and prodded it, saying, ‘It’s a dud, I think. Look at what a different color it is from the others, and so large!’” Hermione said, giving the duck a particularly quack-y sounding voice.

“I suppose that can happen,” Ron said. “Sad though. Be nice if the other duck had a touch of compassion there.”

“Unfortunately, that tends to be in short supply in this story,” Hermione said. “However, the mother duck was certain the egg was still good, and in a few more days, it did indeed break open and a bird came out.”

“And judging from what you said earlier, this was not a handsome duck,” Ron said.

“Yes, everyone took one look at the duckling, even the mother, and declared him the ugliest duckling they’d ever seen, though the mother said she would love him just the same,” Hermione said.

“What was so wrong with him?” Harry asked.

“The other ducklings were yellow and fluffy and small, but he was very big and grey and quite awkward when he walked,” Hermione said.

“Why am I being weirdly reminded of Neville for some reason?” Ron said.

“Possibly because it’s a pretty fair comparison,” Hermione said. “He’s a very good sort, Neville, but he does rather stand out in Gryffinor.”

“That and your brothers turned him into a giant bird with those Canary Creams of theirs,” Harry said.
“Yeah, that’s probably it. Merlin, he did make an ugly bird,” Ron said with a laugh.

“He was very good-natured about it, though,” Hermione said, and there was a guilty twinge to her voice. “He almost always is, and maybe that’s why I haven’t said enough to the rest of Gryffindor about backing off from him. He really has had a bad time of it.”

“I suppose,” Ron said, but the look on his face was bordering on jealous rather than guilty. After all, Neville had asked Hermione to the Yule Ball in fourth year, though she’d already had a date with Krum, meaning Ron was at least the third person to ask her. Harry couldn’t help wondering if she really would have said yes to Neville if Krum hadn’t asked first, which was a strange thought. Harry almost felt sorry for Neville being turned down until he remembered Neville had ended up going with Ginny instead and coming back to the dormitory very late that night. Suddenly Harry wasn’t quite so sympathetic anymore.

“So what happened to the ducklings, including the gawky ugly one?” Ron asked with what sounded like a bit of relish.

“When they were old enough, the mother duck taught them to swim, and while all of them swam well, the ugly duckling was by far the best,” Hermione said.

“Good at sports then, is he?” Ron said. “So not Neville, then.”

Hermione gave him a warning look that did shut Ron up before she continued on.

“Pleased at how well the ducklings had swum, the mother…”

“Swum?” Ron asked, making a face.

“Yes, swum,” Hermione said. “It’s the past participle of swim.”

“Yeah, maybe, but seriously, who says swum?” Ron said, screwing his face into a grimace.

“I do,” Hermione said, sounding offended. “It’s entirely correct.”

“Yeah, so’s calling a bunch of blackbirds a merle, but who does that?” Ron asked.

“Apparently you do,” Hermione said, now looking a good deal more impressed. “How did you know that?”

“Percy mentioned it once,” Ron said as though this were the most damning piece of evidence yet against Hermione’s use of the word swum.

“Oh,” Hermione said. “Well, regardless, the mother duck took her children to the farmyard to show them off to the other animals. Unfortunately, it did not go well.”

“I was afraid of that,” Harry said.

“While the first six were the subject of many compliments, they were entirely forgot when the final and enormous duckling came into view. The animals laughed at him, calling him names, and one rooster even started pecking him viciously,” Hermione said.

“Malfoy,” Ron said, now firmly on the side of the ostracized duckling regardless of any affinity to Neville. “But they’re all a right lot of horrid bullies.”

“Very true,” Hermione said. “The mother duck took him under her wing and told them to leave him alone, saying ‘He’s done nothing to you!’ but they seemed to take issue with his existing at all.”
“Wild guess. Andersen again?” Ron said asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “How did you know?”

“His always seem more than a bit cruel, but in a different way than the others. More like sad and mean,” Ron said.

“It’s worse when you realize it’s basically his autobiography,” Hermione said. “He was a large, awkward, shy, rather unattractive man who was picked on a lot as both a child and an adult.”

“Crikey. Poor bloke. Okay, maybe I’ll cut him a tiny bit of slack about his foot thing,” Ron said.

“Indeed, but to return to the story of the ugly duckling—,” Hermione started to say, but Ron interrupted her.

“Does he have a proper name?” he asked.

“No, not that I’ve ever heard,” Hermione said.

“It seems mean to keep calling him the ugly duckling,” Ron said. “Do any of the other animals get a name in this?”

“No, so he isn’t odd that way,” Hermione said.

“But it’s still mean,” Ron said, frowning deeply. “I’m calling him, I don’t know… Norbert.”

“You’re naming him after Hagrid’s dragon?” Harry asked, wondering if his friend was going round the twist at last.

“Well, he wasn’t exactly adorable at birth either,” Ron said.

“Fair point,” Harry conceded. “Okay, Norbert the ugly duckling it is.”

Hermione looked back and forth between the pair them and gave in.

“Fine,” Hermione said, and Harry noted there was a smile pulling at the corner of her mouth. “The mother duck did stand up for her strange son.”

“Well, at least there’s that,” Ron said.

“But over time even her resolve grew weak, and eventually, to avoid the constant struggle with the other animals, she told him to go away on his own,” Hermione said.

“She threw out her own kid just because he wasn’t good-looking enough?” Ron said, appalled.

“Well, it could also be interpreted more generously that she was afraid something would happen to him if the other animals kept trying to hurt him, but the original text does seem to suggest that she’s really just tired of him,” Hermione said.

“Poor Norbert,” Ron said, sounding really distressed. “This kid’s childhood make yours look perfect in comparison, Harry.”

“Yeah, the Dursleys might have hated me, but they didn’t throw me out the door and tell me to shove off forever when I was a little kid either, much as they probably would have liked to,” Harry said. The story was starting to strike a chord with him as well.
“My parents were obsessed with flossing,” Hermione blurted out suddenly.

Ron and Harry both stared at her, then started laughing.

“Sorry,” she said, looking embarrassed. “I’m not even sure where that came from. Anyway, the duckling did indeed leave the farm, wandering very far, farther than the other ducklings had ever gone, until he reached a large lake with tall grass and reeds all around it.”

“Wait, he walked all that way?” Ron asked. “Why didn’t he just fly?”

“He’s too young to fly,” Hermione said. “Those feathers haven’t grown in yet.”

“Great Merlin, he really is just a baby in this,” Ron said, looking really upset.

“He’s exceptionally young, yes,” Hermione said.

“That’s awfully small to be out all alone,” he said.

“Well, he did make some friends at the lake, a pair of wild ducks,” Hermione said.


“Well, yes and no,” Hermione said. “The ducks insisted on calling him Ugly and used him as a practice test audience for approaching the female wild ducks, hissing at him and such.”

“You know, I really wouldn’t be surprised if this kid grows up to have some sort of self-esteem problem,” Ron said. “Tell me that isn’t the end of the story, Hermione. Please. Even for Andersen, that’s bleak.”

“No, it’s not,” Hermione said reassuringly, then frowned. “Ehm, well, not mostly. Sort of. Anyway, he did live with the ducks for some time on the lake, and he watched many other wild birds come and go, including a flock of beautiful swans. By looking at those lovely birds every day, he learned what real grace was and felt doubly unhappy about his own ugliness in comparison until eventually they flew away.”

“What happened next?” Harry asked.

“Oh, one day a pair of hunters shot the wild ducks from a blind,” Hermione said.

“What?” Ron said, looking up from his pseudo-dead position on the floor. “I mean, I didn’t like them, but still, that’s harsh.”

“The ugly duckling was terrified as an enormous dog came crashing towards the high grass where he was hiding to retrieve the ducks’ bodies for the hunters. The dog saw him, but snorted out, ‘You’re much too ugly to kill,’ picked up the dead ducks in his mouth, and ran back to his masters,” Hermione said.

“So he gets called ugly yet again, but at least it saves his life,” Harry said. “That comes out to sort of a draw.”

“I suppose so, but the duckling was left alone once again,” Hermione said.

“This tyke is having a very, very rough go of it,” Ron said, looking deeply concerned. “Hermione, this isn’t going to be one of Andersen’s stories that ends with someone freezing to death in an alleyway or turning into sentient seafoam or something, right?”
“Well, I don’t usually like to spoil the ending of the stories,” Hermione said uncertainly, but Harry could tell from her expression that she wanted to say something to put Ron at ease.

“Okay, then can you at least promise that the poor duck doesn’t hallucinate the world’s saddest Christmas dinner and a masochistic goose with a fork and knife in it walking around like some very badly done Inferius?” Ron pleaded.

“I… what?” Hermione said looking confused.

“That little girl in the match story really got to me,” he said sadly. “Also, I’m having nightmares about the damn goose. That was just deeply wrong, and there are birds in this one.”

“Without any form of mental reservation, I can promise you this story does not involve waterfowl hallucinating a reanimated Christmas dinner composed of avian Inferi,” Hermione said, then paused. “That may be the oddest sentence I have ever uttered.”

“It’s probably in the top ten,” Ron said, “but only probably since these stories are so mental. Okay, the duckling loses his none-too-nice friends and doesn’t get killed by a dog. Now what?”

“Well, the duckling wandered for quite some time until he came upon the cottage of an elderly woman who lived with a cat and a hen. At first he was quite frightened of her, but she lured him into the house, reasoning that if the duckling proved to be a female, she would be able to eat its eggs along with those of the hen, and if a male, she could kill it and eat it,” Hermione said.

“Merlin, this bird just stumbles about from bad to worse!” Ron said. “At least tell me she didn’t call him ugly.”

“No, she actually had rather poor eyesight, so she didn’t comment on his looks at all,” Hermione said.

“That’s good,” Ron said.

“Her cat and hen did, though,” Hermione added.

“Oh, come off it! This is ludicrous! I mean, cats can be sort of picky and snooty and overly posh, but hens! I ask you, who ever heard of a conceited, bullying hen!” Ron yelled.

“I take it you are unfamiliar with the term hen-pecked?” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said. “Okay, I guess they do have a negative reputation.”

“Granted, they didn’t focus overmuch on the duckling’s features and more on his perceived uselessness. The hen pointed out that she was a valuable member of the group because she could lay eggs, and the cat—” Hermione began.

“I know, let me guess, the cat can kill mice and rats and save them all from the plague or something,” Ron said.

“Actually, the cat just mentions that he can arch his back and his fur can make sparks if someone pets him the wrong way and that he can purr,” Hermione said.

Ron and Harry both looked confused.

“That’s bloody useless,” Ron said. “Putting his back up, purring and sparking? Also, does Crookshanks ever randomly give off sparks?”
“Not so I’ve noticed, but then I’m not idiot enough to rub a cat’s fur the wrong way,” Hermione said. “That’s an excellent way to wind up with a free arm tattoo.”

“So the cat and the hen are a couple of right old prigs,” Ron said, “and the old woman is only interested in the duckling for eggs or breakfast, which is going to prove a problem since Norbert’s a boy. Then what?”

“Oddly, after a few weeks the duckling started to have a craving for swimming in the water again as he’d been away from it for such a long time. He began fantasizing about diving deep to eat water weeds and how wonderfully cool the water would feel closing over his head,” Hermione said.

“Finally, for once food comes up in one of these things and it doesn’t make me hungry,” Ron said, grinning. “No, not even months wandering about in the barren wastelands of Britain will make me develop a craving for water weeds.”

“We’ve actually found the limit!” Harry cried in mock ecstasy, swatting Ron right off the couch. “The bottomless pit has an end at last!”

Ron looked up at him from the floor, crossing his eyes and making a face before glancing over at Hermione and saying, “So what happened? Did he go for a swim?”

“He mentioned it to the hen and the cat. Both of them never went near the water if they could help it, so they thought the duckling had at last lost his mind, and they refused to have anything to do with him at all. So the duckling wandered outside until he finally found a river and went for a swim, feeling much better than he had in the stuffy cottage,” Hermione said.

“And thereby he missed being eaten due to being a non-egg-laying male,” Harry pointed out.

“Yes, it does inadvertently save his life into the bargain,” Hermione agreed. “He did decide not to return to the cottage and lived alone on the pond. The other animals still shunned him for being so ugly, but at least he could breathe and act naturally.”

“Seriously, how ugly is this poor duck?” Ron asked. “He can’t be worse off than a Flobberworm or something.”

“Sometimes perception is the damning bit,” Hermione said. “No one expects a Flobberworm to be handsome, so no one really remarks that they’re unattractive since they aren’t supposed to be. On the other hand, ducklings are usually portrayed as cute and fluffy, so the lack of living up to that expectation makes the duckling appear to be some sort of failure.”

Ron squinted for a second, still sprawled on the floor.

“So, it’s like when Witch Weekly makes people think girls are all supposed to look perfect all the time?” Ron said slowly.

Hermione’s face broke into a whole-hearted smile so bright it made Harry blink.

“Yes, precisely!” she said.

“So, is there a Duck Weekly in this story?” Ron said, frowning.

“Ehm, probably not an exact parallel, but I truly think you’re getting the idea,” Hermione said.

“Patriarchy. Duckiarchy. Same thing,” Ron said, nodding wisely. “So what’s the poor little guy do in isolation on the lake?”
“He swims a good deal, for in spite of everything he was still quite graceful in the water. Then one day, he saw a whole flock of beautiful white birds land on the lake, and he was completely in awe of them,” Hermione said.

“Swans again?” Harry guessed.

“Precisely. The ugly duckling hid in the reeds but couldn’t take his eyes from the stately and perfect birds. He knew that they would undoubtedly abuse him if he went up to them, so he kept a good distance, but he allowed himself the joy of seeing what he would never be: beauty,” Hermione said.

“I don’t really understand why people get so impressed by swans,” Ron said, dragging himself back into his seat. “I mean, yeah, I guess they’re pretty and all, but have you ever really looked at their feet? Those are some weird feet.”

“Classically, they’re considered a pinnacle of beauty, and of course Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in Greek mythology, was supposed to have been hatched from a swan’s egg,” Hermione said.

Ron stared at her.

“I really don’t want to know how someone got hatched out of a swan’s egg, do I?” Ron said.

“Let’s just say Zeus could be horrible when he thought a mortal woman was attractive,” Hermione said, her eyes darkening in a way Harry thought would frighten most Death Eaters senseless.

“Okay, now that I’m scarred for life about that, let’s go back to poor Norbert staring at the pretty birds and experiencing deep-seated self-esteem issues,” Ron said. “What happened?”

“One day the swans flew away as it was autumn and the winter winds would soon arrive, and the duckling realized he would never see them again, but he carried the memory of them as something almost not of this earth,” Hermione said.

“Wait, is he going to migrate too? Do ducks migrate?” Ron asked.

“A good few do, but the ugly duckling didn’t really know how, so he just stayed on the pond, swimming in circles as the leaves fell and then the snow. The water slowly froze over each day, leaving him only a small pool that he broke up with his continued swimming, growing smaller and smaller until finally he was surrounded by ice,” Hermione said.

“He did not die in the ice,” Ron said firmly. “I refuse to accept Norbert freezes to death alone in an empty pond in the middle of winter.”

“Actually, he doesn’t,” Hermione said kindly, and Harry noted that Ron’s earlier declaration against the duckiarchy seemed to have mellowed her considerably. “A peasant comes by and sees him in the ice and takes pity on him, lifting him out and carrying him back to his cottage.”

“Finally!” Ron yelled. “An actual decent person! Is he a woodsman by any chance?”

“It doesn’t say so in the story, but I suppose he might be. Why?” Hermione asked.

“Woodsmen seem like good folk in most of these,” Ron said. “In my brain, he’s a woodsman.”

“Fine with me,” Hermione said, smiling. “He can join Little Red Riding Hood’s and Snow White’s.”

“Maybe they’re all in a club or something. Decent Woodsmen of Fairy Tales. D.W.O.F.T,” Ron
“Dwoft?” Hermione said, raising an eyebrow.

“You named yours S.P.E.W.,” Ron pointed out. “You have very little room to complain.”

Hermione rolled her eyes but continued.

“The peasant, or woodsman, brought the bird back to his cottage, and the warmth of the fire there did revive him. However, the ugly duckling was very upset when he awoke and he didn’t know where he was,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, that can happen,” Harry said. “When I woke up in the Hospital Wing after the Dementors attacked during Quidditch in third year, I thought I was in some sort of nightmare for a few seconds.”

“Quite,” Hermione said with a nod. “That really was awful. The poor duck, though, had no one to explain to him what had happened, and he went absolutely wild. The peasant’s wife screamed as he started flapping among the rafters, and the children laughed and started trying to chase him, which upset him so much that he fell into the butter barrel and then the flour barrel by turns.”

“Mum would not like that,” Ron said. “Sounds like a right mess.”

“Sounds like he’s dredging himself for a fry up,” Harry said.

“Eventually he blundered out of an open window and took off at top speed, leaving the cottage behind,” Hermione said.

“So now he’s back to being alone and out in the cold but he’s also covered in butter and flour?” Ron said. “Norbert’s got no good luck at all in this.”

“Not much, but somehow he did manage to survive the winter,” Hermione said. “Eventually as spring came, he found a little park with a pretty lake in it and willow trees all around. It was a lovely spot, and as he watched, the beautiful swans he had seen last autumn flew down from the sky and landed gracefully on the water. He had travelled very far and had been deeply lonely for a long time, so he couldn’t help but to cautiously approach the birds, even though he feared they would kill him out of repulsion.”

“This kid’s got problems,” Ron said.

“As he approached the fairest swan, he lowered his neck and, deciding that if he had to choose his death, it would be this, quietly said, ‘Kill me,’” Hermione said.

“Oh, come on!” Ron said.

“That’s basically what the swans’ reaction was, as none of them made any move to harm him and couldn’t understand his sorrow,” Hermione said. “Just at that moment, a group of children came up to the lake, bringing along bread and cakes to feed the swans, and they gasped in disbelief when they saw the new bird.”

“Any why would that be?” Ron asked suspiciously.

“Because the ugly duckling was no longer ugly. He looked at his reflection in the lake and realized he was, in fact, a beautiful swan, the most beautiful of them all,” Hermione said.

Ron stared. Harry screwed up his face as though he was trying to work it all out himself. Hermione
just sort of looked between the two of them, not quite certain if they understood, then after a pause gamely plodded on.

“So the children fed him cake and bread, the other swans accepted him into their group, he was never lonely again, and he lived happily ever after,” she said, though it almost sounded more like a question.

Silence filled the room for a few seconds until Ron finally opened his mouth.

“Okay,” he said slowly, “so Norbert was a swan, not a duck.”

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“So how did a swan egg end up in duck nest to begin with?” Ron asked.

“Absolutely no idea,” Hermione admitted.

“Then, never once in this whole story does anyone ever realize that Norbert is actually a swan and not a duck until the very end?” Ron asked.

“Apparently not, no,” Hermione said. “There aren’t any swans at the farm at any rate.”

“Well, there must have been one at some point to stick the egg in the nest,” Ron pointed out. “Where are all the other baby swans in this?”

“Cygnets,” Hermione provided immediately, “and he does seem to be the only one.”

“So essentially everyone in this whole thing is pretty much an idiot,” Ron said.

“To some extent, yes,” Hermione said. “They just assume he’s ugly rather than different, and Andersen used it as a parallel with his own rather unhappy life. He finally found his place in life with his fairy tales, so he pretty much is the duckling.”

“Cygnet,” Ron corrected her. “But the whole point is that rather than the duckling growing up to be fine as a duck, he’s actually a swan and this all comes back around to beauty being the most important thing or some such tosh?”

Hermione tipped her head to one side for a moment.

“That is a possible valid interpretation,” Hermione finally said. “Again, remember that beauty was usually equated with morality and goodness in these tales, so it’s a sort of justification of the duckling’s, or cygnet’s, hardships and a condemnation of his treatment by others.”

Ron shook his head.

“At least Andersen didn’t do anything nasty about feet in this one,” he said.

“Unless the peasant pulled him out of the icy lake and his feet were frozen,” Harry pointed out.

“Good catch, mate,” Ron said. “As far as I’m concerned, Norbert went on to grow up to be a duck, and not even an especially good-looking one, who lived a long and happy duck-life with his nice and average duck-wife and had lots of ducklings whom he actually loved regardless of whether they were pretty or handsome or whatnot, and nuts to the rest of those mean birds and people and whatnot, and that’s the end of the story.”

Harry wondered whether Hermione would be upset over this complete overhauling of one of her
stories, but he was pleased to see she didn’t look angry at all.

“I do believe I like your ending a good deal better than Andersen’s, Ron,” she said, then, to the shock of both boys, she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before getting up and stretching, “It’s getting late. I think I’ll turn in. See you in the morning, early, of course. We’ll need to be at the Vatican library before daybreak.”

“Okay,” Ron said, watching her retreating form, “yeah, daybreak, night, good, sleep, book, library, thingy.”

“Highly erudite,” Harry said, slugging his friend in the shoulder. “Next time, stick to happy ducks.”

“Right, and if you’re so smart, what would you have done to fix that nightmare, then?” Ron asked.

“Easy,” Harry said, rolling over onto the couch to try to get comfortable for another night in Rome. “I’d have had one of the swans tell Norbert he was a wizard. Worked for me.”
“That was most definitely not what I had in mind,” Hermione muttered as she entered the tent, closely followed by Ron and Harry.

All of them looked much the worse for wear. Although they were still safely ensconced in the little alleyway in Rome, their spirits had deflated since the previous day.

“What was that stuff?” Ron asked.

“I’m guessing very old, stagnant holy water,” Hermione said.

“It kind of burns,” Ron said, scratching his arms absently.

“Yes, well, we’ll assume that’s because of it being dormant in those pipes for several centuries and not due to your being some sort of unholy demon or something,” Hermione said, a slight smile pulling at her lips in spite of herself. “Of course, I’m not sure your mother would necessarily agree.”

“Nah,” Ron said, flopping down on the sofa and pulling out his wand. He began using it to dry himself off. “Mum’s certain if anyone in the family is part-demon, it’s the twins. I’m the innocent one.”

Harry snorted a laugh.

“Come off it,” Ron said, looking over at him while suctioning water out of his socks. “Bill’s part werewolf, Charlie works with eerie-looking reptilian dragons, Percy’s in league with the ministry, Fred and George use illegal charms all the time, and Ginny’s just downright dangerous and has been since the age of two. That makes me the poor little lost lamb of the lot.”

“I rather highly doubt that,” Hermione said, sitting in one of the chairs and following Ron’s example by drying herself off.

“Oh, so I’m going to be the one who actually asks what all that was about,” Harry said, taking off his sodden shoes.

“Booby traps,” Hermione said.

“I got that bit somewhere around the point when it appeared to be raining inside the Vatican library, but why? What were they trying to protect?” Harry asked.

“Not sure, but definitely not a Horcrux,” Hermione said firmly. “I’d suspect that, if that was indeed holy water, and I’m nearly certain it was, they were trying to ward off any evil influences that might try to infiltrate that section.”

“So why wouldn’t a Horcrux be stuck in there, then?” Ron asked.
“Because a Horcrux is pretty much the definition of an evil object,” Hermione said. “We haven’t quite figured out how to destroy one yet—”

“More’s the pity,” Ron grumbled.

“But I’m guessing that throwing blessed water on it wouldn’t do it a world of good,” Hermione said.

“Do you think it might melt it?” Ron said, looking up hopefully.

“To be honest, I already tried that at the village church in Ottery St. Catchpole before we left,” Hermione said. “It did smoke a little, but that was it. Also, the vicar wasn’t exactly happy with me when he found me dipping a locket in the baptismal font. I think I’ve been officially banned from setting foot on all property owned by the Church of England.”

Harry laughed. Hermione really had got much better about allowing herself to risk being in trouble for the sake of doing anything that really needed to be done, but he would have paid a mountain of Galleons to see the look on her face when she was thrown out of St. Hubertus’s.

“It really was rather embarrassing,” Hermione admitted, starting to dry her jumper.

“I’d bet,” Ron said, smirking.

“So you don’t think there’s anything in there that would be useful?” Harry asked carefully. “In the library, I mean.”

“Oh, I’m certain there’s a great deal, but I doubt we’d be able to find it in less than a couple centuries,” Hermione said with infinite regret.

“Right,” Ron said, looking downcast.

Harry knew Ron was hoping for at least one more day in Rome before they returned to Britain and its permanent atmosphere of gloom. The break had done them all good, Harry was sure of it, but it seemed to have boosted Ron’s spirits most of all.

“I think we’ve reached another dead end,” Hermione said. “It wasn’t a bad idea, though, and maybe we can get a decent breakfast from the baker tomorrow morning before we go off to the next place.”

“Do we have any Italian money left?” Ron asked. “Actually, now I think of it, did we ever have any?”

“I brought some lira with me along with a few bills for most of the other countries on the continent, just in case,” Hermione said, reaching for her beaded bag and sorting through yet another pile of objects. “Not much, only a bit, but if we’re leaving then it should be safe to spend it tomorrow.”

“Why haven’t we used it before now?” Ron asked, looking put out.

“Because once it’s gone, that’s it,” Hermione said. “There isn’t any more. It was only for an emergency.”

“Being hungry is most definitely an emergency,” Ron said firmly.

“We’ve cadged a good bit from the bins, some pretty excellent stuff, really,” Hermione said.

Harry had to agree. In their two days, they’d gotten some pretty fresh day old bread and even a bit of prosciutto to toast up, but Ron still looked doubtful.
“It would be like the goose with the golden eggs,” Hermione said, her tone a bit annoyed. “Don’t demand too much or we’ll wind up with nothing.”

“Golden eggs? What, like from the second task?” Ron asked.

“No, although that might have been where they got the idea for it. It’s actually quite a short little story, one of Aesop’s,” Hermione said.

“Well, we’ve got time for a short story before we turn in, don’t we?” Ron asked.

“I would think so,” Hermione agreed, smiling a bit. “Once…”

“…upon a time, or whatever that would be in Greek,” Ron said.

“Yes, there lived a man and his wife who were poor country folk,” Hermione said.

“There really aren’t too many rich country folk in these, are there?” Ron asked, considering.

“I suppose not, at least not in these stories,” Hermione said. “Wealth would most likely have been associated with town life, though of course poverty could exist there as well. It wasn’t until basic luxuries were available for Muggles outside of cities and towns that having a place in the country would have been a positive thing. Usually, lack of civilization, especially in Aesop’s time, would have been both dangerous and unpleasant, something to be avoided if one could.”

“Right, so they’re not living at the queen’s summer home in the country,” Ron said. “They’re farmers or some such?”

“Exactly,” Hermione said, “and one kind of the animals they kept was geese.”

“And I get reminded of that horrific, headless, masochistic Christmas goose yet again,” Ron said, shuddering.

“The couple really wasn’t interested in eating the geese, though, as they provided them with eggs, which kept them fed well enough,” Hermione said. “Not unlike the bins from the baker and butcher here, really.”

“I suppose,” Ron said, still sounding sour. “At least they didn’t have to go knocking about in bins at two o’clock in the morning, though.”

“No, but then one day something very strange happened,” Hermione said.

“Which was?” Harry asked.

“One of the geese laid an egg that was solid gold,” Hermione said.

Ron screwed up his face in disbelief.

“You’re joking,” Ron said.

“No, really, I’m not,” Hermione said. “That’s the story. Each day, the goose would lay a golden egg.”

“Somebody’s having this couple on,” Ron said. “Is it paint? Leprechaun gold? Thieves stealing random golden eggs for some ridiculous reason and hiding them under the goose’s bum for safekeeping?”
“No, the goose really did lay a golden egg each day,” Hermione said.

“That completely flouts that whole rule in magic about not being able to make gold,” Ron said.

“With the exception of the Sorcerer’s Stone,” Harry pointed out.

“Philosopher’s Stone,” Hermione automatically corrected him.

“I thought it was sorcerer?” Harry said, looking confused.

“No, definitely philosopher,” Hermione said.

“I’m the one who had it in my pocket,” Harry said, feeling rather annoyed. “I should hope I know what it was called.”

“Sorcerer, philosopher, toh-may-toh, toh-mah-toh,” Ron said waving the issue away. “The point is, maybe the goose ate one of them.”

“A tomato?” Harry asked.

“No, one of the stones,” Ron said, “whatever they’re called.”

“I suppose that could technically be possible, though Flamel was the only known maker of the Philosopher’s Stone, and he wasn’t born until much later,” Hermione said.


Hermione gave him a look, but continued, “Still, he was the only known one. Perhaps someone did manage to pull it off before him.”

Ron looked greatly pleased with himself.

“Okay, so the poor couple can afford to move to town or something,” Ron said.

“They did indeed go into town each morning with their golden egg, which they sold for a tidy profit, and slowly their wealth increased,” Hermione said.

“I like this story,” Ron said, smiling. “Nice and happy.”

“I wouldn’t advise being too comfortable,” Hermione said. “The man and his wife began to become impatient.”

Ron raised his hand politely.

“Yes?” Hermione asked carefully.

“Wouldn’t it be just as fair to say the woman and her husband?” Ron asked.

“I suppose, but that’s not the usual phrasing,” Hermione said.

“Yes, but in this one it sounds like she’s defined in life by her position as being married to him, but he isn’t by being married to her,” Ron said, nodding seriously. “Patriarchy again, right?”

Hermione blinked in surprise.

“Well spotted,” she said, “and this time I really do mean it.”
Ron smiled, Hermione blushed, and Harry considered gagging but thought better of it.

“So the couple, as that’s a more equal term, were both possessed of a desire to get all the good things at once,” Hermione said.

“That doesn’t sound promising,” Ron said.

“No, and their greed led them to think that all the eggs must lie within the goose already, and if they killed her and cut her open, they could have the whole fortune at once,” Hermione said.

“That’s just plain mean!” Ron said angrily. “That goose has been just as nice as could be to them, and they want to kill her!”

“And I’m afraid that’s exactly what they did,” Hermione said, “only when they looked inside her, there wasn’t a single golden egg to be found, and they never had another. They’d spoiled their good fortune by destroying their literal nest egg, and they were soon poor once again because of their impatience.”

“Meanwhile the poor goose is dead,” Harry said, feeling rather sad.

“Wait… No, she’s not!” Ron said excitedly. “She’s fine!”

The other two looked at him curiously.

“Don’t you get it?” Ron said. “Besides being able to make gold, the whatsis’ stone also made the bearer immortal, right?”

“Yes, that’s why You-Know-Who wanted it,” Hermione said.

“So let’s say the goose did swallow it,” Ron said. “They might have tried to kill the goose, but she probably just healed up again and waddled her happy way down the road, and what’s more, we know she did because she shows up in that story with Jack and the insanely gigantic peapods!”

“Jack and the beanstalk, you mean,” Hermione said, but her eyes were enormous. “Oh my goodness, I never thought of that before, but that goose did lay golden eggs, and again for no apparent reason whatsoever!”

“Stone,” Ron said firmly while nodding and folding his arms. “Philosopher or sorcerer, that goose blundered into some wizard’s house, ate the stone, started laying golden eggs, survived attempted murder, and wound up in not one but two of these idiotic things.”

Harry stared at him.

“Is it me or does that make perfect sense?” Harry said to Hermione.

“It really does,” Hermione said, still sounding shocked. “Of course the moral is that greed destroys what it desires, but I suppose that still holds even in this instance since the couple does lose the goose.”

“I certainly wouldn’t stay there if I were her,” Ron said. “Good on ol’ Goosey.”

“You do realize what else this means, right?” Harry said.

Hermione and Ron both looked at him.

“The goose is still alive,” Harry said. “She’d still be gobbling away someplace, laying eggs and
laughing up her wing at the whole of humanity for centuries.”

“That’s true,” Ron said, slowly. “Well, we’ve got a new quest after this one’s over, haven’t we!”

“I am never going to be able to look at this story the same way again,” Hermione said, shaking her head. “My whole worldview is tilted.”

“Decent night’s sleep’ll fix that,” Ron said. “So, where are we off to tomorrow?”

“Harry, it’s your turn to pick,” Hermione said.

“Well, I sort of suggested the Vatican library, so that was my turn,” he said. “You’re up, Hermione.”

“Okay,” she said. She hesitated for a moment, then said timidly, “Well, we’re not all that far, so I think maybe it might be worthwhile to check Albania.”

“Albania?” Harry and Ron asked together.

“It’s where he ran into Quirrell, where Bertha Jorkins was killed, and where he lived, if you can call it living, for many years,” Hermione said. “Maybe there’s a clue there somewhere in the forest.”

Harry turned this over in his mind. He hadn’t expected to stay away from Britain longer, but it was a logical choice, and one that, the more he thought about it, seemed likely to produce something.

“Sounds good,” Ron said, smiling. “Okay, so we’re off to Albania.”

“We’ll head to Tirana tomorrow, then,” Hermione said.

“I thought we were going to Albania,” Ron said.

“That’s the capital city of Albania,” Hermione explained.

“Oh, right,” Ron said. “Tirana.”

Harry nodded in agreement.

“And tomorrow, we get a real breakfast with the last of the lira before we go,” Hermione said. “No point not using a golden egg when we’ve got one. Night.”

“G’night,” Ron and Harry muttered.

As they climbed into their beds and turned off the lights, Harry couldn’t help wondering whether Ron was right. Maybe there really was a goose wandering about the world, laying golden eggs and perhaps leaving them as gifts for people who needed them. It was a pleasant thought.

“Definitely sorcerer’s,” Harry muttered under his breath as he fell asleep.

“Philosopher’s,” Hermione’s voice answered from across the tent, and then all was quiet.
The forests of Albania were deep, and though the chill of winter was in the air, Harry couldn’t help feeling that the cold that was cutting through him had less to do with the weather and more with some of the places they had just visited.

“So, that’s what happened to Bertha Jorkins,” Ron said, shuddering as he re-entered the tent. “Blimey but Wormtail is a nasty bit of work.”

Hermione nodded silently, shuddering. They had managed to find the woman’s final resting place. Pettigrew had apparently used the same trick Barty Crouch Jr. had on his own father, transfiguring her body, in this case into a stone. The people who had lived nearby had avoided that particular area of the forest for the last several years, claiming that anyone who went there had terrible nightmares about red-eyed demons and eerie green lights. Harry still wasn’t quite sure how Muggles had picked up on the dark magic used there, but the stories turned out to have a basis in fact. Hermione’s whispered “Reparifarge” in the clearing in question had homed in on the small, unremarkable stone immediately, and then suddenly, Bertha Jorkins’s corpse appeared.

“That was horrible,” Hermione said, sitting down and staring at the floor between her feet.

“Yeah,” Ron said. “The poor woman might not have been the brightest witch about, but that was a terrible thing to do.”

“At least we can say we gave her a proper burial,” Harry said.

“Yes, but without any family or friends,” Hermione said.

“When this is all over, we can tell someone where she’s buried,” Ron said. “We couldn’t very well carry her around, even if we made her a stone again. That wouldn’t be too respectful either.”

“I know,” Hermione said, but her face was still dark. “I still feel dreadful about all of this, though.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, then added, “and is anyone else worried now that Tommy might have made one of his Horcruxes look like a plain old everyday rock, one we probably tripped right over without noticing?”

“The thought did occur to me,” Harry said uncomfortably.

“No, I don’t think so,” Hermione said, and Harry thought she sounded surer than she probably was. “You-Know-Who didn’t care about Bertha. She wasn’t a trophy or a bit of him, just another one of his countless victims that he disposed of when she was of no more use. He treated her like rubbish. He wouldn’t do that to anything he valued, and he values himself more than anything else.”

“Probably,” Ron said, but he didn’t seem convinced. “It’d be smart, though, having one in reserve that doesn’t fit his usual pattern.”
“I agree, but honestly,” Hermione paused, then said in a rush, “I really don’t think he’s all that intelligent.”

“He’s pretty bloody powerful for an idiot,” Ron said. “Yes, but so is a troll,” Hermione pointed, “and they’re not good at planning at all, are they? He botched trying to kill Harry several times already, he doesn’t research his plans thoroughly, and his ego gets in the way of accomplishing anything he’s trying to do. Honestly, he’s a bit like one of those James Bond villains sometimes, blithering on about how brilliant he is rather than doing anything.”

“Who’s James Bond?” Ron asked.

“This one I know even with my pathetic childhood,” Harry said, smiling in spite of himself. “He’s a Muggle secret agent in movies and books who has really cool gadgets and about five hundred girlfriends, and he always escapes no matter what ridiculous trap he falls into.”

“A fair summation,” Hermione said.

“Sounds like a decent story,” Ron said. “Why not tell us one of those, Hermione?”

“Because he’s rather a sexist pig at times,” Hermione said. “Also, some of his adventures are too risqué for comfortable storytelling.”

Ron certainly seemed to be paying attention now, Harry thought, and he’d pay good money to hear Hermione try to tell the tale of Dr. No. Uncle Vernon was so fond of Ursula Andress that he’d been completely blind to the fact Harry was watching the TV as well from his place at the sink in the kitchen while washing the dishes. Harry had done the dishes for almost three hours, cleaning everything from the breakfast plates to the Christmas pudding mold, in an effort to see the whole movie. At least there was one thing he could agree with his uncle about.

Ron was still looking highly intrigued with the idea of James Bond, but Harry thought it might be much safer to venture in another direction.

“What about a different one, then?” Harry asked. “Are there any stories that you’ve got that are just plain bizarre?”

“That’d be all of them, mate,” Ron said.

“Oh, there’s a few that are very unusual, yes,” Hermione said, thinking. “I suppose ‘The Brave Little Tailor’ would be a difficult one to top.”

“Then by all means, let’s hear it,” Ron said. “I’d rather think of nutty fairy tales then the stuff we’ve seen today.”

“All right then,” Hermione said. “Once upon a…”

“…time,” Ron joined in automatically.

“Yes, there was a poor tailor who was working very hard when he found it was time for lunch,” Hermione said.

“What’s he having?” Ron said, and Harry noticed that even with their really rather luxurious breakfast that morning in Italy before Apparating to Albania—a round of ciambellas filled with custard, orange-glazed cornettos, and some truly excellent espresso—he was still ravenous.

“Bread and jam,” Hermione said.
“Okay, I’ll go with that,” Ron said, closing his eyes. “Strawberry… no, raspberry… no, a bit of both.”

“Actually, the jam really does play a role in the story. The tailor bought it from a passing peddler, bargaining for it, and then put it on some bread. It smelled so sweet in the noonday sun that a whole group of flies came buzzing through the window, and the tailor had to protect his food from them,” Hermione said.

“That’s a good deal less appetizing,” Ron said dispiritedly.

“Ah, but he managed to pick up a piece of paper and kill seven of them with one blow,” Hermione said.

“Seven with just one blow?” Ron said. “Either he’s very good at killing flies or else this fellow really has a huge swarm in the shop.”

“He was very highly impressed with himself as well, going so far as to embroider a belt with the words ‘killed seven with one blow’ and wear it around his waist. Then, deciding that a man with this sort of skill shouldn’t be only a simple tailor, he decided to go out and seek his fortune in the wide world,” Hermione said.

“That seems like he might be taking it a bit far,” Harry said.

“The belt alone went beyond taking it a bit far. Deciding his ability to swat flies well qualifies as a sign to give up his job and go looking for adventure is bonkers. He’s basing his entire life on a random incident with jam,” Ron said. Then he grinned. “I’m already liking this one a lot.”

“As the tailor wandered along the road, he found a small bird that had become tangled in some vines. Deciding this too was something he should pay attention to, he quickly freed the bird,” Hermione said.

“That was nice of him,” Ron said.

“And stuck him in his pocket,” Hermione said.

“And that was stupid of him,” Ron said. “Good way to wind up with a pocket full of bird poo, not to mention an angry bird pecking your thigh to bits.”

“Oddly, it ended up not being as stupid as it seemed,” Hermione said, “for only a few minutes later, he met a very large giant coming in the opposite direction.”

“I am trying and failing to see how that makes stuffing a bird in his pocket less idiotic,” Ron said.

“You’ll see. The giant saw the tailor’s belt and assumed that it referred to seven men, so he was rather impressed with the puny human and challenged him to a contest of strength,” Hermione said.

“Bit of a jump to assume it meant people,” Harry said.

“Yes, but who would think someone would be congratulating themselves on fly swatting?” Hermione said.

“Either one would be weird,” Ron said. “So what’s the strength challenge?”

“The giant picked up a rock and squeezed it in his hand until he made water run out of it,” Hermione said.
“Is that physically possible?” Ron asked.

“Theoretically, some rocks can have a water content, but actually squeezing water from a rock is pretty much impossible,” Hermione said.

“Right, so what did the tailor do?” Ron asked.

“He bent down to pick up a rock from the ground but secretly switched it with a hunk of cheese he had in his pocket for his lunch,” Hermione explained.

“Not the same pocket with the bird in it?” Ron asked.

“No, a different one. Anyway, he squeezed the cheese until whey ran out of it, and the giant was very surprised indeed,” Hermione said.

“Bit dim, isn’t he, mistaking some cheddar for a rock,” Ron said.

“I never said he was an especially smart giant,” Hermione pointed out. “Next, the giant challenged him to a throwing competition. This time, he took a rock and threw it up in the air so high that it took over an hour for it to come back down again.”

“Wouldn’t it have hit the moon or something by then?” Ron asked.

“Not quite, but it certainly should have escaped earth’s lower atmosphere and possibly disintegrated from the force,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “Whatever the case, the tailor said he could beat that, and he took the bird out of his pocket and pretended to throw it. In reality, of course, it simply flew away, and the giant was once again surprised that the tailor’s throw was so high that it never came back down again.”

“I admit that was clever, but he couldn’t possibly have known he was going to need to throw a bird up in the air because a random giant was going to come by and challenge him to a rock throwing contest,” Ron said.

“No, but he was able to think quickly on his feet with what he had around him,” Hermione said.

“Okay, I’ll grant that, but I’m betting this story isn’t done because these things tend to go in threes,” Ron said.

“Indeed, very well observed,” Hermione said, smiling proudly. “The giant knocked over a huge oak tree to carry back home for firewood, and he said he would take one end and the tailor the other. The tailor agreed at once and said he would take the one end with all the branches since it was the more difficult one to carry.”

“That seems like it would be fairly true,” Harry said.

“Except, of course, he carried nothing at all. The giant carried the trunk in front, dragging the branches behind him, and the tailor, as small as he was, was able to lie down and hide in the leafy branches and let the giant give him a ride for his trouble without his being any the wiser,” Hermione said.

“But what if the giant turned around to see if he was keeping up his part of the bargain?” Ron asked.

“He did, several times in fact, but all he could see was the branches of the tree, and the tailor assured him he was doing his part of the bargain,” Hermione said.
“Clever,” Ron said. “I think we’re dealing with a potential Slytherin here.”

“Possibly,” Hermione said, tipping her head to the side. “Actually, the main characteristics of Slytherin, at least according to the Sorting Hat, are ambition and intelligence, which I have to admit doesn’t really seem all that different from most Ravenclaws when you think about it.”

“Ravenclaws?” Ron asked, raising an eyebrow. “They seem a bit too bookish for Slytherin.”

“Not necessarily,” Hermione said. “I’m more than passingly fond of books, and the Sorting Hat didn’t wind up putting me there, though it did consider it briefly.”

“Well, yeah, but look at Luna,” Ron said. “She’s a Ravenclaw, and she’s not exactly a traditional academic, is she?”

“No,” Hermione said carefully, “I don’t think anyone would call her that. Honestly, I always thought she might have been happier in…”

“Gryffindor,” Harry immediately supplied.

“I was going to say Hufflepuff, actually,” Hermione said. “She has that sort of semi-hippie attitude that a lot of them do.”

“But she’s very loyal,” Harry pointed out.

“True,” Hermione said. “They don’t come more loyal, even if she is a bit, well, odd.”

“And brave,” Ron added. “She handled the Death Eaters at the Ministry without much trouble at all.”

“Fair point,” Hermione said, but she looked uncomfortable. “I just wish I could, I don’t know, understand her a bit more. She believes in such ridiculous things, and sometimes I could just shake some common sense into her.”

“So? Common sense is, you know, common. Ordinary. Sort of boring,” Ron said. “One thing Luna never is is boring. Bit daft on occasion, but not boring.”

“Are you saying I’m boring?” Hermione said, a dangerous note in her voice.

“No!” Ron said immediately, backing up. “No, but you’re not really common sense either, are you? You’re uncommonly sensibly, much more than usual. ‘Brightest witch of your age’ and all that.”

Mollified, Hermione shrugged. “Luna’s a good friend and I miss her, regardless of what house she would have been happiest in.”

“She’s probably happiest with what she has,” Harry said. “That’s how she is.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, then added, “but I still think the tailor is a potential Slytherin.”


“That’d fit,” Ron said approvingly. “He doesn’t say much, but you get the feeling he’s thinking a lot. Maybe too much. Unnerving, that.”

“Yes, well, whatever house he would belong to, the giant and the tailor continued down the road until they came to a cherry orchard. The giant bent down the top of one of the trees so the tailor could pick some cherries, but then without warning let go of it. The tailor, who was still holding the
branch when it snapped back up and obviously could not hold down the whole tree with his small strength, was flung wildly through the air,” Hermione said.

“I think the jig is up,” Harry said.

“Unbelievably, the tailor was able to cover even for this, saying that he had spotted a hunter in the valley down below, and to avoid being accidentally shot, he had jumped over the tree of his own accord, then challenged the giant to do likewise,” Hermione said.

“And did he?” Ron asked.

“No, the giant couldn’t manage it and wound up caught in the tree branches,” Hermione said.

“Bit like the old carol, but instead of a partridge in a pear tree, it’s a giant in a cherry tree,” Ron said, laughing.

“Oh, now I’m going to have that song stuck in my head all night,” Hermione said, “only with the wrong lyrics, of course.”

“Let’s see,” said, then began to sing off-key. “Twelve sisters dancing, eleven ants a-working, ten stepmothers plotting, nine princesses sleeping, eight geese a-bullying, seven dwarfs a-mining, six swan princes swimming, five idiotic fathers! Four Bremen musicians, three weird bears, two sore feet, and a giant in a cherry tree!”

Harry and Hermione stared at Ron for a solid minute with looks of equal disbelief and horror on their face.

“What? I could have sung you ‘Pajamabell’ to the tune of ‘Jingle Bells’ instead,” Ron said. “Want to hear?”

“No, no, I think we’re fine, thank you,” Hermione said quickly.

“You’re welcome,” Ron said. “Now what?”

“Leaving the highly questionable totals for most of that to the side, we’ll return to the story,” Hermione said. “The giant was very impressed with the tailor’s strength and invited him to spend the night in the cave that was home for himself and his brothers.”

“That was nice of him,” Ron said.

“Not really, as you’ll see. When they arrived, each giant was eating a whole sheep, and the home inside the cave was truly enormous,” Hermione said.

“How many brothers did he have?” Ron asked.

“The story usually doesn’t say, but a fair few,” Hermione said. “Anyway, the tailor was told to sleep in one of the enormous beds, but it was so huge that he was uncomfortable, and once the candles were blown out, he went over into a corner and slept there.”

“How can a bed be too big?” Ron asked. “I can understand too little, of course, but just pick a spot sleep. It can’t be that odd.”

“Well, somehow it was, and a good thing too since the giant had really brought him back to the cave so he and his brothers could kill the tailor because he was frightened of how strong he was. They all took great iron bars and fell upon the bed, beating it viciously to pieces and thinking they had killed
the tailor into the bargain, then went to sleep,” Hermione said.

“That is not good hospitality,” Ron said. “At least they didn’t try to eat him, though, like the witch in the gingerbread house.”

“No,” Hermione said, “they at least stopped short of cannibalism, which really isn’t much of a bright side. However, the next morning, they found the little tailor very much alive and only complaining that the bed had been a bit lumpy. Terrified, they ran out of the cave, never to be seen again.”

“This bloke has remarkably good luck,” Harry said suspiciously. “Seriously, what are the chances on that?”

“Exceptionally low,” Hermione agreed, “but his luck wasn’t over yet. He continued his way down the road, and some of the king’s army saw him and the declaration on his belt. They had been hunting for a solution to a problem they were having, and they decided that a man who had killed seven with one blow should be able to tackle it.”

“And what was that problem?” Harry asked.

“Another pair of giants,” Hermione said.

“This story has a thing about giants,” Ron said, frowning.

“Agreed,” Hermione said. “There could be some latent pureblood prejudice occurring here if the wizarding world ever had a connection with it.”

“Yeah, I’m almost starting to root for the giants in this one, except these do all seem homicidal,” Ron said. “Still, what’s the problem with these two?”

“They’re homicidal,” Hermione said.

“Oh. Great, okay,” Ron said. “So does the tailor tell the soldier he actually only killed flies or…”

“No, he just follows them to the king, who wasn’t very impressed by the look of him,” Hermione said.

“Why not?” Harry asked.

“Well, the story is called ‘The Brave Little Tailor,’” so I’m guessing he wasn’t especially threatening looking, and on top of that, he was fairly poor,” Hermione pointed out.

“Okay, now I’m picturing Collin Creevy in this role,” Ron said. “It’s making it a lot funnier, actually. So what does the king do?”

“The king informed him that a pair of giants were roaming the countryside and killing everyone they met, and if he could kill them, he would have his daughter’s hand in marriage and half his kingdom,” Hermione said.

“There’s that patriarchy thing again,” Ron said. “I suppose no one asked the daughter her opinion of marrying some random fellow who could kill a couple giants, did they.”

“No, they didn’t,” Hermione said. “You’ve caught on well. The tailor thought it was quite a good deal, though, and agreed to the king’s terms, though secretly the king assumed he wouldn’t survive. He did offer him one hundred knights as extra support, but the tailor said he wouldn’t need them.”

“Not half sure of himself, is he?” Harry said with a laugh.
“More like he didn’t want any witnesses,” Hermione said. “He left the knights outside of a forest where the giants were known to live, then walked until he found the pair of them sitting under a tree after a long day of murdering the local farmers.”

“Pleasant,” Ron said. “Then what?”

“The tailor climbed up into the tree under which they were sitting, taking a handful of rocks with him,” Hermione said.

“He’s going to pelt them to death with rocks?” Ron asked. “That’s most likely not going to work.”

“No, it wouldn’t, but he had a much more clever plan,” Hermione said. “Just as one giant was starting to fall asleep, he dropped a rock on his head.”

“That sounds like a really good way to get a giant very angry fast,” Ron said.

“Precisely,” Hermione said.

“Not smart,” Ron said, shaking his head.

“Oh, but it was!” Hermione said. “The first giant thought the other giant had hit him, though of course he said he didn’t, and just as the second giant was falling asleep, the tailor dropped a rock on his head in turn.”

“And he thought the first giant, who was already angry with him, had conked him on the head?” Harry asked.

“Yes, though he too denied it,” Hermione said. “Finally, the first giant began to fall asleep again, and the tailor dropped the third rock, and the situation became very violent very quickly. The two of them got into a horrible fight, knocking down trees, clubbing one another with them, beating each other to a pulp until they actually killed one another. Then the tailor climbed out of his tree, which fortunately hadn’t been touched, stuck his sword in each one’s heart, and called the knights to see that the giants were dead.”

“Why does this sound weirdly familiar?” Harry asked.

“Possibly because it’s also a Greek myth,” Hermione explained. “The hero Cadmus pulls the same trick on a whole army of soldiers by hitting one with a rock, and each one thinks someone else had hit him, and they’re all so angry at one another they almost all finished each other off.”

“What did the soldiers do to get Cadmus wanting to kill them?” Ron asked.

“Nothing. I’m not entirely sure they were human, actually. He’d just killed a dragon, then pulled out its teeth and sowed them in a field, and they grew into soldiers,” Hermione said. “The goddess Athena had told him it was a good idea, so he did it. The five best ones, the one who survived, followed him into battle and founded the city of Thebes, or so the story goes.”

“Uh-huh,” Ron said. “Right. Don’t tell Hagrid that story or he’d sob himself to sleep for months. Anyway, the knights assume the tailor killed the giants, which is technically true if you squint hard enough, yeah?”

“Precisely, and they take him back to the king, who was stunned that he was still alive. While he was quite pleased to have the giants dead, he had no desire to marry off his daughter to the strange man,” Hermione said.
“Maybe he shouldn’t have promised that then,” Ron said.

“Or maybe he shouldn’t have treated his daughter like a thing to be bartered with,” Hermione said.

“Or maybe the tailor could speak up and say if she’s uncomfortable with the arrangement, so is he,” Harry said.

“True enough, but the king set another task for the tailor, thinking he couldn’t possibly manage it this time and he would be rid of him,” Hermione said.

“And what did he have to do this time?” Ron asked.

“A wild unicorn was running about the country, goring people to death with its horn. The king ordered the tailor to bring him the unicorn’s horn as a bridal gift, but not to kill the unicorn itself,” Hermione said.

“There is so much wrong with that concept that I don’t even know where to begin,” Ron said.

“Go on, then,” Hermione said.

“First off, the princess would have a better chance of getting close to the unicorn than a bloke would since full grown unicorns don’t fancy being around males,” Ron said. “Next, unicorns don’t just go about randomly goring people unless, of course, some nitwit is bothering them. Finally, so far as I know unicorn horns don’t just go dropping off for no reason, so how’s he going to get the horn without killing it?”

“All completely correct, and Professor Grubbley-Plank would be highly pleased,” Hermione said, smiling. “She really was a very good Care of Magical Creatures teacher.”

“But not as good as Hagrid,” Ron said immediately, Harry nodding fiercely in agreement even though he wasn’t entirely sure he agreed.

“No, no, of course not,” Hermione said, but Harry noted she was unconsciously rubbing a spot on her arm where she’d been burned by a Screwt. “Anyway, the tailor accepted the challenge, appearing if anything rather bored by it.”

“And of course he managed it, right?” Harry said, an idea starting to form in his head.

“Yes. He got the unicorn to chase him. Then he stood against a great tree, and as the unicorn was about to impale him on his horn, the tailor stepped clean to the side. The unicorn wound up running straight into the tree, getting his horn stuck. Then the tailor took out an ax, chopped the horn off, and the unicorn ran away, leaving his horn still partially buried in the tree trunk. All the tailor had to do was pry it out and give it to the king,” Hermione said.

“Wouldn’t that kill it?” Ron said, looking worried. “Sounds bloody painful.”

“I honestly don’t know,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “I don’t think a real unicorn would ever be stupid enough to fall for that trick anyway, so it’s a moot point, but I’d need to do some research. I know several Medieval kings claimed to have goblets made of unicorn horn, though most of them are actually from narwhals.”

“Okay, first off why would someone want a goblet of unicorn horn?” Ron asked.

“They were supposed to counteract any poison that was in the cup,” Hermione said.
“Which of course didn’t work,” Ron said.

“Not even a little bit,” Hermione said.

“Okay, then what’s a narwhal?” Ron asked.

“A completely non-magical whale that happens to have a very large twisted horn on its forehead, at least the males do,” Hermione explained. “They’re usually about eight feet long.”

“Fairly small whale,” Ron said.

“No, not the whale. The horn,” Hermione said.

“Blimey, I don’t even want to know how big a unicorn with an eight foot horn would have to be,” Ron said.

“I have absolutely no idea how people who sold the false horns explained it either,” Hermione said. “In any case, this was a normal-sized horn as it was real.”

“And how did the king react to that little present?” Harry asked.

“Not well,” Hermione said. “He gave the tailor one more task in an effort to finish him off.”

“Which was?” Ron asked.

“To capture a wild boar that was--.”

“Wait, let me guess. Terrorizing the countryside?” Ron suggested.

“Indeed,” Hermione said.

“If I were the tailor, I’d get out of there,” Ron said to Harry. “They’ve got far too many things wandering about the country and causing trouble. Go find a nice, normal country where giants and unicorns and boars and what have you have all gone starkers and want to kill anyone they see.”

“You raise a fair point, but the tailor agreed, though he was rather annoyed to have to do the king yet another service. This time, he opened the door and the window of a small chapel. Then he got the boar to chase him. The tailor ran right into the chapel, the boar following close behind, and then leapt out the window, which was much too small for the boar. Then he ran around and slammed the door, trapping the boar inside, where he kill it at his leisure,” Hermione said.

“Pretty close to what he did with the unicorn, really,” Harry said.

“I’m not exactly the most religious of people, but is penning up a wild boar in a chapel and then slaughtering it in there really socially acceptable for Muggles?” Ron asked tentatively.

“No, not that you mention it,” Hermione said. “That would definitely be frowned upon, especially since the boar undoubtedly would have done a great deal of damage in the process.”

“Just checking,” Ron said. “The tailor might have gone a bit far there.”

“Possibly, but the king finally relented and presented the princess to the tailor as his bride, and they were wed that same day,” Hermione said.

“Great Merlin, not in the same chapel!” Ron said, his eyes bugging out.
“I—I don’t know,” Hermione said, looking a bit ill. “One would hope not.”

“I’m 100% certain a pool of boar’s blood wasn’t in any of Fleur’s bridal decorating magazines.” Ron said.

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “Maybe that was the look that season: rustic chaos. Put together a charming little chapel, a bunch of overturned and smashed pews, drench everything in the leavings of a boar killing, throw some pink and white tulips around, maybe a few bows, and there you have it.”

Ron and Hermione stared at him.

“Harry, please don’t ever become a wedding planner,” Hermione said.

“I’m only joking!” he said.

“We know,” Ron said, “but still… Eugh.”

“It does raise an interesting question as to whether the story is meant to subvert traditional religious marriage as well as the hold of the church on the lives of the peasantry and royals alike,” Hermione said, gazing into the middle distance. “Of course, in the case of the boar killing, there could be a concept as church as protector, but the more obvious connection would be the profaning of sacred space, and if it really is the scene of the wedding, then it would make even more sense because of what happens next.”

“Which is?” Ron asked.

“Oh, the princess wasn’t particularly happy with her husband,” Hermione said.

“As no one asked her, I can’t fault her for that,” Ron said.

“No, but her issues with him became even more serious when he began talking in his sleep,” Hermione said. “At one point he started blabbering about sewing a shirt and cleaning up his shop, and the princess knew that he wasn’t any sort of noble at all but really only a poor tailor.”

“Oh, well if she’s going to be all posh and snooty about it, then that’s different,” Ron said. “Now I feel free not to like her with a clear conscience. Go on, then.”

“She went to her father and revealed the horrible truth, and her father agreed that this had gone on quite long enough. He arranged for the same hundred knights to be outside of his son-in-law and daughter’s bedroom that very night, waiting for the signal to come in and carry the tailor off, putting him on a boat to who knows where, or in some versions, just to kill him outright,” Hermione said.

“I’m now seeing why getting married in a blood-soaked chapel may not have been a good omen,” Harry said.

“Yes, but the tailor’s squire, who had taken a liking to him for all his bravery, warned him ahead of time, and the tailor hatched a plan,” Hermione said. “He stayed up all night, and when he heard the knights at the door, he pretended to be talking in his sleep once more, saying, ‘What ho, serving boy! Make that jacket and patch those trousers or it’s the stick for you! For I’ve killed seven with one blow, escaped from a den full of giants, finished off another two, stolen a unicorn’s horn, caught the fiercest wild boar, and I am not afraid of the hundred knights who stand outside this very door!’” Hermione said, giving the tailor a voice that started out squeaky and ended in veritable roar.
“That must not have gone over well,” Ron said.

“Precisely. The knights ran in fear from the castle along with the king and his daughter, off to the boat, and sailed away, never to be seen again,” Hermione said.

“And the tailor?” Harry asked.

“He promoted the squire to his chief advisor, became king, and lived very happily ever after,” Hermione said.

“Well, at least it ended well for the tailor,” Ron said. “I still stand by him being a Slytherin with that many tricks up his sleeve, but he earned that spot as king and then some.”

“Most likely,” Hermione said.

“Or there’s the other option,” Harry said.

“What?” Ron asked.

“Well, think about it. Most of this involves weird lucky coincidences: killing the flies, randomly picking up and carrying a bird and bit of cheese, not liking the giant bed, bumping into the knights, the king making a rash promise, his tree not getting torn down in the giants’ fight, the unicorn being clumsy, and the boar being really stupid. Add to that, this all started at lunch on one day, and all the rest of the things that happen really could be crammed into twenty-four hours,” Harry said.

Hermione appeared to do some math in her head, but eventually nodded, saying, “Yes, it’s possible, though he’d have a busy morning of it.”

“So,” Harry said, smiling, “Felix Felicis.”

“What?” Ron said.

“At lunch, he might have taken a bottle of good old Felix, and the next thing you know he’s unbelievably lucky for a solid day,” Harry said. “I only took a few hours’ worth on that night Aragog was buried, and the rest of you lot got only a tiny sip at the battle after Dumbledore died, but can you imagine what it’d be like to be that lucky for a whole day? It’s the only explanation that makes sense, isn’t it?”

“You know,” Ron said slowly, turning the matter over in his mind, “it does make sense. Hermione?”

“Well, there’s no proof of it in the story itself specifically,” Hermione said, “though the peddler who sells him the jam always did strike me as rather odd and a bit magical. I suppose it could have been enchanted or had Felix Felicis in it since after he eats it really is when all the strange things start to happen.”

“Felix,” Harry said, nodding firmly. “Has to be.”

“Wish we still had some of that hanging about,” Ron said, looking a bit glum.

“I wish I could have brought some, but it’s incredibly tricky to make and disastrous if it goes wrong,” Hermione said apologetically. “I actually was hoping to try to brew some after Bill and Fleur’s wedding, but I didn’t predict the Ministry falling so soon.”

“Ah, that’s all right,” Ron said, waving his hand. “You packed enough stuff in that little bag anyway.”
“All Ron and I brought was our wands, the dress robes we had on, and ourselves,” Harry said. “We’d have been in right state if you hadn’t planned this out.”

“That’s true,” Ron said, looking as though he hadn’t actually realized that before. “We really would have been.”

Hermione blushed but looked pleased.

“So, where are we off to tomorrow?” Ron said.

“Oh, well, you picked Italy, I picked the Vatican Library, and Harry tried Albania,” Hermione said. “It looks like it’s your turn again, Ron.”

“That’s right,” he said, looking serious. “I suppose maybe we’d better get back somewhere nearer home, oughtn’t we.”

“Maybe,” Harry said, silently thinking it was a good sign that Ron was the one suggesting it.

“Okay then,” Ron said. “I say we try the town where Merope and Tom Riddle had their honeymoon. Where was it?”

“A little spot outside Sussex,” Hermione said, and Harry noted she looked surprised. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah,” Ron said. “I think we owe it to Bertha Jorkins.”

Harry and Hermione were silent for a moment.

“Okay, then,” Hermione said. “We’ll leave a bit after sunrise.”

“Home sweet home,” Ron said with a grimace.

“Maybe it will be again soon,” Harry said.

“Yeah,” Ron agreed. “Maybe.”

The wind blew loudly outside their tent that night, and Harry shivered beneath his blankets that night. It was cold, and he kept thinking of the sound he had heard in his first year, the dry, slithering, scratchy noise of Voldemort’s shattered form skittering over the dead leaves of the Forbidden Forest. He shut his eyes and tried to sleep, willing himself not to hear that sound on the other side of the canvas, hoping going home was the right decision.
“Home again, home again, jiggity-jig,” Ron said without much energy as he opened the tent flap and made a direct line for the sofa, with Harry and Hermione right behind him looking equally all in.

“At the very least I think we can be certain there’s absolutely nothing here,” Hermione said with a sigh as she settled into her usual chair.

“Yeah, there’s not really much of anything,” Harry said. “Merope and Tom Riddle’s honeymoon cottage was pretty bleak.”


“Between the view of the fetid bog from the cracked glass in the window and the mostly fallen in ceiling with patches of mold, I’d tend to agree,” Hermione said, “but in fairness that might not have been what it looked like sixty or more years ago.”

“Right, I’m sure it was a charming little spot to take your magically enslaved spouse for a happy honeymoon,” Harry said sarcastically. “Plant a few petunias around the door and it’d be a real showplace.”

“You’re probably right,” Hermione said. “Granted, anywhere that didn’t have Morphin and Marvolo in it was most likely an improvement for Merope, but still, the air around there just felt horrid, like it had known something terrible.”

“But not a Horcrux,” Harry said.

“No,” Hermione agree. “There was nothing concealed there, no trace of magical energy, no suspiciously out of place objects, nothing. It was just massively depressing.”

Harry suspected that the real problem was they were back in England, and from what he could tell the Dementors had been breeding at full tilt in the little time they’d been gone. Either that or being able to breathe fresh air unpolluted by a constant low-key hum of despair had left them ill-prepared for the reality of home. If it had always been this bad, Harry was stunned they hadn’t all tried to murder each other long ago.

“Okay, so Tommy decided to use the Gaunt cottage ruins for the hiding place of one Horcrux. Right, Harry?” Ron said.

“Yes, that’s where the ring was,” Harry agreed.

“And the diary went to dear old Lucius, and the locket went to the cave with a connection to the orphanage,” Ron said.

“Exactly,” Hermione said, sounding tired. “There’s no pattern.”
"But, see, maybe the pattern is there’s no pattern?" Ron said. "Hear me out. Let’s say Dumbledore was right and there are three more Horcruxes for the founders, or, if Gryffindor doesn’t have one, then that repellent reptile of Tommy’s. He’s already had two from Slytherin, and we’ve got those, even if one of them very stubbornly refuses to admit when it’s beaten."

The locket, currently hanging around Hermione’s neck, which Harry thought probably explained why she looked even more tired than he and Ron did, seemed to give a belligerent pulse of power before going back to sleep.

"Yes," Hermione said. "But—"

"But he doesn’t seem to be hitting the same place twice," Ron said. "Two different families, plus a cottage. I think we might not be able to narrow down where they are, but we know where they most likely won’t be. I don’t think we’ll find another one anywhere near a place that’s related to the Gaunts, his childhood, or the Malfoys."

Harry found that an awfully slim reduction of possibilities, but to his surprise, Hermione was squinting her eyes and nodding slowly.

"It’s not a huge lead, but it does eliminate a few places and people. For example, I was wondering the other day whether You-Know-Who might have hidden something at Malfoy Manor, but no, he wouldn’t have wanted to risk two Horcruxes in the same place in case of some sort of unforeseen disaster happening," Hermione said. "Also, the Horcrux doesn’t like this conversation. I can feel it, and that has to be a good sign."

She took off the locket and dropped it carefully but with a definite sense of repugnance on the kitchen table. Harry noted she immediately took a deep breath, like she was cleaning out her lungs.

"If this keeps up, we may actually have to consider Fiendfyre," she muttered to herself, but as Harry had no idea what that meant and Ron hadn’t noticed, he decided to skip it.

"Fine, so the Malfoys are, so to speak, clean," Harry said.

"And the Gaunts, and probably anything to do with the orphanage as well," Hermione said. "I tend to agree with Dumbledore that Nagini is a Horcrux. That would fit the pattern as well since she stays with him, moving from place to place, and therefore wouldn’t be as open to possible attack without a constant guard."

"Okay, so that leaves the cup and something from Ravenclaw," Ron said.

"Or, to follow your line of reasoning, something from a different era of his life or left with a different follower," Hermione said.

"Hogwarts," Harry said firmly. "One of them has to be at Hogwarts somewhere."

Ron and Hermione looked at one another.

"So, do you want to go there next?" Hermione asked nervously.

"No," Harry said. "I think that has to be last, or next to last, right before Nagini. The place is crawling with Deatheaters, and . . . it might not end well."

Harry had almost said what he was thinking, that they might all wind up dead and their mission die with them since, so far as he knew, Dumbledore and confided it to no one else. Harry had thought about that many times, and while initially he was angry about the secrecy, he now realized it might
have been the only way Dumbledore could ensure that the three of them wouldn’t have done something far too risky. They had to be careful at least until the last Horcrux was in view or it would all be for nothing. Harry had to admit it was a pretty persuasive tactic for keeping them alive.

Hermione seemed to have picked up on his unspoken thought, though, and even Ron, usually a bit slower at reading between the lines, gave Harry a look that suggested he knew what was what.

“Okay, then, we save Nagini for last and Hogwarts for next to last,” Ron said. “So what else have we got?”

“I suppose the usual coterie of sycophants and assorted hangers-on,” Hermione said, ticking them off on her fingers. “The Yaxleys, the Lestranges, the Carrows, Macnair, possibly Nott, along with several others.”

“What about Wormtail or Greyback?” Ron asked.

“I don’t think he’d trust Greyback,” Hermione said. “He’s still a pureblood fanatic, and he seems to loathe werewolves.”

“No,” Harry agreed, “Greyback isn’t likely.”

“Wormtail then,” Ron suggested. “He stayed faithful to him when he didn’t have a working body.”

“True,” Hermione said, considering, “but he’s a betrayer. I think You-Know-Who is aware that Pettigrew’s first loyalty is to himself. He’d do anything to save his own skin, and if he had a Horcrux, he probably would have turned it over to Dumbledore in exchange for protection. It would be the most logical choice. Since we know he didn’t do that, I don’t think he has one.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, sounding crestfallen. “Then who do you reckon? Or is it a place?”

“Bellatrix,” Harry said firmly. “She’s a right little bootlicker.”

“The only problem is she’s so obvious that she’s almost too obvious,” Hermione said.

“Unless she’s so obvious that she goes round again into not being obvious,” Ron said.

“And then if it goes too far again, she’s obvious once more,” Harry said.

Hermione shook her head and gave a faint chuckle.

“Perhaps we’re all overthinking this,” she said. “Maybe it’s hanging about in some ridiculously simple place like, I don’t know, You-Know-Who’s wand or something.”

“Where did he live when he was working for Borgin and Burke?” Harry asked.

“A flat in Knockturn Alley,” Hermione said.

“Okay, well, if it’s not attached to a person, and it could be, maybe it’s there,” Harry said.

Hermione looked very nervous.

“That’s nearly as dangerous as being seen in Hogwarts,” she said.

“Nearly, but not quite,” Harry said. “We’d need Polyjuice, of course. Do we have enough?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, waving a hand impatiently, “but that’s not the point. That foray into the
Ministry nearly got us all caught. We’d need to plan this very carefully.”

“Then we plan it carefully,” Ron said. “Take as much time as we need, but I think Harry might be on to something. It’s worth trying.”

*“But it’s Hermione’s turn to pick next,” Harry said.

“Oh, right,” Ron said, looking a little embarrassed. “Ehm, what do you reckon, then?”

“I don’t know,” she said, slumping a bit more in her seat.

“Not a phrase we often hear from you,” Ron said.

Hermione glared at him but said, “I really don’t know, though. None of us do. We could pick the wrong place and wind up all getting killed for nothing.”

She squinted for a moment as though she were trying to remember something.

“What?” Harry asked.

“Oh, it’s just another story,” Hermione said.

“Long or short?” Ron asked. “I’d like a story, but I’m about ready to nod off as it is.”

“Quite short, actually, and it’s about one of your favorite things in all this,” Hermione said.

“Food?” Harry ventured and was hit with a pillow for his trouble.

“Nah, it’ll be a girl with a completely bonkers name,” Ron said.

“No, a goose,” Hermione said.

“Another goose? What, were they thick on the ground in the old days or summat?” Ron said with a laugh.

Harry noted that the Horcrux on the table was looking remarkably pale all of a sudden. It really didn’t like it when they were acting normally, and Harry couldn’t be happier about that.

“I expect there were a fair few of them, but this is from very long ago, one of Aesop’s stories,” Hermione said.

“Oh, the old Greek bloke,” Ron said. “Okay, so what’s the story?”

“Once—“

“—upon a time,” Ron chimed in. “I don’t care how old they are; they always start that way.”

“True enough,” Hermione said with a sigh. “Anyway, there lived a king who had a pet swan as well as a goose that was being raised for slaughter.”

“A pet swan?” Ron asked.

“Yes, meant to swim about on his lake and look pretty, I suppose,” Hermione said. “You can’t exactly take one for a walk or cuddle with it, but it would be nice to watch on the water.”

“Odd fellow. Get a cat,” Ron said.
“Compared to Hagrid, he’s positively normal,” Harry said.

“If we’re marking it that way, then yes, the king is downright boring,” Ron said. “Okay, so the swan is there to be pretty, and probably also to hiss loudly and peck viciously if what we’ve learned about them in previous stories holds up.”

“Yes, but the goose and the swan spent a good deal of their time in one another’s company and became friends, swimming on the lake together and taking their meals at the same time, that sort of thing,” Hermione said.

“Well, that’s depressing,” Ron said. “The poor goose isn’t long for this world, right?”

“Even so,” Hermione said. “However, no one counted on the king’s cook having far too much wine. One day when he had decided to kill the goose and cook it for dinner, he was so drunk that instead he grabbed the swan by the neck instead.”

“He couldn’t tell a goose from a swan?” Ron said. “That’s really drunk.”

“If it were a white swan and a white goose, there really wouldn’t be that much difference,” Hermione said. “They’re roughly the same size, the same color, have similar feeding habits, and are aquatic birds. The Tufted Roman Goose, which is one of the oldest domesticated geese, looks quite a bit like a Mute Swan if you don’t study it closely.”

“Or if you’re completely snockered,” Ron said. “That’s really drunk.”

“In reality, even real Mute Swans make some noises, but there’s an old legend that when a swan knows death is approaching, it will sing one perfectly beautiful song before it dies, and that’s what this one did now,” Hermione said. “It’s complete tosh, of course, but people believed it.”

“So the swan starts singing and what happens?” Harry asked.

“The cook stopped dead in his tracks and realized that he had the wrong bird,” Hermione said. “He’d come dangerously close to killing the king’s beloved pet for nothing.”

“I’m betting that wouldn’t have ended well,” Ron said.

“No, it would not,” Hermione said. “The cook then took the swan back to the lake, and he let the goose go as well, fearing any other mistakes that might happen. The moral of the story is supposed to be that—“

“Wait, let’s see if we can work it out,” Ron said quickly. “Um, don’t kill things when you’re drunk? No, that’s too obvious. Be careful of the company you keep or you can get bumped off by accident?”

“Not bad,” Hermione said, considering.

“Or maybe double-checking before an irrevocable decision is a good idea,” Harry suggested.
“Also a fair point,” Hermione said.

“Listening to others is crucial to avoid mistakes?” Ron said.

“People who show mercy will get mercy?”

“Beauty is as beauty does?”

“When something is wrong, speak up?”

“Don’t eat goose?”

“Don’t eat swan either? Wait, is swan even edible?”

“It is,” Hermione said, giggling a bit. “It was quite a fashionable dish for a while in the Renaissance, though it’s supposed to be rather gamey.”

“Okay, then I give up. What’s the moral of the story?” Ron asked.

“Supposedly, it’s that music is powerful enough to thwart death. Or possibly to be careful when taking any life,” Hermione said.

“I like ours better,” Ron said.

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “It reminds me of Fawkes a bit.”

“Yes, I’m wondering if some Muggle accidentally stumbled upon phoenix song and mistook it for a swan’s dying song,” Hermione said. “It’s more in the line of what the stories say a swan song should sound like.”

“Maybe,” Ron said. “I still think the cook was an idiot. Also, what’d the king eat that night?”

“And once again we return to food,” Hermione said with a sigh.

“At least the birds lived happily ever after,” Harry said.

“In some versions,” Hermione said. “In others, well, the king still has goose for dinner.”

Ron grimaced in distaste, but added, “Maybe it’s the same golden egg laying goose from the other ones.”

“There’s nothing in this story about golden eggs, though,” Hermione said.

“No, but there’s nothing in the story about there not being golden eggs either,” Ron said sagely.

“There’s also nothing in the story about there not being a six-legged purple cow who enjoyed playing table tennis with her tail while reciting Milton,” Hermione said in exasperation. “That’s not an argument!”

“No, but I’ve got the image firmly stuck in my mind now, thanks,” Ron said. “Seriously, woman, a purple cow with six legs who plays table tennis?”

“I don’t know. It just came to me. I’m tired,” Hermione said by way of excuse.

“But the story does make a fair point about not taking a potentially fatal action lightly,” Harry said.

“Yeah,” Ron admitted.
“Of course, sometimes not taking an action can be fatal too,” Hermione said nervously. “All right, then. We need to do something. I’m in favor of trying You-Know-Who’s former flat in Knockturn Alley if both of you think it might do some good.”

“It’s worth a chance,” Harry said, nodding. “I agree with it.”

“Me too,” Ron said.

“Okay, then we’ll head back to London tomorrow, use the Polyjuice, and see what we can find,” Hermione said. She paused a moment, then added, “But I think we’d better steel ourselves to the possibility that things are going to be horrid there.”

“Probably,” Ron said, looking grim.

Harry only nodded. It was a risk, but they had to do something. He just hoped that at best it would pay off, and that at least they’d escape without detection.

“We should probably get some shut eye, then,” Ron suggested. “Big day tomorrow.”

As they all turned in for the night, Harry wondered if any of them would sleep well. It didn’t take long for him to drift off to sleep, though, with a dream of phoenix song wafting through his brain as he searched the edge of the Black Lake for a swan that glowed green in the dim moonlight. He spent all night trying to reach it but never quite able to catch it.

Ron, on the other hand, dreamed of a certain violet-hued bovine with half a dozen hooves and a penchant for sports.
Ten years ago in August, I wrote Cinder-what-the-hell?-a, expecting it to be a one-shot. Now, almost quarter of a million words and forty-four chapters later, the trio are still sitting around in various desolate places on a never-ending camping trip, telling fairy tales like some sort of magic-based MST3K. And I'm still having fun with it. I hope you are too. I have a fairly long list of other fairy tales I want to play with still, which means I don't see this ending particularly soon, so enjoy the journey. Thank you for all the lovely feedback I've received since 2008 on this. (Incidentally, I've now also passed the million word mark overall. I need to get me a life!)

The trio entered the tent in silence. They had chosen to place their temporary home in an alleyway behind a vacant pub in London, and whether it was the wards and protective charms they used to seal themselves away or the empty little road was just unusually quiet, the silence was deafening. No one spoke as they sat in their accustomed places. Harry took the Horcrux from around his neck and placed it on the table, trying to make as little noise as possible with its chain. The ugly locket seemed to glow with smug satisfaction. If it really was capable of emotion, it was the only one of them to feel happy now.

The silence lasted the better part of twenty minutes. Hermione had a couch pillow wrapped in her arms, Ron was staring at a stain on the floor, and Harry, feeling bonelessly tired, sat so far back in his chair it threatened to tip. He knew in a distant way that he was hungry, and he actually had gotten some food while they were out, currently sitting in a paper sack by the door. They should all eat. But none of them felt up to it after what they had seen.

“Do you suppose—” Ron said, shattering the silence, but he seemed unable to finish his thought.

“What?” Harry asked.

“Do you suppose they saw us?” Ron finished, looking up from the spot on the carpet.

“Yes and no,” Hermione said. “I'm pretty certain that Ginny and Fred noticed us, but with the Polyjuice potion, I don’t think they knew who we were.”

Ron nodded, his thoughts confirmed. Harry silently agreed. The changes that had come over Diagon Alley since the last time they had seen it were obvious. Some of them echoed the propaganda they had found in the Ministry: pictures of themselves on wanted posters, himself as Undesirable Number One, pamphlets on the crimes of Muggleborns drifting about in the gutters underfoot, graffiti of Muggles showing them as barely human, all of what Harry had been steeling himself to see since they had decided to come here.

Still, he wasn’t ready for the sheer hopelessness in every corner. Dementors floated silently everywhere. Empty shops, their windows blasted out and their signs blackened by fires, were far more numerous than occupied ones. Knockturn Alley had always been hideous, but that aura of darkness and something foul had leech'd its way everywhere else. Ollivander’s, Fortescue’s, even Flourish and Blotts (“Books are always considered too dangerous in times like these,” Hermione had whispered sadly as they passed its vacant spot), all of them were gone, and in their place were
harried-looking witches and wizards who kept their heads down and moved quickly, finishing their errands as fast as they could before going to the safety of home, if home was safe at all. Harry had even noted a large number of purebloods who looked every bit as worried as the rest of them, including Theodore Nott’s family.

Of course, the posters with images of menacing Death Eaters and bold lettering declaring “All hail our protectors!” glaring down on them from every wall didn’t lessen the effect.

The three of them had used Polyjuice to turn into a woman from India who was in her forties for Hermione, a younger man who had been emptying dustbins behind a store for Ron, and a wizened octogenarian who had been feeding the birds on a park bench for Harry. Although the origins of their transformations were all Muggles, they made sure to dress in wizarding robes and not give any outward signs of being anything but the usual clientele of Diagon Alley. Anything else might have been lethal.

Reaching Riddle’s old flat had proved relatively easy. Borgin and Burkes was deserted. While the shop wasn’t closed down permanently, the lights were currently off, and a quick look through its glass windows showed the shelves were largely empty. The few items still left were put together haphazardly, as though someone had rifled through them and decided none were worth taking. Harry wondered whether Voldemort’s followers had been looking for potential weapons or if the Order of the Phoenix had raided it. Possibly both were true. Either way, Hermione was able to break in with little ado, and the small flat at the top of the stairs was unguarded.

Their search had produced absolutely nothing at all. The room was vacant, completely empty. Even the furniture had been removed. The grey walls and equally grey floor were all that remained. A single window looked out over the front of the shop with a view of the street below, but it was so clouded in dust and grime that only a vague picture of the world was visible, warped, covered in years of dirt. Harry was certain there was a metaphor in there for Voldemort’s life, but he didn’t care to spend the time to examine it further.

Hermione had still used a few spells to check for any concealed artefacts, but nothing turned up. It was Ron who had noted how odd that was, though.

“There aren’t even any spiders,” he said, and while that normally would have been a cause of delight, even he knew that was wrong. “No mice, no cobwebs, no dead flies on the sill, nothing.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Hermione said. “There’s a spell on this place, but not the kind we’re looking for. It reeks of evil in here so much that even a Basilisk wouldn’t take up residence.”

They’d left the dingy, disturbingly untouched spot behind, Harry feeling like he’d accidentally crawled into a forgotten corner of Voldemort’s mind. A chill wind blew up the alley as they left, wandering back towards the main strip of shops. Harry pulled his robe around him more tightly to keep out the blast of cold, and it was then he realized Ron wasn’t with them.

“Where is he?” he said to Hermione, who appeared to have noticed his absence at the same moment.

“No idea,” she said. “He was here a moment ago, then—”

She looked behind her, and Harry heard her sharp intake of breath. He was almost certain what he would see even before he turned around, and he hadn’t been wrong. There was Ron, still disguised as the Muggle man, walking swiftly in the opposite direction, following the path of two people with brilliantly red hair. Even from here he recognized Ginny, but he couldn’t be certain if the other figure was Fred or George.
“Merlin, he’ll give us away for certain,” Hermione whispered quietly, beginning to move with as much haste as she could towards him without drawing attention.

Harry was right on her heels, but Ron had already managed to pull up level with his siblings before they could reach him. He appeared to be about to speak, but at that precise moment Amycus Carrow walked out of the shop door only a few feet away, laughing very unpleasantly. That seemed to stop Ron, and he drew back a bit. Ginny and Fred continued on, disgust evident on their faces as they passed Carrow. Ginny turned around to say something to the Death Eater, and Harry found himself fervently hoping her temper hadn’t gotten the better of her so completely that she was about to be killed for her trouble.

They couldn’t hear what she said, but Carrow sneered at her, and then Ron applauded briefly before slipping back into the crowd before Carrow could see who had made the noise. Ginny seemed to have found the source of it, though, and a strange look passed over her face. She quickly took Fred’s hand (Harry could see both of his ears now) and continued up the street, leaving Carrow behind. For a split instant, though, she looked over her shoulder and made eye contact with Harry.

“What did Ginny say to that git?” Harry asked now that they were back in the safety of the tent.

“She was bawling him out for picking on some poor half-blood kid for having a ragged pair of shoes,” Ron said. “She said the girl’s ‘sole’ might be worn through, but unlike Carrow she at least had one.”

“Nice pun,” Harry said.

“I thought so too,” Ron said, then winced, “hence the clapping.”

“We got away without a problem, so it wasn’t that awful,” Hermione said consolingly.

“She might know it was us,” Harry said quietly. “She looked right at me. I thought about giving her a wink, but it might have been too obvious.”

“As opposed to my applauding like a trained baboon,” Ron said, his voice full of self-loathing.

“If it makes you feel any better, if the situation had been reversed and we’d run across my parents just ambling down the street, I probably wouldn’t have had any self-control either, and they wouldn’t even know who the girl was who was sobbing and hugging them,” Hermione said. “You’re only human, Ron. It’s understandable.”

“Maybe,” Ron said, still looking uncomfortable. “I feel awful, though. The whole day was a nightmare.”

“It’s the Dementors, too,” Harry said. “There were so many of them that no one stood a chance against them. It feels like they’ve sucked every happy memory out of me and I’ll never laugh again.”

Hermione looked up at him and actually had a little grin on her face.

“I don’t suppose you’d like to hear a story about just that,” she said.

“What, not laughing?” Harry said.

“In a way,” Hermione said, then turned to Ron and added, “and there’s one of your favorite things in this one.”

“Food?” Ron asked, perking up.
“Well, yes, that too,” Hermione said, “but something else.”

“Why not?” Harry said.

“Go on then,” Ron said, looking mildly interested.

“Alright then. Once upon—“

“A time,” Ron finished, but without further comment.

“Indeed, there was a couple who had three sons. The first two were their favorites, but they had no patience with the third one, and so rather than his name, they always called him Simpleton,” Hermione said.

“Simpleton? That’s cruel,” Ron said.

“A few versions use Dummling instead, which is no better,” Hermione said.

“I already don’t like these people,” Ron said darkly. “I hope this gets better.”

“Well, perhaps it will. One day the oldest son went out to chop wood, and his mother gave him good wine and a sweet cake to take with him,” Hermione said.

“You’re right; it got better,” Ron said. “I’m not so much for the wine, though I wouldn’t say no to it, but a sweet cake sounds awfully good about now.”

“Chocolate would be better still, but there was none to be had in Diagon Alley,” Harry said. “They’ve sold out.”

“Gosh, I wonder why,” Ron said sarcastically. “Might have to think a whole two seconds there. Could it possibly be something to do with the Dementors floating all over the place?”

Hermione had a longing look on her face, and Harry thought he heard her mumble the word “Cadbury” under her breath with the same level of passion she’d once reserved for Lockhart.

“So, what happens to the fellow with the lunch?” Harry asked.

“Right. Well, he walked into the woods and was just about to start work when a little, old, grey man appeared before him and said, ‘I am very hungry and thirsty. Will you not share your food and drink with me?’” Hermione said, giving the old man a creaky, high-pitched voice that reminded Harry of Flitwick.

“I’m guessing the answer is no,” Ron said.

“Indeed. The oldest son said that he had no reason to share with those who had less than he did, and that the little old man should be off as he would get nothing from him. Then the boy picked up his ax, and at the first stroke the blade bounced off the tree and hit him squarely in the leg, injuring him so that he had to go home,” Hermione said.

“Talk about instant karma,” Harry said.

“Karma?” Ron asked.

“It’s a traditionally Hindu or Buddhist concept that good deeds result in good outcomes for the person who acts righteously, and bad deeds create bad situations for the perpetrator, sometimes immediately, but often later on,” Hermione said. “However, in this particular instance, it was really
the gray man who had caused it.”

“I rather thought so,” Ron said. “The bloke’s not all that bright. If you find a short, elderly, oddly grey chap wandering around the forest, most likely he’s not human and it’s better not to offend him.”

“Yes, but I’m not really sure what he’s supposed to be here,” Hermione said. “He almost sounds like a gnome, but the rest of his behavior doesn’t match up. I suppose he could be some variety of elemental spirit, but that’s still not quite right either.”

“The Muggles who make these things up only get about one out of every five things right when it comes to magic, so I suppose we should cut them some slack,” Ron said. “So the eldest comes home with a limp. Then what?”

“The next day, the middle son went out, with yet another bottle of good wine and a sweet cake, to finish the job his older brother hadn’t done, and once again the little gray many appeared, asking for a share of his food. He ignored the man too, and he also met with an accident while chopping down a tree, injuring his arm,” Hermione said.

“Karma strikes again,” Ron said, then added, “which is apparently the name of the weird little grey man.”

“Just so,” Hermione said, then stopped and shrugged. “Fine. His name is Karma. It fits. Anyway, the third son said he wanted to try chopping wood, but his parents said he was far too stupid.”

“Unlike the tremendous brains that nearly amputated their limbs previously,” Ron said.

“True. Simpleton repeated over and over his desire to chop wood until finally his parents gave in. They turned him out into the forest with an ax, a cup of water, and some dry bread, rather hoping not to see him again,” Hermione said.

“Home sweet home,” Harry muttered quietly, “except all I got were Dudley’s old socks. At least bread and water would be useful. And probably smell less.”

Ron gave Harry a sad look that Hermione echoed.

“Anyway, what does Simon do?” Ron asked, ending the awkward silence.

“Simon?” Hermione asked. “How do you get that for a name?”

“You know the old rhyme, yeah? ‘Simple Simon met a pie man going to the fair’?” Ron said.

“I thought that was a Muggle nursery rhyme,” Hermione said, looking surprised.

“It is? How do they explain the verse about the Quidditch match?” Ron asked, looking confused.

“What?” Harry said.

“Yeah, you know. ‘Simple Simon dared the pie man to catch a snitch mid-air, but Simple Simon beat the pie man, and ate his pie right there,’ Ron recited in a sing-song voice.

“That’s not in ours,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, even I ran across that one,” Harry said. “He just tries to get a pie without paying for it, but the pie man catches on and Simon walks away hungry.”

“Well that’s depressing,” Ron said. “I like ours better. At least he gets a meal out of it. I also like
calling the third son Simon a lot better than Simpleton. That’s just rude.”

“I wonder which version came first,” Hermione said, staring into the distance. “The literary cross-references between Muggle and non-Muggle works are really a rather fascinating subject.”

“Fine, but what happens to Simon?” Ron asked.

“Oh, yes. The little grey man shows up again, but the boy is much kinder than his brothers and immediately offers him a share of the poor food and drink he has, but no sooner do they sit down to eat together than the water becomes a good wine and the dry bread a fine cake,” Hermione said.

“Karma,” Ron said, nodding his head firmly.

“Even more than you know. The little man told him that since he had been so kind and hospitable, he would reward him. He showed him a particular tree, and told him to chop down that one and look among the roots for something,” Hermione said.

“And did he?” Ron asked.

“He did indeed,” Hermione said, “and without any accidents, either.”

“So what was in the roots of the tree?” Harry asked. “A pot of gold?”

“Diamonds?” Ron suggested.

“Rubies?”

“Emeralds?”

“Pearls?”

“A Paracelsus Chocolate Frog card?”

Harry and Hermione stared at Ron.

“What? It’s really rare. I’ve been looking for that thing since first year without any luck,” he said.

“None of that,” Hermione said. “Instead, he found… a goose.”

“A goose?” Ron said.

Hermione nodded, waiting for the inevitable.

“Okay, what is it with these people and gooses? I mean, geese. They lay golden eggs, they get swapped with swans, they get kidnapped by giants, and now they roost underneath gigantic tree roots?” Ron said.

“Oh, and the goose’s feathers were made of gold,” Hermione added as an afterthought.

Harry and Ron exchanged looks.

“They were what now?” Ron asked calmly.

“Gold. It was literally a golden goose,” Hermione said.

“So the old girl’s moved from laying golden eggs to being made of gold,” Ron said.
“Or maybe one of the golden eggs hatched, and this goose was inside it,” Harry suggested.

“Yeah, that’d fit,” Ron said, nodding in approval. “This is the daughter of the golden-egg laying goose. Or something.”

“I thought you’d come to the conclusion she’d eaten a Philosopher’s Stone, explaining her longevity and the gold eggs,” Hermione said.

“Sorcerer’s Stone,” Harry muttered.

“So? Nothing contradicts that theory with this one,” Ron said, folding his arms firmly and ignoring the issues of the stone’s nomenclature. “She ate the stone, she lives forever, she lays golden eggs, and one of them hatched, producing a golden goose. Completely logical, though I don’t know what she’s doing underground.”

“Yes, well, that part never does get satisfactorily explained,” Hermione said. “Anyway, the youngest son—“

“Simon,” Ron piped up.

“As you wish. Simon picks up the goose and takes her with him to a nearby inn to pass the night, thinking that perhaps the goose will help him to earn his fortune,” Hermione said.

“Kid’s not that stupid after all, is he,” Ron said.

“That night, the innkeeper’s oldest daughter noticed the goose and thought she would try to pluck a few of its feathers to make herself rich, but no sooner did she touch the goose than her hand stuck fast to it,” Hermione said.

“Well, she did have sticky fingers in the metaphorical sense, and now it’s literal,” Harry said.

“Sticky fingers?” Ron said, looking confused.

“It’s a Muggle term for someone who tends to steal things,” Harry said.

“Well, yeah, that’d fit here. So what did Simon do when he saw the girl stuck to the goose?” Ron asked.

“He ignored her completely,” Hermione said. “He just put the goose under his arm and walked on the next morning with the girl still stuck to the goose.”

“That must have been a bit awkward,” Harry said, snickering.

“Yes, and the girl called for help, and her sister heard her and grabbed her, although some versions of the story say she too was trying to steal a feather, and she became stuck to her sister. As they both wailed in misery, trotting along behind the boy, the youngest sister heard them and grabbed on as well, and now the boy, the goose, and all three girls were going along the road in a line,” Hermione said.

Harry and Ron both snorted.

“And it gets worse! The vicar of the local church saw the three girls following behind the boy and cried ‘For shame! Have you no modesty! It is unseemly for maidens to chase after men so!’ and then he grabbed the youngest girl to try to stop her and became stuck fast as well,” Hermione said.

Ron shot a look at Harry, took a deep breath, then said in a very even tone, “And does that represent
the patriarchy punishing the girls for behavior deemed acceptable for males but not for them?”

“Perhaps,” Hermione said, “although the concept that the vicar is made to look a fool as much as the girls do rather undermines that message and instead enforces an opposite interpretation that the vicar is the one in the wrong.”

“Then it undermines the patriarchy,” Ron said.

“Potentially at this stage, yes,” Hermione said, giving him a glowing smile.

Harry fought back the growing urge to run out of the tent and take a lap of the block just to avoid the feeling of being a third wheel. However, as they were in close proximity to a wide variety of Death Eaters, he managed to rein in the feeling and only rolled his eyes and sighed.

“And then what happened?” he prompted her.

“Oh, yes, right,” Hermione said, snapping back to herself. “The sexton came out to remind the vicar that he had a christening later that morning, and he grabbed the vicar’s arm to detach him from the train and became stuck fast as well.”

“This is becoming quite the parade,” Ron said.

“And then the vicar and the sexton saw a pair of farm workers along the side of the road, and they called out to them to help them, and the men grabbed onto the sexton to try to pull him away and became stuck as well,” Hermione said.

“Okay, so Simon, the goose, the three sisters, the vicar, the sexton, and the two workers,” Ron said, ticking them off on his fingers. “This is starting to remind me of the one about the gingerbread boy that ran off with the chain of people following along.”

“Yes, it does have some of the properties of a cumulative tale,” Hermione said. “Granted, we’re missing an anthropomorphic baked good here, though.”

“Yeah, but we picked up a goose made of gold. That’s a fair trade,” Ron said. “And Simon doesn’t take any notice of the lot of them?”

“Exactly,” Hermione said. “He just continues into the next town. A king lived there who had an only daughter who had never in her life laughed.”

“That’s odd,” Ron said. “Was it a medical condition or summat?”

“I suppose there could have been a partial paralysis of the vocal chords or some other underlying cause, but in the story she’s just far too serious for her own good,” Hermione said.

“Sounds like someone I know,” Ron said, giving Hermione a pointed look.

“Oh, come off it! I laugh plenty,” Hermione said.

“Yeah? When?” Ron asked, still fixing her with a critical gaze.

“Well, there’s… I suppose… well, I can’t think just now, and it’s not like it’s a laugh a minute out here,” Hermione snapped at him. “In any case, the king had issued a proclamation that whoever could make the princess laugh would win her hand in marriage and inherit the kingdom eventually.”

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake, another father who’s willing to slap a ring on his daughter’s finger in return for something stupid!” Ron said. “It seems like the princess really does have a good reason for not
laughing: her father’s a nitwit.”

“It’s another fairly ridiculous task, but no sooner had the king made the proclamation then into town walked the youngest son, err, Simon, with his goose and his train of people following along behind. The princess was looking out of her window, saw the whole lot of them following one behind the other, and she burst out laughing at once,” Hermione said.

“Which of course proves that they’re a perfect match and should be joined in matrimonial bliss without any further delay,” Ron said, rolling his eyes.

“Actually, the king was none too pleased at having to marry his daughter to a peasant boy, so he said that Simon would need to complete some tasks to prove he was able to be a good king,” Hermione said.

“I can’t decide whether the king is attempting to make a more rational choice here, which is good, or if he’s trying to wiggle his way out of his promise, which is bad,” Harry said.

“Thank you for not saying ‘weasel his way out,’” Ron said, tipping an imaginary hat at him. “That always annoys the whole lot of us.”

“I imagine it would,” Hermione said.

“So, the first task the king set for the boy was to find a man who could drink an entire cellar full of wine.”

“And this has what to do with being a good and wise king?” Harry asked, wrinkling his nose.

“Nothing, of course,” Hermione said. “The king just wanted to get rid of him, so he set what he thought was an impossible task.”

“Since you said he thought it was impossible, I’m going to assume it wasn’t,” Ron said.

“Indeed. The boy went back to the same spot where he’d met the little gray man, and sure enough, there he was, weeping that he was so very thirsty and yet he couldn’t find anything to drink,” Hermione said.

“Wild guess. The kid takes him back to town and gets him a whole cellar full of wine?” Harry asked.

“Precisely. The little man drank every single cask of wine and then disappeared,” Hermione said.

“Whew. He must have been completely sozzled,” Ron said.

“Apparently not,” Hermione said. “Perhaps alcohol had no effect on him, whatever he was.”

“That’s lucky. That’d be an awful hangover. Anyway, the boy gets the princess now?” Ron said.

“No, the king next says he has to find someone who can eat a mountain of bread,” Hermione said.

“And the kid gets the little grey man again, and he eats all the bread?” Ron said.

“Right again,” Hermione said. “And as this is a fairy tale, of course the king comes up with a third task.”

“What next? Lift the whole castle with one hand?” Ron asked.

“No, though that’s a good one. Instead, he said the boy needed to get him a ship that could sail on water and on land,” Hermione said.
“The bloke wants one of those amphibious car things,” Harry said.

“That would fit the bill nicely, but of course this was long before the invention of the automobile,” Hermione pointed out.

“An amphi-whatimous car?” Ron asked.

“It’s pretty much exactly what the king asked for. On land, it drives like a regular car, but it can also be used as a boat,” Hermione said.

“Too bad he didn’t ask for something that could go on land and in the air. Dad’s old car would have been just exactly perfect,” Ron said. “I wonder whatever happened to that Ford Anglia.”

“Probably still roaming the Forbidden Forest, trundling about under the trees and terrifying the spiders,” Harry said.

“Yeah,” Ron said, smiling. “Good ol’ girl.”

“I don’t suppose the little grey man had a boat that also worked on land by any chance,” Harry said.

“The boy went to ask him, and sure enough, the little grey man produced it at once and made him a present of it,” Hermione said, “all because he had once shared his simple lunch with the old man.”

“Bully for him, I suppose,” Ron said. “Now does he get to marry the princess?”

“The king could see no way out of it, so yes, he gave the boy his daughter,” Hermione said.

“And once again, no one asks the girl what she wants,” Ron said.

“Unfortunately, as usual, no. Some years later, the old king died, and the boy was crowned king in his place. He became well known for his wisdom and kindness, and under him the kingdom was peaceful and prosperous,” Hermione said, “and they all lived happily ever after. The end.”

“Meanwhile, what exactly is going on with the goose and the seven people that were stuck to her?” Harry asked.

“So far as I know, they remained glued to the goose through the whole ordeal,” Hermione said. “They never do bring them up again as that’s the end of the story.”

“Well, if they do all live happily ever after, I think it’s safe to assume the seven of them don’t remain attached to the goose’s hind end for the rest of their lives. How would any of them have used the loo, anyway?” Ron said.

“As usual, Ronald, your sense of decorum and tact is legendary,” Hermione said with a sigh.

“Yeah, because that was in full evidence today,” Ron said, gloom making his features drop again as he remembered his public display earlier.

“Oh, snap out of it,” Harry said, slugging him in the arm. “I don’t think there was any harm done. It even provided a distraction for them so that Carrow didn’t focus on getting even with Ginny.”

“I suppose so,” Ron said, but he still sounded glum.

“They looked okay,” Hermione said. “Fred and Ginny, I mean.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Ron said, lightening a little. “No major wounds or anything. I guess I at least got
some word about part of my family.”

“True enough,” Hermione said, smiling a little, “and Ginny still has plenty of fight in her.”

“That’s my little sister,” Ron said, pride showing in his eyes. “She’s made of strong stuff, that one.”

Harry nodded, not trusting himself to say anything. It had been a horrible day, but seeing Ginny, even with everything else going on, had been good.

“I suppose we’d best turn in,” Hermione said. “It’s getting late.”

“Mmm,” Ron said. “Where are we going next? Harry, it’s your turn to pick.”

Caught off guard, Harry frowned, staring at the Horcrux sitting on the table. A thought occurred to him, one he hadn’t considered before.

“What if, rather than trying to find another one, we try to get rid of this one instead?” Harry said. “Even if we did manage to track down the next Horcrux, we’d only be carrying around a pair of the bloody things, and that might be worse yet.”

“That’s a good point,” Hermione said. “I hadn’t really thought of that, but if we do succeed in finding it, the effect both of them might have on us could be even worse.”

“I do not want that,” Ron said, looking ill. “One is much more than enough, thanks.”

“So what do you have in mind?” Hermione asked Harry.

“Well, we’ve tried all sorts of spells and hexes,” Harry said. “Maybe we could try something less magical and more natural.”

“Like what?” Ron asked.

“Like . . . throwing it in a volcano?” Harry said tentatively, hoping it didn’t sound ridiculous out loud as it did in his head.

“A volcano?” Hermione asked, looking worried.

“Yeah,” Ron said, sounding enthusiastic. “A volcano! Why not? They’re kind of thin on the ground in Britain, though. Where were you thinking?”

“I don’t know. Are there any active volcanos that are off by themselves?” Harry asked Hermione. “Just in case this backfires, I don’t want to wipe out a whole city or something.”

“You know, I think there might be,” Hermione said, reaching for her beaded bag and rooting through it until she found, to Harry’s surprise, not a book but a newspaper. She flipped through the pages hurriedly. “I read about this just last year. There was a major eruption on the island of Montserrat near the city of Plymouth. The whole place has been permanently evacuated as a result. The Soufrière Hills volcano that caused all the damage is definitely still active, too, though the whole city is buried in mud and ash. It’s completely illegal to go there, of course, but then we’re not exactly following the rules anymore.”

“There was a time I never would have believe that of you,” Ron said with an admiring gaze. “So where’s Montserrat then?”

“The Caribbean,” Hermione said. “It’s not too far from Guadeloupe or St. Kitts and Nevis.”
“We’re going to the Caribbean?” Ron said, suddenly a lot more keen.

“Into an exclusion zone covered in poisonous volcanic ash, but yes, it’s in the Caribbean,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said, now significantly much less keen. “Right. Do you think it’ll work?”

Just at that moment, the locket started to vibrate, almost as though it were trying to walk itself away from them.

“That’s good enough for me,” Ron said, grabbing it before it could fall on the floor.

The next morning, before they left, Ron woke to find something on his forehead.

“What’s this?” he said, grabbing it and staring at it in the light. “Blimey! The Paracelsus card! Did you put this here?”

Harry shook his head.

“Hermione?” Ron said, but she was already out of the tent and starting to take down the wards that protected them so they could leave. “She really is full of surprises, isn’t she?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, looking at the locket. “Aren’t we all?”
“Well, that was unexpected,” Ron said as all three of them collapsed onto the couches inside the tent.

“We walked directly into that one,” Harry said, wondering if he would ever have full use of his limbs again after that much running.

“I am such an absolute moronic fool!” Hermione cried as she pulled off her shoes and poured out ridiculous amounts of filthy water onto the floor, immediately syphoning it away with her wand. “Of course it was a cover story!”

“Good cover,” Ron said.

“An erupting volcano,” Hermione said, snorting at herself. “Right, because that was likely!”

“A lot more likely than a whole bunch of nesting dragons,” Harry said.

“What were those, anyway?” Ron asked.

“Peruvian Vipertooths,” Hermione said immediately. “They’re one of the most lethal species of dragons. We read about them in The Monster Book of Monsters.”

“You read about them,” Ron said. “I never even tried to open that books after it nearly tore off my big toe. I’ve still got a scar there that looks like a demented woodpecker.”

“Want to trade?” Harry asked, pointing at his forehead.

“No thanks, mate,” Ron said. “So if they’re Peruvian, what are they doing in Montserrat?”

“Good question. If I had to make a guess, I’d say they came here en masse at some point during the late nineteenth century when the International Confederation of Wizards sent in exterminators to kill them off because they were attacking humans at a very alarming rate,” Hermione said. “I remember Hagrid was in tears over it when we talked about it once over tea in third year.”

“I don’t remember that,” Ron said, looking at Harry quizzically. “Do you?”

Harry shook his head.

“That would be during the time you weren’t speaking to me because of the broom Sirius sent you,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said, looking uncomfortable. “Right. Hagrid mentioned you’d dropped round for tea a few times during that… thing. So how many people did the Vipertooths kill? Or is it Viperteeth?”

“Vipertooths is indeed correct, and they wiped out roughly twenty villages,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, time to put out some traps and cheese,” Harry said.
“It appears at least one colony left and headed northeast, though,” Hermione said. “Dragons live such long lives that they might well be the same ones who were driven out a century ago.”

“It took them this long to find a new spot?” Harry asked.

“Possibly,” Hermione said. “Most likely they’ve been moving from place to place for a while, then took up residence in Montserrat’s volcano for a bit, bred, laid eggs, and when they realized they were going to need a nursery—“

“They burned down everything in sight and took over the island,” Ron finished. “You’ve got to hand it to them. Get driven out of Peru, then go take over most of a Caribbean island to replace it. That’s an upgrade, I suppose.”

“Yes, Hagrid might be pleased,” Hermione said sourly, “but they did cause terrible damage and killed nineteen people a few months ago.”

Ron grimaced as he tried to remove his soggy boots, but the sodden laces were stuck together.

Hermione took out her wand and murmured, “Renodo,” at which the laces unwound themselves.

“So, now that we’ve made roughly fifty dragons furious at us—” Ron started.


“Right then, seventy gigantic copper dragons are now more than a bit miffed at us, what do we do?” Ron asked.

“Nothing,” Hermione said. “There’s too many of them to try to undo the Horcrux, and it’s far too dangerous. We were lucky to Apparate out of there alive.”

“And right into the ocean,” Ron pointed out.

Once it had become obvious that the volcanic eruption was a cover story for Muggles to hide the presence of dragons, they had considered the possibility of trying to use dragon fire to destroy the locket, but the sheer number of dragons was impossible to deal with, and Hermione had eventually Apparated them back to the beach on Antigua where they had set up their secured and warded tent. Unfortunately, she had forgotten to compensate for the change in the tide, and they wound up drenched to their waists in the Caribbean Sea, roughly thirty feet from the tent.

“Sorry about that,” she mumbled.

“Between getting soaked or being fried, I’ll definitely go with this option,” Harry said, still trying to dry off his socks.

“Not so sure about that,” Ron said, pulling off his sopping socks and throwing them over his shoulder. “At least fried we’d be warm, wouldn’t we.”

“I did say I was sorry,” Hermione, an edge forming in her voice. “Anyone can make a mistake, after all, and I did get us away from a flight of dragons undetected. Being rather soggy is a minor inconvenience considering the alternative.”

“I suppose, but be more careful next time,” Ron said, using his wand to send a jet of warm air over his rather blue toes.

“Perhaps next time you can fix it yourself if you’re inclined to be so picky about how you’re saved,”
Hermione said, then paused and started to grin.

“What?” Harry asked. “You can’t possibly know a story about dragons and landing in the Caribbean Sea, can you?”

“No, but I do know one about a highly ungrateful dwarf,” Hermione said.

“Hey! I’m taller than either of you two by a good margin!” Ron said.

“True enough,” Harry agreed quickly, trying to defuse the situation. “Still, after today, I’d rather not have the last thing I think about before bed be those things on the other island. I’ve had enough nightmares.”

“Fair point,” Ron admitted. “Okay, I agree to listen to Hermione’s story.”

Hermione gave him a look Harry thought she might have picked up from one of the dragons, but Ron missed it as he was too busy drying off his cuffs.

“Fine. Once—“

“—upon a time, yeah, we get that bit by now,” Ron said, still not looking up as Harry noticed what certainly looked like small sparks come out of her eyes.

“There lived two sisters. One was dark haired with ruddy cheeks and merry as a robin in spring, and the other was fair haired with very pale skin and gentle as a soft rain,” Hermione said.

“And they’re related? Bit odd, that. I suppose one must look like their father and the other like their mum,” Ron said.

“Perhaps so,” Hermione said, glancing at Harry, whose resemblance to his father (with the constantly remarked upon exception of his mother’s eyes) had become something of a cliché by now. “In any case, the girl with red cheeks was called Rose Red, and her sister was Snow White.”

“Seriously?” Ron asked. “I thought she had dark hair and red lips or something.”

“This is a different Snow White,” Hermione said.

“More than one poor girl got stuck with that name?” Ron said, looking horrified. “Next you’ll tell me there are a bunch of Turnipheads walking around, or maybe Ashyweeper was the most popular name for girl Muggles for a few decades.”

“No,” Hermione said, and the faint quaver in her voice told Harry that her control was near snapping. “Granted, names like Blanche or Bianca or Alba or the like are possible, and all of them refer to something being white, but Snow White showing up in two different stories as a name appears to be a fluke.”

“Too bad,” Ron said. “Turniphead actually has a nice ring to it, really, rather unique. Anyway, what’s up with the sisters? Is one evil?”

“No, they actually get along splendidly and are very close. They lived with their mother, who was a widow, in a poor little cottage on the edge of the forest,” Hermione said.

“Sorry to hear that,” Ron said, looking appropriately apologetic. “Poor kids with stupid names.”

“Rose Red isn’t so bad,” Harry said.
“I grant you, of the two, Rose Red isn’t horrendous,” Ron said. “Maybe drop the ‘red’ bit, though. Too redundant.”

“As I said, they lived with their mother, who had two rose bushes planted in front of the cottage, one on either side of the door, and the flowers of one were red while the other were white,” Hermione said.

“I wonder what they might possibly be meant to symbolize,” Ron said, sarcasm dripping from the words. “Couldn’t possibly be the girls, could it?”

“Your astute observation is correct,” Hermione said. “The girls were very good friends, never bickering and always together, though Snow White preferred to be home, reading and tidying the house, particularly in the chill of winter, while Rose Red loved to roam the fields and hillsides, preferring the warmth of summer, but each found joy in the other’s happiness.”

“Siblings who always get along?” Ron said, raising an eyebrow. “Yeah, that’s likely. Wait, are the girls twins?”

“It’s never said one way or the other, but they’re at least very close in age,” Hermione said after thinking a moment. “It’s certainly possible, though.”

“Then it might be a bit more likely they don’t fight all the time, I guess,” Ron said. “Fred and George do get on well, though even they’ll argue. Not like they do with Percy the Prat, but still some.”

“Well, whether they were twins or not—” Hermione began.

“They are,” said Ron, turning to Harry. “Just feels like it.”

“Fine, then, they’re twins!” Hermione said, her nostrils flaring in suppressed rage at the incessant interruptions. “Anyway, they would go out into the forest and wander about, hand in hand, for hours at a time, and all the beasts were tame to them. Deer would come up to them to be stroked, rabbits would hop about their feet, and the birds of the air would sing them sweet songs as they walked beneath the trees in perfect accord.”

“That’s not normal,” Ron said, frowning.

“No, obviously,” Hermione said. “It’s meant to show they’re innocent and good-natured.”

“I’m innocent and good-natured and birds don’t whistle along after me while rabbits play hopscotch around my feet,” Ron said.

Both Hermione and Harry gave him looks of extreme disbelief.

“Okay, maybe innocent is an overstatement, but it’s not like I’ve ever killed anybody either,” Ron said.

“Yes, well, let’s simply say the sisters were truly extraordinary in their goodness, far above the average,” Hermione said.

“I think I’m pretty good-natured,” Ron muttered to himself, and Harry thumped him on the back of the head with a cushion.

“Go on, Hermione,” Harry prompted her.

With a nod, she continued, saying, “One day, they stayed so late in the forest that darkness fell, and
they both lay down to sleep on the green moss until morning with no fear at all.”

“Bet their mum wasn’t best pleased with that,” Ron said.

“She doesn’t seem to have had much cause for worry, for when they awoke, they saw a beautiful child dressed in shining white sitting a few feet from them,” Hermione said.

“And that would be who? Ehm, whom? Whichever. Both. Neither,” he said, grimacing. “For pity’s sake, sometimes I wish I just spoke Mermish! It’d be a good sight easier than this mess.”

“You were right the first time with who,” Hermione said. “Apparently it was their guardian angel, who smiled kindly at them and disappeared. By the morning light, they could see they had slept right next to a steep precipice, and in only a few more steps they would have fallen to their deaths, but instead they were kept safe.”

“How exactly did they miss they were sleeping right by a great ruddy cliff?” Ron asked.

“In the dark it wouldn’t be too difficult,” Hermione said.

“Idiot children,” Ron said, shaking his head. “That guardian angel should have smacked them about the head with his halo.”

“Or her halo,” Hermione said. “It might have been a girl, though technically angels are probably non-gendered.”

“Whatsoever. Shrimpy Pinky and Banana Yellow manage not to fall to their deaths, which is a good thing, and go back home to their mum, right,” Ron said.

“Shrimpy Pinky and Banana Yellow?” Hermione enunciated slowly, disbelief coloring every word. “Ron, just how hard did Fred and George used to hit you when you were a child?”

“Fairly hard, fairly often,” he said with a shrug. “Why?”

“I’m starting to wonder how much permanent damage was done,” she said. “Anyway, yes, they went home to their mother. Time passed, and winter came. One cold and snowy night there was a knock at the door, and being hospitable and unafraid of strangers due to innocence, Rose Red sprang forward and opened the door.”

“Stupid on their mum’s part. She really should have taught them to check who was there first. Whom was there first?” Ron gave a look of pained confusion and tried again. “They should know better than to unlock the door without looking first!”

“The Dursleys would have taken away dinner for a month if I’d done that,” Harry said.

“Never ceases to amaze me how pathetic your childhood was,” Ron said, giving Harry a sympathetic look. “I did that once when I was about seven. Thankfully it was only old Xeno Lovegood. Granted, he was wearing his pants on his head, carrying a bucket full of frog spawn, had painted his face in purple and orange stripes, and greeted me by yelling, ‘Those who offend the dirigible plums shall perish at the hand of the Gernumblies!’”

Harry and Hermione stared at him.

“Yeah, never opened the door without seeing who it was first again,” Ron said.

“But what on earth was he doing?” Hermione asked.
“No idea. That’s just Xeno,” Ron said. “Rather off-putting, though, especially at six in the morning.”

Harry silently thought that if Ron had told this story about anyone else, he’d have no doubt it was made up, but with Luna’s father practically anything seemed possible.

“Yes, well,” Hermione said, still looking both perturbed and deeply uncomfortable, “you’re quite right as what bolted through the door was a huge black bear.”

“Did it want porridge?” Ron asked.

“What?”

“Did it have a wife and a gigantic baby and want porridge, like in the story about the brunette kid who was a housebreaker?” Ron asked, and though he sounded entirely sincere, his eyes were dancing with suppressed glee.

“Goldilocks? No, no, this was a completely different bear,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said. “Too bad. I was rather hoping the mum and daughters would fix him up with some take away. They never did get their breakfast. Well, except in the version where they ate the little girl.”

“The bear did ask to be allowed into the house, though, as it was bitter cold outside and he was freezing to death,” Hermione said.


Hermione stared at him again.

“What? I’m hungry,” Ron said. “You can’t eat flowers and snow. Or you can, but I don’t want to.”

“They invited him in and the bear lay before the fire until the snow melted from his coat and he was once more warm, and he was a very good guest indeed,” Hermione said.

“A polite bear. Well, that’s much better than being mauled to death,” Ron said.

“In the morning, the bear left, but he returned again that night, and each night thereafter. Soon Snow White and Rose Red lost their first fear of him and began to play with him, riding him like a great horse about their kitchen and playing all sorts of games with him, even hitting him with the fire poker so that the bear cried out in mock-pain, ‘Snow White and Rose Red, do not beat your lover dead!’” Hermione said, giving the bear an especially grumbly voice that Harry thought sounded more like she was coming down with a cold.

“There is so much wrong in that statement that I don’t even know where to start,” Ron said, sighing.

“Let me try?” Harry said. “Okay, a talking bear is playing games inside a house with two girls, which is not safe, and then it starts spouting bad poetry and refers to itself as a romantic interest for both of them?”

“Very good,” Ron said, “but you forgot the bit about the poker. Fun game, that. I doubt that was mock-pain the bear was yelling in.”

Harry bowed slightly in recognition that he has skipped that particular issue, and Hermione just put her face in her hands and drew a deep breath.
“Yes, quite, fine,” she said. “Everything both of you have said is indeed a valid, logical, and dare I say sane point about this story, but just go with it, will you?”

“Fine,” Harry and Ron chorused together.

“When spring came again, the bear said to them, ‘I thank you for your kindness and shall not forget it. I will not return tonight, for now that the snow has melted, I must protect my treasure from the gnome who would steal it, and I dare not leave it unwatched by night. Fare thee well!’ and as Rose Red opened the door for him, the edge of it caught on his fur, and for one moment she thought she saw a gleam of gold beneath it, but that might have been her imagination,” Hermione told them.

“So it’s a bear with financial assets and no access to a bank,” Ron said.

“And one who apparently is wearing a gold coat under his fur,” Harry added.

Ron nodded, saying, “Obviously it’s not her imagination. Far too convenient.”

“Yes, well, the bear did indeed not return that night. Days passed, and the mother sent the girls into the forest to gather some firewood,” Hermione said.

“They’re not going to wind up in the freakish gingerbread house of a cannibalistic, pro-patriarchy, anti-feminist stereotype of ancient wise women under the guise of the crone figure, are then?” Ron said, looking concerned.

Hermione looked duly impressed before saying, “No, though that was very well remembered. The mother isn’t attempting to lose the children in the forest. She really does just need some firewood.”

“Oh,” Ron said, smiling, “that’s all right, then.”

Harry pondered for a moment just how long it had taken Ron to come up with that combination of words and insert it into a conversation, and he had to tip his hat to his friend’s patience at waiting for the right opportunity.

“In any case, as the sisters walked deep into the woods, they heard shouting and calls for help ahead, so they ran towards the sounds,” Hermione said.

“Was it the bear?” Harry asked.

“No,” Hermione said.

“A talking goose?” Ron suggested.

“A what?” Hermione asked.

“There’ve been loads of geese lately,” Ron said nonchalantly. “Why can’t one talk? We’ve already got a talking bear in this one, haven’t we?”

“Yes, but…”

“Or if not a talking goose, how about a talking moose?” Harry suggested, trying to sound serious.

“Right,” Ron said, nodding as though this were the most logical thing in the world. “A talking moose. Or goose.”

“Or a spruce? Wait, have we had a talking tree?” Harry asked.
“Not yet. If it isn’t a goose, moose, or spruce, it could be a chartreuse mongoose named Bruce who got loose.”

“Oh, then why not an animate talking caboose!” Hermione yelled, throwing her hands in the air in fury over the pair of them. “Do you want to hear the story or not!”

Harry and Ron looked at one another.

“Got any better rhymes for goose?” Ron asked.


“Nah, better call a truce,” Ron said, and Hermione groaned. “So what was it?”

“A dwarf with his beard stuck in a crack in a log,” Hermione said in a flat voice, obviously becoming tired of them.

“Okay, I wouldn’t have guessed that particular image,” Ron said. “How’d that happen?”

“He wouldn’t say, but the harder he tugged at his beard, the louder he cried, and when he saw the two girls, he called out to them, calling them lazy, good-for-nothing dimwits for standing about gawking at him rather than trying to help,” Hermione said.

“Nice fellow,” Harry said. “I hope they kept walking.”

“No, they felt sorry for him, and they stopped to try to help free his beard from the tree, but nothing helped,” Hermione said. “Everything they did prompted the dwarf to call them ever worse names.”

“So they left his verbally abusive nastiness behind and went to get firewood for their mum?” Ron suggested.

“No, Snow White, who had been doing the mending before she left, still had her sewing scissors in her apron pocket, and she used them to cut off just the tip of the dwarf’s beard, freeing him from the log,” Hermione said.

“Somehow, I doubt he’ll be grateful,” Harry said.

“You’re quite right. He accused them of spoiling his beard, though barely an inch of it had been sacrificed, and threatened them with all manner of violence if he ever saw them again,” Hermione said. “But then a strange thing happened. He reached down into the crack in the log and pulled out a great sack, and the sisters could see it was filled to the brim with jewels of all kinds. Then, with a pop, he and the bag both disappeared.”

“Apparated,” Ron said firmly. “Also, someone put protective wards around that tree to keep the jewels from being stolen.”

“He was definitely caught in a burglar trap,” Harry agreed.

“Which means the girls just helped him steal someone’s treasure,” Ron said.

“Not on purpose!” Hermione said, looking horrified. “They were trying to do something good!”

“Yeah,” Ron said, “but it still didn’t turn out well.”

“I suppose not,” Hermione said. “Anyway, several months passed.”
“During which the rude dwarf probably spent all that poor bloke’s gems on fire whiskey and betting on Quidditch,” Ron added.

“And the girls were walking along the river that ran through the forest when once more they heard cries for help,” Hermione said, ignoring his interruption.

“I don’t suppose it was the dwarf again,” Ron said.

“It was,” Hermione replied.

“I am deeply shocked,” Ron said, looking anything but. “What’s he got his beard stuck in this time? Another log?”

“No, it had gotten tangled in his fishing line,” Hermione said.

“Wild guess. The girls save him by cutting off the tip of his beard, he yells a bunch more verbal abuse at them the whole time, and he winds up disappearing with another sack of diamonds and suchlike?” Ron asked innocently.

“No,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said.

“It’s a bag of pearls this time,” Hermione said, “but you got the rest pretty much right.”

“So, aiding and abetting thievery, second instance,” Harry said.

“Get a few years for that in Azkaban, possibly. Oh, wait, they’re kids, aren’t they? Probably not, then,” Ron said.

“Actually, their specific age isn’t mentioned,” Hermione said. “They could be over eighteen.”

“Seventeen,” Ron corrected her.

“Muggles use eighteen,” Hermione said.

“They do?” Ron asked, looking confused. “Why?”

“Why do wizards use seventeen?” Hermione said.

“Because it’s the first prime number after thirteen, and thirteen’s obviously too young,” Ron said firmly.

“What does it being prime have to do with anything?” Hermione asked. “That’s a ridiculous reason.”

“At least we have a reason, even if it’s a bit daft,” Ron said. “Why eighteen?”

“Because… it’s… Harry, a bit of help?” Hermione said.

“No idea,” Harry said.

“See? Arbitrary. Anyway, as things tend to happen in threes in these things, I’m going to assume the girls happen on the dwarf again with his beard stuck in a sewer or a brick wall or a Bludger or something,” Ron said.
“Stuck in a Bludger?” Harry said, looking at Ron as though he were crazy.

“Snitch seemed too small, and the Quaffle wouldn’t move on its own, so getting his beard stuck in a Bludger means he’d be swooping around all over the place, banging into things,” Ron said.

“Yes, but is there even an inside to a Bludger for his beard to be stuck in?” Harry asked.

“Of course. They’re hollow, you know. So are Snitches, actually. Sometimes they have to be opened up by referees to be tested for any illegal modifications. They found one once with a whole colony of miniaturized wasps inside it that the Luxembourg team had put there as revenge against the Greek team. The idea was the Greek beater would smash the Bludger, it would break open, and the wasps would come out, go back to normal size, and sting the other team. Luxembourg were disqualified for two seasons after that. Rotten sportsmanship,” Ron said.

“I should say so,” Hermione said, her eyes enormous. “Well, in any case, his beard actually wasn’t stuck in anything this time.”

“No?” Harry said, still mentally reminding himself never to make an enemy of the Luxembourg Quidditch team.

“No, instead a gigantic bird was trying to carry him off to feed him to its young,” Hermione said. “It had caught hold of him, and he was struggling to keep himself on the ground by clutching at anything around him and failing miserably.”

“Okay, that does seem like an actual emergency this time,” Ron said. “What did they do?”

“As the dwarf called them block headed fools and addle pated nitwits, they grabbed onto his coat and pulled hard until he slipped from the bird’s talons and fell back to earth,” Hermione said.

“Well, not polite, but at least he’s alive,” Ron said.

“The dwarf, however, was angry at them for tearing his coat to shreds, calling them names and otherwise just generally being horrid. Then he took a bag from a hiding place under a rock and pawed through it, and they saw that it was filled with golden coins,” Hermione said.

“Again? For crying out loud, how much dosh has he got from stealing?” Ron said.

“Just at that moment, a bear, fury written on its face, charged into the forest clearing, terrifying all three of them. The dwarf said, ‘Don’t eat me! I’m too small! Eat these two useless, plump hussies instead!’ but the bear cuffed him once with its great paw, and the dwarf lay dead,” Hermione said.

“Ursa ex machina,” Ron mumbled.

“Huh?” Hermione said, bewildered.

“Well, the bear isn’t a god, so deus ex machina really wouldn’t work there, would it? So what happens now?” Ron said.

Harry noted Ron seemed to be working rather hard to keep a straight face.

“Where did you learn about the concept of deus ex machina?” Hermione asked, sounding very confused.

“What, the idea of introducing a random event in a story to bring about the desired conclusion even though it has little to do with the characters’ actions, originally derived from ancient Greek plays that
brought in a god character dangling from a machine—” Ron turned briefly to Harry, “that’s the machina part—to wrap up the story? Doesn’t everyone know that?”

“No,” Hermione answered.


“Huh?” Hermione said intelligently.

“Bear. One just showed up and killed the dwarf. What happens next?” Ron asked.

“Oh, right, yes, bear,” Hermione said, sounding like she was still trying to adjust her world view. “All at once, there was a blinding flash of light, and the bear turned into a handsome prince.”

“Because he killed some bloke?” Ron asked.

“Actually, sort of, but not just anyone. The prince explained that the dwarf had wanted to steal his treasure and had turned him into a bear, and only when the bear was able to find him and kill him would he become human again,” Hermione said.

Harry and Ron looked at one another.

“Okay, so I’m assuming this is the same bear they were playing with all winter, right?” Harry said.

“Exactly,” Hermione said.

“So why didn’t the talking bear tell them about this whole mess?” Ron asked.

“I’m not sure. It’s possible he wasn’t able to speak about it as part of the enchantment,” Hermione said.

“Okay, so someone transfigures a prince into a bear, which, really, is fairly stupid. Why not make him a toad or a housefly or—“ Ron started.

“Or a ferret?” Harry suggested.

“Best day of my life,” Ron said nostalgic, a dreamy look in his eyes before coming back to himself. “Right, though, or a ferret, when the spell can be reversed by killing the dwarf. A bear could kill a dwarf without much problem, but how would a bunny rabbit manage it?”

“Bite him in the carotid artery while he’s asleep?” Hermione suggested.

“Okay, now I have horrifying bunny images in my head,” Ron said, turning pale. “But, say, a guppy?”

“Wait until the dwarf is swimming and swim up his nose, choking him?” Hermione said.

“Housefly?”

“Find a lethal disease, become a carrier, and bite the dwarf,” Hermione said.

“Three-toed sloth?” Ron finally tried.

“Oh, I’m sure they can be rabid or something, though admittedly trying to catch the dwarf would be somewhat of a problem,” Hermione said. “Probably it could just hang in a tree, wait for the dwarf to walk under it, then drop on it and break its spine from the impact, provided the distance was
significant enough. There would be some maths involved for that one to work properly, though.”

“You know, we’re lucky you’re on our side,” Ron said, looking at her with a mixture of respect and fear. “You can come up with a lot of ways to kill someone without much to start on.”

“Thank you, I think,” Hermione said. “In any case, the bear explained the situation, and at once proposed marriage to Rose Red, who accepted.”

“Now I have absolutely no idea how old these two are,” Ron said.

“Post-puberty, we’ll assume,” Hermione said.

“What about Snow White?” Harry asked.

“Oh, she moves in with her dead dad’s second wife and develops an allergy to apples, but this time she meets nice dwarfs,” Ron said, smirking.

“No, although the idea both stories involve dwarfs of one kind or another is odd now that you mention it,” Hermione said. “The prince has a brother, and he marries Snow White.”

“Convenient. And where has he been hiding? Was he turned into a carnivorous rabbit?” Ron asked.

“With nasty, pointy teeth,” Hermione said, but when neither of them got the joke she sighed and muttered, “I’m wasted on this lot. He was just back in the kingdom, waiting for his older brother to return, I suppose.”

“And poor Snow White just automatically marries him? What if he’s horrible?” Ron asked.

“Supposedly, she’s very happy, as is Rose Red, and she and her sister move into the castle together with their mother, who takes the rose bushes with her, which grow to enormous size and produce many blooms,” Hermione said.

“And that’s the end?” Ron said.

“Yes,” Hermione said.

“Okay, so the dwarf is an ungrateful little pig and ignores the kindness the girls do for him by complaining about being mildly inconvenienced in return for saving his life,” Ron said. “This is supposed to line up with you getting us away from an island full of dragons but accidentally dropping us into a couple feet of water in the process, right?”

“Well, yes,” Hermione said.

“Point noted,” Ron said. “Fine. But if I ever grow a magnificent beard, don’t go chopping off the bottom of it if I get it stuck in a log or fishing line or something.”

“And I shall also let birds of prey take you for a ride without intervening on your behalf,” Hermione said primly.

“Dare I ask where we’re off to next?” Harry said.

“Whose turn is it now, anyway?” Ron asked.

“I picked You-Know-Who’s old flat, and Harry wanted to try a volcano,” Hermione said.

“Then it’s me,” Ron said, looking glum. “Okay, give me a second.”
Harry and Hermione sat quietly as Ron mumbled to himself.

“Right, so in order for He Who Must Not Be Named to get from Albania to England, he must have travelled somehow, right?” Ron ventured.

“Yes, and I doubt he was in any condition for Apparition, even Side-Along,” Hermione said.

“So he and Wormtail either went by land or boat. What do you two think he picked?” Ron said.

“If it were me, I’d go by land,” Harry said. “A boat is too dangerous. If an enemy attacked, he’d have nowhere to go.”

“Yeah, I agree,” Hermione said. “He probably went overland by the most direct route he could safely.”

“There’s a lot of space between Albania and England, and he could have picked loads of different routes, but I think he’d have to cross at the Channel, wouldn’t he?” Ron asked.

“Most likely,” Hermione said, and Harry nodded.

“So let’s check the Dover coast,” Ron said. “I think it would be the spot he’d probably have come ashore. Maybe we’ll find something.”

“It’s a possibility, at any rate,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, decent plan, Ron,” Harry said.

“Thanks. Shall we turn in, then?” Ron said.

“I’m exhausted,” Hermione agreed. “Is everyone properly dry again?”

“Yeah, no harm done,” Harry said.

“Better to be dunked than roasted,” Ron agreed. “Thanks for that.”

“Don’t mention it,” Hermione said as she slipped behind the curtain where she slept.

“Percy mentioned *deus ex machi*-whatsthat?” Harry whispered as he and Ron made up beds on the two couches.

“Okay, okay, so I read a book on Greek drama once,” Ron said. “I was really bored during the weeks going up to the Triwizard Tournament when we weren’t talking, so bored I started reading random books in the library. That one and 1001 Ways to Cook Radishes. I actually counted. There were only 927. I owled the author a complaint and got twenty pounds of radishes as an apology. Poor old witch said no one else had ever caught it. Probably because no one else ever read it, I’d wager.”

“You really were bored,” Harry said, mildly impressed.

In an hour, Ron and Hermione were both soundly asleep, but Harry just couldn’t seem to doze off. Instead, he quietly got up and opened the tent flap, peering out at the thousands of stars in the sky and mirrored in the sea. Far off, he could just barely see an occasional flash of brilliant orange and red fire. Most people might think it was only the restless volcano, but Harry was no Muggle. He knew better.
“You know, they say the cliffs are high, but I didn’t really know how high they actually were until I was halfway down one,” Ron said as he opened the flap of the tent, looking more than a little worse for wear.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed as he entered.

“Let’s not do that again, shall we?”

“Indubitably,” Hermione said, closing the door behind her and shuddering.

“If I wake up shrieking tonight, I apologize in advance. I’ll be sure to add an extra layer of muffling spells. I hate heights.”

The trio had come back to Britain and had started by exploring the beaches around Dover by moonlight, the chalk cliffs glowing eerily behind them. Nothing in the vicinity seemed to be giving off any signs of residual magic, and Hermione, looking at the towering precipices behind them, had suggested that getting a raised vantage point of the area might be useful. After Apparating from the pebble-strewn beach to the grassy slopes above the cliffs, they had attempted looking for something out of the ordinary. Ron had even tried yelling, “Accio Horcrux!” once they were entirely convinced they were alone, but nothing happened. Harry secretly wondered if something that simple would have worked, but honestly, if Voldemort had chosen to turn his soul into a random rock on the beach, they probably never would have found it anyway.

It had still been very dark when Ron had got too close to the edge of one of the cliffs, trying to look straight down at the beach, and had suddenly disappeared from view with a shriek. Hermione had run forward and cast the same spell Dumbledore had used in their third year to slow Harry’s descent when he’d fainted during the Dementor attack on the Quidditch pitch, but her enthusiasm had carried her over the brink as well. Harry had arrived a split second after, almost clutching her robes as she plummeted down, but he made a go of copying her spell and managed to slow her down as well. He Apparated down to the beach to find the pair of them, not too far from where they had pitched their tent, looking deeply shaken.

“I can’t fault Gloucester for passing out in King Lear,” Hermione had mumbled.

While Harry had no idea what she meant, Ron had stared up at the cliff and said, his face nearly as white as the chalk, “Yup.”

“So, what now?” Harry said. “It was worth a try, but I don’t think any Horcruxes are lurking about.”

At least he hoped not, thinking of the millions of rocks again. Thankfully, that didn’t seem Voldemort’s style. He’d want something grand, and while the cliffs were stunning, he doubted one of them contained a shred of that thing’s soul.

“The locket didn’t react, either,” Ron said, looping it around the armrest of the chair and heaving a sigh of relief to have the thing no longer affecting him quite so badly as when he was wearing it. “No vibrating, no glowing that I saw, no noises, nothing.”
Hermione was looking at the ugly necklace very strangely, drawing back from it instinctively.

“What?” Harry said.

“Ron, when you fell—“

“Do we have to talk about that?” Ron said, turning a little green.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Hermione said. “When you fell, you didn’t get the feeling you were, you know, pushed or something, did you?”


Hermione said nothing, but she nodded pointedly at the locket.

“That thing?” Ron said, then laughed. “You think it was, what? Trying to do me in? Killed by a necklace? Not bloody likely.”

“One nearly killed Katie Bell last year,” Hermione said quietly.

Harry and Ron looked at one another, and Harry was only slightly comforted to see Ron appeared as terrified as he was by that realization.

“Okay,” Ron said slowly. “Maybe. Maybe not. It really was slippery up there, and I was a prat to be so near the edge. It didn’t really require anyone or anything to give me a nudge.”

“No,” Hermione said, staring at the necklace. “It might have been nothing at all.”

The unspoken words “then again, it might not,” hung in the air among the three of them, and the locket continued to give its sickly, unnatural light in the gloom.

“Is there any dinner left?” Ron asked abruptly, completely breaking the mood.

Harry and Hermione stared at him.

“What?” he said. “I’m hungry. Pondering whether our least favorite fashion accessory is also homicidal isn’t filling our stomachs.”

“I think we still have a few slices of bread left, a tin of sardines, and a couple tomatoes,” Hermione said, getting up rather quickly to look in the kitchen. Harry didn’t blame her. They all wanted to run from that thing.

“I thought the bread had gone stale,” Ron said.

“It has,” Hermione admitted, “but it’s a good deal better than nothing, and I don’t want to waste it.”

Her hand paused above the sardines, and she shook her head with a little snort.

“There’s a story about stale bread, isn’t there,” Ron said.

“No, well, probably yes if I think hard enough, but there is one about wasting bread,” Hermione said. “Come on, you lot, get up. I’m not making sandwiches all by myself and telling a story, even if it is a short one. Harry, will you slice the tomatoes? Ron, could you open this blasted tin?”

Harry got up at once, putting some distance between him and the locket. Ron paused for a moment, then joined the others in what passed for their kitchen, leaving the necklace where it was.
“Alright then,” Hermione said. “Once…”

“Once a time,” Ron said, squinting as he tried to pry open the sardines. “That bit never really changes much.”

“Except with the highly disturbing piper,” Harry pointed out.

“Oh, yeah, that bloke,” Ron said, finally peeling back the top of the tin and nearly slicing his finger in the process. “That one really was disturbing.”

“Well, I’m afraid this one is too,” Hermione admitted.

“Lovely,” Ron muttered, but Harry elbowed him in the gut as he sliced the tomatoes as evenly as he could, trying to ignore memories of preparing potions ingredients in Snape’s dungeon.

“There was once a child named Inge, and she was very beautiful,” Hermione said.

“Inge?” Ron said, thinking it over. “That’s not odd at all. Not only is she pretty, she has a decent name. For these things, she’s doing really, really well already.”

“Yes, she did have many advantages, but unfortunately she was a cruel, merciless, horrid child,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Ron said. “Yeah, that sounds less good.”

“Indeed. She used to catch flies and pull their wings off to watch them crawl about helplessly for her amusement, or she would catch live bugs, stick them through with sharp pins, and place a leaf before them so that they would grasp it as though to save them, all while saying, ‘Oh, how funny! It looks just as though the bug were flipping over the pages in a book and reading!’” Hermione said.

“She’s not just cruel,” Ron said, his face screwing into an expression of disgust. “She’s a ruddy psychopath is what she is.”

“Dudley used to do the fly thing when we were kids,” Harry said, “but not the one with the pin, though if he’d ever had the idea, he probably would have. Bit too dim for well-organized animal cruelty.”

“See? Psychopath,” Ron said, chucking his friend on the shoulder sympathetically.

“Unfortunately, as she was so very pretty, no one gave much thought to her behavior, and when she should have been punished, her faults were overlooked by all except her mother, who often wept over her daughter and declared that while now Inge trod on mother’s apron to amuse herself, one day she would surely trod on her mother’s heart,” Hermione said.

“Mum would have a fit if one of us did something like that,” Ron said, nodding firmly. “That girl would have been cleaning the broom shed with a toothbrush.”

“Well, something much worse happened to Inge,” Hermione said.

“She was locked in a tower? A witch tried to eat her heart? She married a fellow who had killed a bunch of his previous wives?” Ron said, brightening up.

“No,” Hermione said. “She was adopted by a rich couple who thought she was very pretty.”

“That’s worse?” Harry asked.
“Yeah, sign me up for worse, then,” Ron said.

“It really was bad since they humored her even more than her first family and ignored all her faults, spoiling her completely and giving her such an inflated ego that she looked down on everyone around her,” Hermione said.

“Malfoy,” Harry said. “Sounds like Malfoy.”

“A bit, yes,” Hermione agreed. “I don’t think he could have turned out as anything other than he did with the parents he has.”

“Okay, so Ing-o Malfoy gets adopted. Then what?” Ron asked.

“Inge, I mean, Inge, lived with her wealthy and indulgent new parents for about a year before her mistress, as she called her, suggested Inge should go to visit her family,” Hermione said.

“I’m guessing that didn’t happen,” Ron said.

“Well, yes and no. Inge dressed up as fine as she could, more to make others envious and ashamed of their own poor clothes in the town of her birth, and she went to see her mother. However, the girl saw the poor woman at a distance, surrounded by young maidens and working men, sitting on a stone to rest. Next to her was a great bundle of twigs and sticks from the forest that she had obviously gathered for firewood,” Hermione said.

“Did she help her mum carry the firewood home?" Ron asked.

“No,” Hermione said. “Instead, she was embarrassed to be related to such a poor woman and slipped away without being seen.”

“Okay, regardless of how pretty she is, she’s terrible,” Harry said.

“Yeah, I’d already crossed her off the list of appealing females with the fly thing, but she’s not winning any prizes for kind-heartedness,” Ron said. “So she never saw her mother again?”

“Not exactly. Her mistress sent her back again six months later along with a very large loaf of bread as a present for her family,” Hermione said.

“The mistress doesn’t sound as selfish as the girl,” Ron said.

“No, but she still let her do anything and get away with it,” Hermione said. “Inge did indeed bring the loaf with her to visit her mother, but along the way there was a great mud puddle in the road where she needed to cross, and she was afraid she would dirty her shoes.”

“Go around,” Ron suggested with a shrug.

“She couldn’t. It was the only route,” Hermione said.

“So she went home?” Harry asked.

“No,” Hermione said. “She threw the loaf into the middle of the puddle to use it as a stepping stone, sacrificing her family’s food for her vanity.”

“Wait, would that even work?” Ron asked. “Bread is rather squishy usually. If she steps on it, won’t it just fall apart and sink and get her shoes covered in muddy bread?”

“We assume it’s quite a large loaf, and perhaps it’s something firm like pumpernickel or the like, so if...
she moved very quickly, she might have been able to step on it fast enough not to be troubled by the mud,” Hermione said, “but I admit, it isn’t a wonderful plan. Then again, I never said Inge was all that bright, either.”

“Fair point,” Ron said. “So what happens when she shows up at home with no bread?”

“She didn’t,” Hermione said.

“Oh, did she buy another loaf at the bakery to replace it?” Ron asked, then frowned. “No, that’s not something she’s likely to do.”

“Quite right. She never arrived home,” Hermione said.

“Why?” Harry asked.

“Because the moment she stepped onto the loaf, it sank,” Hermione said.

“Told you it wouldn’t work. The stupid cow winds up covered in mud anyway and that’s a lesson to her overinflated ego, right?” Ron said.

“Not quite,” Hermione said. “The loaf sank, taking her with it until she was sucked through the mud puddle and into the house of the Marsh Woman.”

“Okay, that’s one deep puddle,” Ron said. “Who’s the Marsh Woman?”

“It’s not really clear, but she’s a highly unpleasant person who brews in the early summer, and the mist seen on the meadows in the morning is supposed to be the steam from her brewing pots,” Hermione said.

“So, some sort of Muggle version of a witch then?” Ron asked.

“Possibly, though obviously the typically negative stereotype of one. The story says when compared to the Marsh Witch’s home, a pile of mud would look like a palace,” Hermione explained.

“So she doesn’t clean often. But let’s say Inge hadn’t stepped on the bread,” Ron said. “She’d have had to step in the puddle anyway. Would she still have been sucked down to the Marsh Woman?”

“I don’t think so,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “It appears that wasting the bread was the last straw and she was sent there as punishment.”

“Good. I don’t want to have to worry over taking a step in a puddle,” Ron said with a grin. “So how long does she stay there?”

“Well, it’s not clear. Inge becomes frozen solid in the Marsh Woman’s home because it was so cold, so she couldn’t move at all, and the loaf of bread was still stuck solidly to her foot, so for days or weeks or longer, she had no idea how long, she stayed there, stiff and motionless as a statue, and then the Marsh woman one day had company come to call,” Hermione explained.

“Inge’s mother? The family that took her in? The baker royally angry over the misuse of his bread?” Ron suggested.

“No, it was the devil and his grandmother,” Hermione said.

Harry and Ron exchanged looks.

“Okay, there is so much wrong in that statement that I don’t know where to start,” Ron said.
“Well, it seems that the Marsh Woman, in addition to being some sort of witch, is also a demon, and the devil stop by to see how she’s fairing in capturing souls and other nasty business,” Hermione said.

“Accompanied by his gran?” Harry said.

“Nice of him to take the old girl out for a bit of a treat,” Ron said, rolling his eyes.

“Well, that’s what the story says,” Hermione said with a shrug.

“What’s she do, sit and knit while they have tea?” Ron asked.

“Essentially, yes, though we’re told she’s knitting lies into spider webs and that her hands are never idle, always busy creating something evil,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, okay, I’m picturing Umbridge at this point. Then what?” Ron asked.

“Well, the grandmother saw Inge and thought she would make a perfect addition to her grandson’s entrance hall, and the Marsh Woman gave Inge to the devil as a present,” Hermione said.

“Immediately, Inge sank even deeper into the earth, the loaf of bread still stuck tightly to her foot.”

“So she’s statuary in hell?” Ron said.

“Basically, yes,” Hermione said.

“You know, if you’d asked me what the consequences were of using bread as a muddy stepping stone, I don’t think I would have come up with that one,” Ron said.

“I wouldn’t have thought Old Scratch was much into interior design either,” Harry added. “So what happened next?”

“She came to rest in a subterranean cavern filled with the souls of all those who had been terrible in their earthly lives, each one suffering in some way and hoping for the Gates of Mercy to open and take them from that horrible place, but they seemed to be always shut,” Hermione said.

“So there’s a way out of hell?” Harry asked.

“Sort of, but it seems more like she’s not quite in hell but sort of on the border of it, like it’s some other afterlife that Andersen is making up, since—“

“Wait, did you say Andersen?” Ron asked, saying the last name with a laugh.

“Yes, it’s one of his. It’s called ‘The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf,’” Hermione said.

“And she was worried about shoes and has her foot stuck in a loaf of bread?” Ron said. “Well, there’s yet more of our old boy and his weird obsession with feet.”

“I suppose so,” Hermione said. “It really is rather odd.”

“So that’s the end of the story, then,” Harry said.

“No, actually. We get a fairly graphic description of Inge’s punishments next. At first, she thinks she’s been chosen to be there because she’s so pretty, still believing in her vanity above all else.”

Ron looked at Harry and said, “You’re right. Dim bulb here.”
“In actuality, a great snake lived in her hair, and her dress, spattered in mud, had toads in every fold of it. Each of them croaked endlessly, sounding like an asthmatic poodle,” Hermione said.

Harry and Ron both snorted in laughter.

“An asthmatic poodle?” Harry said.

“Bit of a weird simile there,” Ron said.

“Well, it’s straight from Andersen’s story. Toads that sound like asthmatic poodles,” Hermione said firmly.

“How many asthmatic poodles have you heard in your life?” Ron asked.

“None,” Hermione said. “The real question is how many had Andersen heard.”

“Probably one would be enough to make an indelible memory,” Harry said.

“Yeah, maybe his next door neighbor had one that kept him up nights or something,” Ron said.

“Or maybe he was just a nutter,” Harry suggested.

“Or that,” Ron conceded. “So she’s still not able to move at all?”

“Right, which I think is supposed to remind us of how stiff and proud she was in life. She can move her eyes, but can’t turn her head, and she stares endlessly at all the other souls who are blanketed in cobwebs like manacles. Eventually, she realizes the horrible state she’s in, but she’s unable even to weep or even blink,” Hermione said.

“Okay, so that’s the end?” Ron asked.

“No, then the flies whose wings she had torn off come back and start crawling all over her face, and no matter how much she hopes they’ll stop, they can’t fly away, so she’s tortured by them endlessly,” Hermione said.

“Right, because that’s not disturbing, even if she does rather deserve it,” Ron said, looking green. “And that’s the end?”

“No, not yet,” Hermione said.

“Oh, come on, what’s next! Does she get repeatedly hit over the head with a giant flaming baguette to really pound home the lesson or something?” Ron asked.

“No, but her worst torture is she could still hear all that went on in the world above her, and she learned that her last deed had been seen by a cowherd who reported it far and wide. This was how her mother learned what had happened to her along with her mistress, and she heard them weeping as their hearts broke over her ingratitude and pride,” Hermione said.

“Okay, I’d rather take getting hit with the bread,” Ron said. “Nothing is worse than mum crying over something I’ve been stupid enough to do.”

“Inge’s story became well known to all the people, and they laughed at her and used her as a warning for children, telling them to avoid being like ‘Wicked Inge,’ and everyone shuddered at the thought of how horrible her fate must be,” Hermione said.

“So now on top of everything else, she’s become an object lesson,” Ron said. “Yup, she’s in hell.
Now what, because I’m guessing this still isn’t the end?"

“Well, one little girl heard the story of Inge and wept over her, saying how sorry she felt for her and wondering if there wasn’t any way to help Inge or if she might someday leave that place,” Hermione said.

“And?” Harry and Ron said together.

“She was told she might if she were truly sorry and repented of doing all her evil,” Hermione said. “Not long after, Inge saw two bright stars far above, which were her mother’s eyes closing for the last time in death, and she felt the woman’s tears fall on her as she grieved one more time over her wicked daughter.”

“Oh, for crying out loud! We met the kid for what, two seconds? And she was nice and all that. And now she dies too?” Ron said. “It’s like writers really enjoy making their audience sympathize with and like certain characters before killing people off.”

“Perhaps, but it’s a children’s morality tale. They generally do go into extremes. In any case, many years passed, and at long last the little girl who had heard the story of Inge and wept over her grew to be an old woman and was dying,” Hermione said.

“I mean, yes, the girl is awful, but honestly, it’s a loaf of bread,” Ron said. “Isn’t this getting slightly into the territory of overkill?”

“Okay, now it’s just getting sad,” Ron said.

“Andersen’s stories generally do. The same thing happened again when her mistress died, who sighed with her last breath about her disappointment over her adopted child’s cruelty,” Hermione said.

“Again, it’s more like Draco being turned into a ferret,” Hermione said. “The tears Transfigured her into a bird.”
“Except Moody meant that as punishment,” Ron said, closing his eyes happily, “and it was the most wonderful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“You mean Barty Crouch Junior meant it as punishment,” Hermione said. “You’re applauding a Death Eater using Transfiguration for torture.”

“It’s Draco,” Ron said, not opening his eyes. “That makes it okay.”

Hermione opened her mouth to argue the point, then shrugged and mumbled, “Honestly, the little prat did worse to others,” and carried on.

“Inge, now in the form of a bird, was fed one day by a woman who gave her breadcrumbs. Inge, refreshed by the food, sang sweetly to other birds nearby, and they soon arrived and ate all the crumbs that were left,” Hermione said. “This she did many times, taking only one small crumb for herself and then alerting the other birds in the area to the food so that they might eat and also feed their little ones.”

“So the bird is feeding the birds by finding people feeding birds and telling birds where to get fed,” Harry said.

“Essentially, yes,” Hermione said. “It’s a bit complicated, but I suppose there really aren’t that many good deeds a bird can do, but it certainly qualifies as one.”

“At least it’s not putting droppings all over people’s windows,” Harry said, laughing.

Ron still had his eyes shut.

“Ron?” Hermione asked. “Are you sleeping?”

“No,” he responded, his eyes firmly closed. “I’m picturing ferret-Malfoy stuffing his cheeks full of breadcrumbs and spitting them all over Crabbe and Goyle’s shoes. It’s a nice picture.”

Hermione rolled her eyes again.

“I can hear you do that, you know,” Ron said, his eyelids not moving.

“After quite a long time, Inge the bird had saved so many breadcrumbs for others that altogether they equaled the weight of the original loaf that she had trod on so many years ago,” Hermione said.

“Wait,” Ron said, opening his eyes, “does she still have a loaf stuck on her bird foot?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Hermione said. “That would look rather odd on a bird.”

“So? It would look odd on a statue with a snake in its hair and live asthmatic poodle-toads in its dress, too” Ron pointed out. “I’m not taking anything as a given.”

“Fair point,” Hermione said. “Nothing is mentioned about it, though.”

“Fine,” Ron said, “then I’m imagining her foot still stuck in a loaf. Small loaf. Maybe a crouton.”

“’The Bird Who Trod on a Crouton’ has a nice ring to it for a title,” Harry said approvingly.

Hermione shook her head, wiping her hand over her brow as though warding off a migraine, before saying, “And once the bird had saved as many crumbs as were in the long-ago trodden loaf, a change came over her.”
“Again?” Ron said. “What’s she now? A trout?”

“No, she became a seagull,” Hermione said with more patience than any human can be said to possess within normal limits.

“So not really that much of a change then,” Ron said. “She just started making that annoying shrieking sound and dive bombing boats for fish.”

“No, but several people saw the gull fly directly towards the sun and disappear,” Hermione said.

“She immolated herself?” Ron asked.

“No!” Hermione said. “She wouldn’t have really been able to fly all the way to the sun, Ronald! For one thing she’d run out of oxygen first!”

“This girl-bird just escaped hell and became a different bird because she saved up enough breadcrumbs at the good deed bank and now you want to interject reason into this?” Ron said.

“Fine, yes, whatever, the original implies Inge is accepted into heaven through her good deeds, but if you prefer an aerial version of a suicidal Viking funeral, be my guest. The end,” Hermione said, collapsing against the cushion. “I’m all in. Where are we going tomorrow?”

“It’s your choice, I think,” Harry said. “I picked Montserrat, also known as Dragon Paradise, and Ron chose Dover, also known as Mind the Gigantic Gap, so you’re up.”

“Oh,” Hermione said, looking even more tired. “It really was a decent idea. I’m almost certain You-Know-Who must have come across somewhere near here.”

Ron snorted, but Harry noted he looked rather pleased all the same.

“I don’t think he left anything near here, though,” she said, and her expression, eyes half-closed, lips held tight, told Harry she was thinking very hard. That usually yielded excellent results.

“So?” Ron asked after several tense seconds.

“Harry,” Hermione said, her voice hesitant, “I have a thought, but it’s not a pleasant one.”

“At this point, is anything likely to be?” Harry said, steeling himself. “Go on.”

“That awful graveyard you were in, the one where, where Cedric died: do you think you could bear going back there again? It’s only that if that’s where You-Know-Who’s father was buried, his grandmother and grandfather are probably near there too, and if he used his father’s murder to make the locket and hide it in the Gaunt house, then maybe another one might be nearby too?” Hermione said, her voice apologetic.

Harry shuddered. It was the very last place he wanted to step foot again. Still, Hermione’s argument had merit to it.

“I suppose it’s logical,” Harry said, but he didn’t look at either of them. “Yeah, okay. We can check the graveyard, but I think it’d be better by daylight.”

“Right,” Ron said, sounding anything but enthusiastic. “Worth a try anyhow.”

“So, bed, then Little Hangleton,” Hermione said, but she looked anything but happy at the prospect. “I do hope I’m not being a fool about this. I’ve thought of it before, but putting you through going there again—“
“It’s okay,” Harry said, but he sounded about as enthusiastic as he felt, which was not at all. “It’s a good thought. We should check it.”

“You absolutely sure, mate?” Ron asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I think I’m going to need a full night’s sleep, though.”

“Right,” Hermione said, quickly getting rid of the remains of their sandwiches. “See you in the morning.”

All three lay down to sleep that night, but as Harry heard first Ron’s breathing and then Hermione’s drift into the regular pattern that meant they were asleep, he himself felt no pull towards dreams. He stared at the canvas ceiling of the tent. Tomorrow he would return to the graveyard. He had no desire to rush the experience in his nightmares.

From across the tent, the Horcrux glowed dully, the least comforting of nightlights.
The trio returned silently at dusk to their tent, carefully concealed inside a copse of dense yew trees along one of the neglected paths of the Little Hangleton churchyard. They each sat in their accustomed places, looking at nothing and not speaking. A sense of exhaustion weighed heavily on the three, and the Horcrux, vicious little thing, seemed to rejoice in their fatigue, glowing with its repellent, sickly yellow-green light. Harry didn’t know about the others, but he was so tired that climbing into bed seemed like too much work, and even food held no allure.

The day had been dreadful. They had arrived at the churchyard shortly after the winter dawn broke, and the rising sun had stained red the thin crust of ice on the ground. For hours, they had searched through tombstones, many toppled with age and so worn that their names were unreadable, trying to find some clue. A good number of Riddles populated the cemetery, some of them as far back as the 1300s, and Hermione had even spied three markers that had the name Gaunt, which had surprised them. Harry assumed the pure-blood Gaunts wouldn’t have wanted their final resting place to be among Muggles, but as Hermione reasonably pointed out, it wasn’t likely that every single Gaunt in a straight line had shared Marvolo’s and Morphin’s prejudices.

“It’s a good sign, maybe,” she had said, staring at the name Lludica Gaunt with a date some seven hundred years ago and a lifespan that seemed to stretch over a century. “Even in the worst settings, maybe something positive can still happen.”

Harry had looked across the graveyard towards the spot where Cedric had died, his own parents had appeared, and Voldemort had regained his body. Even in the full light of a particularly bright winter day, there seemed to be a shadow haunting the spot, a sense of bad memories leaching across the ground like poison.

They had searched that spot last. Ron had used a spell to try to reveal recent dark magic, but the whole place had nearly gone up in green flames since it had absorbed so much negative energy only a few years ago. Hermione had quickly doused it, but an odor like brimstone and rot clung to the place even after she tried to blow the fumes away. Harry sat down on an old stone, mentally apologizing to whoever Margaretha DeKennet had been, but he needed a moment. Flashes of Cedric’s death, of Wormtail slicing off his own hand, of the duel that had nearly taken Harry’s life, and of the intense pain in his arm from the wound he had been given to resurrect Voldemort fully were sickening him to the point that he could hardly stand it.

They had searched, but as was becoming usual, they found nothing. Or rather, nothing that they had wanted to find. Oddly, visiting this spot had left Harry with a renewed sense of the importance of what they were doing. Hermione just looked very sad, and Ron, well, Harry hoped it hadn’t been too much for him.

“You alright, mate?” Ron asked suddenly, shattering the quiet.

“Not really,” Harry said. “You?”
“No,” Ron said, frowning. “Hermione?”

“I’m afraid this was a bad idea,” Hermione said, biting her lip. “I shouldn’t have suggested it.”

“No,” Harry said. “Really, I think we needed to try.”

“We could be up to our noses in Horcruxes here and wouldn’t know it,” she said, frustration coloring her words. “There’s so much that’s happened here that’s horrid, and it’s really appalling because this should be a peaceful place. You-Know-Who desecrated it.”

“Another in his long list of very bad deeds,” Ron said, sighing. “I think even Muggles could feel it.”

“I’m sure they can,” Hermione agreed. “Sometimes places just have a bad feel to them even if you can’t put into words just why.”

Harry nodded. Even the Dursleys could have spotted that something was wrong here.

“I’m exhausted, but I’m not going to be able to sleep tonight,” Ron said. “I can feel it. My brain’s on overload.”

“I know what you mean,” Hermione said.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got a story for us, do you?” Ron asked.

“Well—” she paused for quite a while as though considering. “There is one that this place brings to mind, but it’s not a very happy one. It’s actually rather eerie. But parts of it are set in a churchyard.”

“Fine by me,” Ron said. “I’m not exactly in a mood to hear about happy, floppy bunnies that talk and wear twee outfits.”

Harry wasn’t entirely sure he agreed, but he knew he wouldn’t sleep for hours either even with the feel of exhaustion weighing on him.

“Go on, then,” Harry said.

“Alright then. Once upon a time,” Hermione began, and Harry noticed Ron silently mouthing the familiar opening words with her, “there lived a poor girl who was very beautiful but also very proud and vain.”

“She doesn’t walk on bread by any chance, does she?” Ron asked.

“No, but it is another of Andersen’s tales,” Hermione said.

“Figures. Does this one have a name again?” Ron asked.

“Yes, actually, she’s called Karen,” Hermione said.

Harry blinked at the sheer normalcy of the name.

“Karen? Really?” he said.

“Yeah,” Ron said, sounding stunned, “that might be the weirdest one yet.”

“It’s actually a very common Muggle name for girls even today,” Hermione said.

“Seriously?” Ron said. “Why?”
“Well, I don’t know exactly, but it is,” Hermione said. “It was also apparently the name of Andersen’s half-sister.”

“Oh, well, I suppose that’s nice,” Ron said uncertainly.

“Not really. He couldn’t stand her, which is why he named the main character for her. In any case, you’re not wrong about there being some similarities to ‘The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf,’ because Karen is taken in by an elderly woman due to her beauty, and she’s spoiled and given everything she wants,” Hermione said.

“What is it with pretty girls being prats in these?” Ron asked.

“Aside from the fact Andersen was repeatedly rejected by women in his life and seemed to blame them for it? Probably more of the old patriarchy circular trap that beautiful women are shallow and filled with vice, but only beautiful women have value, so women valuing beauty is necessary from a sociological and financial standpoint, but valuing their beauty contrariwise makes them less valuable as it’s seen as a serious character flaw and a sign of moral inferiority,” Hermione said in one very deep breath.

“Your lot just can’t win, can you?” Ron said.

“No, and that’s the whole point of patriarchy,” Hermione said. “It’s also why there are so few stories about the negative repercussions of male physical vanity and boatloads of ones with females, all of whom get punished quite severely.”

“I sense this might be one of the gorier ones,” Harry said.

“Your premonition is correct. At one point, a princess in the town ordered a pair of lovely red shoes, and Karen, seeing them, thought them the prettiest shoes ever seen. Karen had once had a pair of rough, ugly red shoes when she was a poor child, and now she became obsessed with the red shoes. It turned out they didn’t fit the princess, and the girl convinced the old woman, whose eyesight was very poor, to buy them for her,” Hermione said.

“Okay, so, shoes,” Ron said. “This is her great crime?”

“Red shoes,” Hermione stressed. “You see, she wore them to church, and it was considered ill-mannered and shocking for a girl to wear anything other than simple black shoes to church, but Karen thought only of how beautiful they were, completely ignoring the service the whole time. Even the figures in the stained glass windows shook their heads at her vanity, but she imagined they were impressed and jealous of her shoes.”

Ron and Harry exchanged looks.

“Okay, so while I’m not even sure why good old Gryffindor red shoes are somehow automatically evil in the first place,” Ron said, “since when do Muggles having moving images in their pictures?”

“They don’t,” Hermione said, pausing to think. “Well, at least not during that time period. What an odd little detail from the wizarding world to show up in a story.”

“Yeah, I keep picturing the stained glass mermaid in the Prefects’ Bathroom,” Harry said. “ Granted, she’d probably be in favor of the shoes, though.”

“No feet,” Ron pointed out. “She’d only just be jealous.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Harry said. “You’re probably right.”
“Why would she be jealous of something she wouldn’t have any reasonable use for?” Hermione pointed out.

“Cause girls do that?” Ron said.

The look Hermione sent him was so scathing that Harry thought it might actually draw blood.

“Ehm, can I retract that comment due to idiocy, hunger, patriarchy, and a wizard-centrist world view that is unfair and unjust to other sentient creatures?” Ron said with a tremble in his voice.

“You may,” Hermione said, but there was ice in her tone.

“Thank you,” he squeaked.

“In any case, the old woman was soon informed by her shocked neighbors of what Karen had done, and she was scandalized as well. She made the girl promise never to wear the shoes to church again, but the following Sunday, Karen once more put the red shoes on, too tempted by how pretty they were to resist,” Hermione said.

“Now, if she promised not to wear them, that’s not good,” Ron said.

“Yes, and she ends up paying for it, of course,” Hermione said. “When she stepped out of the old lady’s carriage at church, a mysterious old soldier with a long red beard was standing outside. ‘What very lovely dancing shoes,’ he said. ‘Sit fast, when you dance.’”

“Wait, he was talking to the shoes?” Harry asked.

“Apparently so. Karen thought it odd, but the old lady gave the soldier some money, then went into the church, where the girl once more spent the whole service thinking of nothing at all except her pretty red shoes. As they left the church again, the soldier was still there, and he repeated, ‘What pretty dancing shoes.’ Suddenly, without her permission, her feet began dancing, causing the coachman to try to restrain her, kicking the old lady in the process, before finally they could prize off the shoes,” Hermione said.

“Tarantallegra,” Harry and Ron said together.

“Yes, it does sound almost exactly like the dancing jinx,” Hermione said. “Some poor Muggle must have got hit with it at some point. In this case, though, the shoes were thought to be to blame, and the old lady put them away in a cupboard so as not to tempt Karen, but the girl still sometimes opened the door and looked at them longingly.”

“Bit dim, isn’t she?” Ron said.

“Well, I never said she was bright. Not long after, the old lady became very ill, and though it was Karen’s duty to nurse her, there was to be a great ball in town. Karen thought how much she would love to go and be the envy of all there in her red shoes, for a ballroom is not a church after all, so she thought it would be no sin only to look at the shoes, and then that it wouldn’t be wrong to try them on, and then the next thing, she had slipped them on and was out the door and off to the ball,” Hermione said.

“Nope, not bright,” Ron said. “Wild guess. She started dancing again and couldn’t stop?”

“Precisely. The soldier with the red beard appeared again, uttered, ‘What pretty dancing shoes!’ and off she went, but this time no one could catch her,” Hermione said.

“Maybe the soldier wanted the shoes,” Ron suggested.
Hermione and Harry both looked at him.

“What?” he said. “He hasn’t any reason to be jinxing her, really. Who’s to say he didn’t think them rather fetching and wanted them?”

Hermione shrugged and said, “That makes as much sense as any other explanation, I suppose, but the general consensus is he’s some sort of demon sent to attack Karen for her vanity.”

“Oh he likes red shoes,” Ron said.

“Oh that,” Hermione said. “Anyway, she danced on and on, utterly exhausted but unable to stop. She was terrified and tried to pull the shoes from her feet, but they wouldn’t move. She tore her stockings to pieces, scratched at her own legs, and injured herself over and over. Still dancing, she came to a churchyard at night, and there she saw an angel with a sword, staring at her, its face grim and pitiless. She called out for help, but the angel said only, ‘You shall continue to dance until your skin shrivels and you are a skeleton, knocking at the doors of vain children to frighten and teach them humility! Dance, you shall dance!’”

“Oh, that’s a horrifying image,” Ron said. “This skeletal girl wandering the world, unable to stop dancing, frightening the kids? Seriously, she’s not a nice person, but it’s not like she killed somebody!”

Harry shuddered. The graveyard was already an intensely frightening place to him, but now he was imagining the girl being confronted by one of the stone angels on a tomb and condemned by it. He almost told Hermione to stop.

“The girl was horrified too and called for mercy. The angel turned to say something to her, but she was unable to hear what it said as the shoes carried her off into the darkness,” Hermione said.

“Please tell me that isn’t the end of the story,” Ron said.

“Well, no, but it doesn’t get a good deal happier,” Hermione said, “for she danced on and on until she reached the hut of the town executioner.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Ron said.

“No, and she was able to knock on his door, and when he came out, she begged him to help her,” Hermione said.

“He didn’t cut off her head?” Ron said, looking ill.

“No,” Hermione said.

“Good,” Ron said, relieved.

“He cut off her feet,” Hermione explained.

Both boys made retching noises.

“For Merlin’s sake, all some had to say was finite incantatem and the poor thing would have been fine!” Ron said.

“But, as they were Muggles, they didn’t know that. The shoes, with the bloody stumps of her feet still in them, continued to dance down the road,” Hermione said.

“The shoes just… kept dancing… with her feet in them,” Ron said slowly. “This is really messed up,
you know that, right?"

“It does seem to be a form of reverse execution, in this case removing the lower extremities rather
than that head to suggest her sin, while grave, isn’t a capital offense, though there is an element of
castration to the description as well, possibly paired with potential negative menstrual imagery for the
red shoes added to the red blood of the feet to create a connection to the lower status of females both
biologically and morally from the contemporary standpoint of the story, so yes, I suppose it really is,
as you put it, messed up,” Hermione said.

Harry and Ron looked at one another in semi-terrified silence.

“Oh, for pity’s sake, half the world’s population has a menstrual cycle at some point in their lives!
It’s no more obscene than digestion!”

“Okay,” Ron said, looking both pale and green at the same time. “So is that the end of the story,
then?”

“No,” Hermione said.

Harry noted that Ron looked deeply shaken by that.

“First, Karen kissed the hands of the executioner for taking mercy on her,” Hermione said.

“I hope he washed them first,” Ron mumbled, and Harry shuddered.

“Then the executioner made her a pair of wooden feet, and she went on her way,” Hermione said.

“I suppose it’s lucky she found an executioner who whittled for a hobby,” Harry said.

“She sounds a bit like old Kettleburn,” Ron said. “Remember when Dumbledore retired him and his
remaining limbs?”

“In a way there’s a parallel, but those were magical replacements,” Hermione said. “These would
have been just solid wood. If it had been one foot, it might have worked fairly well, but both would
have been very difficult, so Karen needed crutches to move.”

“This girl is having a truly horrible day,” Ron said. “But things have to get better after that, right?”

“That’s rather what she thought, but it’s not what happened,” Hermione explained.

“Of course it isn’t,” Ron said.

“Karen tried to go back to church, thinking that she had confessed her sins, paid dearly for them, and
had learned her lesson and would not be vain again. But she reasoned that there were many in the
pews who were less deserving to be there than she now, which showed that part of her was still vain,
for she thought herself better than her neighbors,” Hermione said.

“Andersen really, really hated his step-sister,” Ron said.

“Apparently so. The girl used her crutches and wooden feet to try to go to church, but as she went up
the stone walkway, the shoes, still with her bleeding feet in the them, came dancing down the path,
blocking her way, and she cried out in horror and fainted,” Hermione said.

“Yup, he really hated her,” Ron said. “So is that the end?”

“Not quite,” Hermione said.
“Oh, come off it!” Ron said. “What’s next? The shoes kick her in the bum all through the town until finally she falls off a cliff into the ocean and gets eaten slowly and painfully for weeks by rabid demon sharks?”

“No, though that’s an interesting image. Karen finally realized she was not yet clean of her sin, and she went to the parsonage and begged for a humble job scrubbing the floor. She asked no pay, only a place to sleep and a little food. The parson agreed, and she worked quietly, hard and long, with great patience, slowly winning the love of all who lived there, even the children, to whom she was very kind,” Hermione said.

“So… she basically became a house-elf,” he said.

“For all intents and purposes, that’s a good parallel,” Hermione said. “No pay, long hours, no sick leave, no social status, and a tiny room stuck behind the kitchen. After a time, the parson suggested she could try to go to church again, but she shook her head sadly and retired to her little room to pray as the bells rang and the others went to services.”

“Tell me the shoes didn’t show up in her room and kick her in the head or something?” Ron said.

“No,” Hermione said.

“Good,” Ron said.

“The angel showed up instead,” Hermione said.

“You’ve got to be joking! What did she do wrong this time? Were her wooden feet painted the wrong color or something?” Ron asked.

“No, this time the angel appeared, but instead of a sword, it held a bouquet of flowers. As the angel waved it around the room, the walls of the tiny spot drew back further and further, filling with light like stars, until Karen realized she was in the church itself, sitting beside the parson’s family,” Hermione said.

“Apparition?” Harry suggested tentatively. “Or maybe the flowers represent a Portkey?”

“Possibly, or it’s simply an angel giving a sign of acceptance,” Hermione said. “The parson said it was good and right of her to come to church, and as the sunlight filtered through the stained glass, Karen’s heart filled with so much happiness and gratitude that it burst and she died. Her soul went to heaven, and no one there ever mentioned the red shoes again. The end.”

Harry and Ron were quiet for a while.

“Okay, so, here’s what I’ve learned,” Ron said. “God’s least favorite color is apparently red. Next, dying is the closest this girl gets to a happy ending, as is often the case with Andersen. Also, his hatred for his step-sister is pretty darn terrifying, and if she ever showed up mysteriously dead, I’m guessing he did it. Oh, and this story is so soaked in patriarchy it actually bleeds. Am I close?”

“Mostly,” Hermione said. “I said it was an odd one, and probably further proof of Andersen’s weird foot thing you’ve been noticing.”

“Pretty blatant foot maiming in this one,” Harry said.

“Can’t miss it,” Ron agreed. “Well, let’s all have a nice, relaxing, nightmare-free sleep after this happy little tale, right?”
All three of them laughed mirthlessly.

“Where are we off to next, then?” Ron asked tentatively. “Harry, it’s your turn, isn’t it?”

Harry didn’t feel much like deciding anything at the moment.

“I think I’d like to sleep on it,” he said. “I’ll give you something in the morning, right?”

“Fine, mate,” Ron said, but his features were etched in concern. “You okay?”

Harry waved his concern away, but he knew he wasn’t fooling either of them. The endless journey was taking a toll on all of them. Perhaps they were being as vain and foolish as Karen to think they could find the Horcruxes and destroy them all when much greater and more famous wizards, even Dumbledore himself, and failed in their attempts. Maybe they should just go home, except, Harry reminded himself, he no longer had one.

“It’s alright,” Hermione said, her voice soft. “It was a hard day, and I’m sorry my idea didn’t bear any fruit at all.”

“At least we know,” Harry said. “That’s something. Each time we learn one more place they aren’t. There has to be a limit, isn’t there?”

“Must be,” Ron said. “Take your time. We’ll figure it out in the morning.”

They all crawled into their beds, exhausted and ignoring the aches and pains and empty stomachs that were becoming normal parts of their lives. As Harry fell asleep, for a moment he fancied he heard a tapping like shoes dancing down a stone path towards the church, each step clicking its warning. He told himself firmly that it was branches of the trees clattering together in the wind.

He knew nothing of the Dementors who swarmed just outside the barrier of Hermione’s protective spells.
The following morning, Harry had suggested that perhaps they should regroup, take a day to think and plan, and to his surprise, both Hermione and Ron had agreed immediately. It felt like they had been traveling for years, and the possibilities were still endless, but the one thing all of them knew for certain was they needed to leave the Little Hangleton churchyard as far behind them as possible.

“Perhaps we can choose a completely neutral spot,” Hermione suggested. “Somewhere that has nothing to do with Horcruxes or even magic in general.”

“Yeah,” Ron agreed. “Someplace that belongs in the dictionary next to the word Muggle.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Harry said, and he actually had a smile on this face. “It’s a bit daft, but it should fit the bill.”

“Oh?” Hermione said.

“Yeah. School,” Harry said.

“Hogwarts?” Ron said, sounding a little hopeful.

“Not that one. The one I went to before Hogwarts. The Muggle school where Dudley and his gang used to torture me,” Harry suggested. “The building was closed a few years ago when they built a new one down the road, so it’s been sitting empty all this time, but it’s probably one of the least magical places you could possibly ask for, and no one goes near it.”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said, furrowing her eyebrows. “Could the Death Eaters have put a watch on it?”

“Why would they?” Ron asked. “It’s not like he’d have any reason to go back there.”

“Yeah, I originally thought of Privet Drive, but it probably really is being monitored,” Harry said. “I don’t think the old school has a close enough relationship to me to warrant a second look by Death Eaters.”

“Well, you’re most likely right,” Hermione said, relaxing a bit. “It’s only a tangential connection, and it’s not like it has any link to what we’re doing. They’re the sort who wouldn’t consider looking at something purely Muggle in someone’s background unless there was a purpose for it.”

“Hermione,” Ron asked as they shut down the charms around their campsite and prepared to move in the predawn light, “where did you go before Hogwarts?”

“Oh, a Muggle day school called Little Scholars of England,” Hermione said wistfully. “It did have a rather good playground. Excellent swings.”

“We were just tutored at home by Mum,” Ron said. “I’m not sure how she survived teaching Fred
and George maths and reading. I’m starting to think she put a spell on herself to keep her from flying off the handle every four minutes.”

“Yes, there are a few spells that can increase patience,” Hermione said as she deftly removed another barrier.

“No, I meant literally flying off the handle,” Ron said. “The only way they would pay attention was if she taught them while they were about fifty feet in the air on broomsticks, including her. Of course, Fred and George being Fred and George, they were always mucking about and trying to fly off, and she kept having to speed after them with me and Ginny in tow. The number of times she had to pull out of a steep dive in a week was too high to count, and yeah, sometimes she did go right off the handle of her broom.”

Harry stopped breaking down his section of the barrier to stare in impressed horror at Ron while Hermione did the same.

“What?” Ron said. “That’s typical parent stuff, right?”

“Not particularly, no,” Hermione said slowly. “Your mother has her reasons for being a bit paranoid, doesn’t she.”

“I suppose,” Ron said uncertainly. “Well, mine’s done.”

“Me too,” Harry said.

“And that’s me as well,” Hermione said, giving one last wave of her wand and efficiently packing the tent into her little beaded bag. “Lead on, Harry.”

“Right,” he said, and he Apparated to his old primary school, taking Ron and Hermione along with him, leaving the churchyard and its foggy landscape behind.

Unfortunately, the new view wasn’t a tremendous improvement. The rising sun showed that time and neglect had made the old building practically a ruin even in only a few short years. Grass poked up between cracks in the pavement, several windows had been smashed, rude graffiti covered the outside walls, and the whole school had an air of dereliction that made it feel cold even before they stepped inside.

“Charming,” Ron said with a wry smile. “I can see why Muggle kids just love these places.”

Hermione quickly used the Alohomora charm to open a side door, disconnected the burglar alarm, and they were inside in a moment. The electricity was turned off and there was no heat, but Harry remembered the way to the old gymnasium. He supposed Hermione would have preferred the library, but he doubted an abandoned, empty-shelved library would have put her in a better mood. Quite the opposite. As it was, the gymnasium offered both the prospect of a bit of light through the skylights, privacy since there were no floor-level windows, and plenty of space, so it was easily the best place to set up the tent. A few random squeaks suggested that there might be some rats about, but that was nothing new. They’d been in residence even when the students had still been here.

The trio were now old hands at setting up both the tent and its wards, and in less than ten minutes, they were sitting on the old bleachers, batting around ideas and eating the last of some chocolate bars Hermione had been hiding behind a stack of Arithmancy books in her bag.

“Wales,” Ron said.

“Why Wales?” Harry asked.
“We haven’t been there yet?” Ron said with a shrug.

“Yes, but there’s no real connection to Horcruxes there,” Hermione said.

“True,” Ron admitted, “but then maybe there might be something there just because there’s no connection.”

“By that logic we could go anywhere from Kilkenny to Kathmandu,” Hermione said. “I still think there needs to be some sort of distinct reason Tommy would leave them wherever they are. As evil as he is, they’re still bits of his soul. I don’t think he’d just toss them about like litter, and besides, they’d have to be safe.”

“But how safe was the Gaunt cottage even with all the protective charms on it that Dumbledore had to go through?” Harry said. “And leaving the diary with the Malfoys turned out to be a stupid idea since old Lucius handed it off to an eleven-year-old.”

“But Lucius Malfoy didn’t really know what the diary was, and whatever he might have said, I think he thought You Know Who wasn’t coming back,” Hermione argued. “The Gaunt house was literally falling apart and essentially a rubbish heap, though. So you’re right, Harry, the location doesn’t have to be grand.”

“Just related,” Ron said. “I don’t think Tommy would have picked just any rubbish heap, you know? Only one that had significance.”

Harry nodded. They were going in circles again. Where would they be? Where might Voldemort have put them? What corner of his past were they ignoring?

“Do you think we should just try to kill Nagini already?” Ron said suddenly.

“Dumbledore seemed to think we should wait on that one, if she even is a Horcrux,” Harry said. “He wasn’t certain.”

“And she’d be close to You Know Who,” Hermione pointed out. “I doubt he’s letting her far from his sight.”

“Ah, a boy and his human-eating gigantic snake,” Ron said, pasting a look of fake bliss on his face. “Inseparable.”

“Freud really would have some sort of mental breakdown over him inserting his soul in a huge snake, and a female one at that,” Hermione mumbled to herself, but both Harry and Ron shrugged and went back to chewing their chocolate slowly.

“Okay, a very long shot here, but did Tommy have any hobbies?” Ron asked.

“Besides torturing anyone who wasn’t pure-blood?” Hermione said.

“Well, yeah, that but didn’t he ever do anything vaguely normal? Even as a kid?” Ron asked.

“Not that I know of,” Hermione said. “He wasn’t on any house teams for any games or sports; that much I know from research. He was a member of the Slug Club, but really that was more of a cover for trying to pump Slughorn for information on the Dark Arts.”

“I’m not so sure,” Harry said. “I mean, yes, he did use Slughorn for information, but I had the strangest feeling he rather liked him.”
“Well, Slughorn likes anyone he thinks might be useful to him someday,” Hermione said.

“No, I mean Vol-euh, Tommy, I think he may actually have not exactly been fond of him, but then I don’t think he’s fond of anyone, so liking someone even a little bit by a normal person’s standards would put him at the top of his list of favorite people,” Harry said.

“But why?” Hermione asked.

“Because he isn’t dead,” Harry said bluntly. “Tommy must have known that Slughorn’s memory about the Horcruxes could be damning for him, but he never ordered him killed. Instead, he sent Death Eaters to recruit him, and when he turned them down, nothing happened to him. Why didn’t he just murder him? It would have been a lot safer, and without that missing memory, we wouldn’t have any idea how many Horcruxes he made or even a firm idea that was what he was up to.”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said, looking surprised. “It’s possible, but it seems so unlikely for You Know Who to actually be human enough to have some kind of affection, even a bit, for anyone.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to imagine, but at the same time, it’s a huge gap in his defenses, and there’s no other logical reason for it, is there?” Ron said, then stopped for a moment as an idea hit him. “Do you think he might have slipped Slughorn a Horcrux without letting him know? Like with Malfoy?”

Hermione and Harry exchanged looks before both shrugged.

“Why not? I’m not saying he shoved his soul into a box of crystalized pineapple and wrapped it up as a Christmas present for him, but he’s certainly done stranger things,” Harry said.

“Like what?” Ron asked.

“Like removing his own nose,” Harry said.

“Fair point,” Ron said. ‘I never got that either.”

“Nor I,” Hermione said. “So, what should we do? Go to Slughorn’s old house he abandoned before sixth year or try to contact him directly?”

“I think the house first,” Ron said, which surprised Harry as he thought that Ron would have jumped at any chance to get in contact with other wizards.

“Why not Slughorn himself?” Hermione asked, and Harry could tell from her voice she was thinking the same thing.

“Because I’m not sure we can trust him,” Ron said. “It might be too much temptation for him. You’re right about him liking anyone he can use to his advantage, and having Harry Potter, the single thing that Tommy wants more than anything and a free ticket to anything Slughorn might ask for, show up on his doorstep could be more than he can handle.”

“You’re right,” Harry said. “Slughorn isn’t awful, but he’s risky. I’d rather wait until it’s a last resort to contact him directly.”

“Does anyone know where he used to live?” Ron asked.

“Yes, I have it in here somewhere,” Hermione said, reaching into her beaded bag, which never left her side these days. “I made a point of looking up the information on all of the staff, past and present, before we left, just in case we needed it. It was in one of Dumbledore’s notebooks.”
She rummaged through the bag until she finally pulled out a small, red-bound book that looked like an ordinary Muggle address book. In fact, that’s exactly what it was.

“Here it is,” Hermione said. “Slughorn, Horace: number 78 Popinjay Path, Leeds.”

“Fits,” Ron said. “Alright, then, Leeds tomorrow?”

“I think so,” Harry said, then all of them stopped cold as something thudded to the floor behind them.

In an instant all three had their wands out, back to back, eyes searching through the darkness.

“We know you’re here!” Ron called out in a voice that sounded much less frightened then he really was. “Come out and face us, you ruddy cowards!”

“What was it?” Hermione said quickly as they circled slowly, surveying the empty gymnasium.

“There,” Harry said suddenly, seeing a large chunk of plaster on the ground about fifteen feet away, a small plume of dust still rising from it.

Cautiously, Harry used his wand to illuminate the section in the ceiling where it had originated, and he found a large water spot. The roof was obviously damaged and rotting away. In fact, though the hole the plaster had left, a small bit of sky was visible. It appeared there was no one there.

“What do you think?” Harry asked.

“Probably just an unlucky accident,” Hermione said, “but we’d better make sure.”

In the next few minutes, Ron and Harry kept their wands drawn and ready to fight as Hermione went through a list of spells to reveal intruders and show traces of magic. Aside from themselves, no one else proved to be present.

“I think we’re safe,” Hermione said with a sigh of relief. “Just a case of worrying the sky was falling, almost literally.”

“What?” Ron said. “Why would someone do that?”

“Oh, it’s another Muggle story,” Hermione said. “It’s more a fable than a fairy tale as there’s no magic in it, though.”

“But it’s mad?” Ron said with a trace of a smile as he lowered his wand. Harry, still a bit concerned, kept his ready to strike, but tried not to be obvious about it.

“Fairly,” Hermione said.

“Well, then, let’s have it,” Ron said.

Hermione considered for a moment, then quickly repaired the hole in the ceiling with a bit of efficient wandwork. Harry and Ron sat on the floor outside the tent, and while neither said anything about it, they both kept their wands ready. Harry noted that although Hermione looked quite relaxed, her fingers were still wrapped around her wand, ready at a moment’s notice.

“Once…”

“Upon a time,” Ron finished.

“Yes,” Hermione said with a sigh. “There lived a hen whose name was Henny Penny.”
“Henny Penny?” Ron said, looking slightly appalled. “Not the most creative name, I suppose, but still better than Turniphead, I guess.”

“This is usually a story for very young children,” Hermione explained. “The rhyming aspect of the name would help them remember it. In some versions, the main character is Chicken Licken.”

“Chicken… Licken,” Ron said slowly.

“Which somehow devolved into Chicken Little in certain retellings, which rather undermines the whole point of the rhyme-based mnemonic device,” Hermione said, “though I suppose Chicken Little is a bit less twee.”

“A bit, but not much, especially when it’s a direct descendent of Chicken Licken,” Ron said. “That one does sound rather appetizing, though.”

“The boy is 99% stomach,” Hermione mumbled under her breath just loudly enough that Harry caught it before she went on. “In any case, Henny Penny went out for a walk one fine day, and as she was strolling, an acorn fell from an oak tree and struck her smartly on the head.”

“Ow,” Ron said, sounding sympathetic. “I’ve been hit with one of those. They hurt like blazes. Granted, Fred and George were hurling them at me at the time, so there was a good deal more velocity involved, not to mention a lot more than one acorn, but for a chicken, one nut alone would probably be pretty nasty.”

“Out of morbid curiosity, what had you done to your brothers that got them pelting you with acorns?” Hermione asked.

“Nothing.” Ron said defensively, but when both Harry and Hermione gave him disbelieving looks, he shrugged sheepishly. “Okay, I stole one of their brooms and took it for a ride around the pasture. I still don’t think it’s worth being stoned to death with acorns.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Hermione said. “Be that as it may, Henny Penny was indeed very distressed when the acorn hit her head. Crying out in terror, she exclaimed, ‘The sky is falling! The sky is falling!’ and took off like a shot down the road, intent on telling the king of their impending doom.”

“Wait, that’s a pretty big jump to make,” Harry said. “How did she get from an acorn hitting her to the sky falling?”

“Concussion?” Ron suggested.

“You know, that’s a fair point,” Hermione said, tipping her head to one side and considering. “It’s entirely possible that the acorn could have struck her with such force that it did cause a concussion, and one common side effect of that condition is mental confusion. It would certainly explain the bizarre leap she makes that the sky is cracking apart. That’s entirely likely, Ron, and one of the better explanations I’ve come across for the inciting incident of this story.”

“Yeah!” Ron said, smiling, obviously thrilled that his point was a good one, even if Harry suspected he hadn’t followed some of Hermione’s words.

“But, concussed or not, Henny Penny ran and ran down the road, making for the palace with all haste, when she met Ducky Lucky,” Hermione said.

“Ducky Lucky?” Ron said.

“Yes, Ducky Lucky,” Hermione repeated. “Henny Penny told Ducky Lucky, ‘A great piece of the
sky has fallen, and it hit me on the head. I am going to the king to tell him!’ and Ducky Lucky, 
horrified, cried, ‘I shall come too!’ They both ran together along the road, squawking and quacking 
their alarm, ‘The sky is falling! The sky is falling!’

“So Ducky Lucky just accepted Henny Penny’s nutter ravings about the sky breaking up without 
any backing at all?” Ron said.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “Either Ducky Lucky trusted Henny Penny completely or she wasn’t very 
bright, especially since the story was so outrageous. Possibly both.”

“Well, you go through life with a dignified name like Henny Penny, it’s going to inspire a certain 
automatic aura of confidence from those around you,” Harry said. “Poor old Ducky Lucky can’t be 
blamed for that.”

“True,” Ron said. “Go on then. So Jenny Wreny and Plucky Mucky are on their way to see the king 
to tell them an acorn, pardon, the sky is falling. Now what?”

“Well, they ran into Turkey Lurkey,” Hermione said.

Ron and Harry both just looked at her.

“How in Merlin’s name can you actually say that with a straight face?” Ron said.

“It’s the character’s name,” Hermione responded.

“It’s an abomination is what it is!” Ron yelled. “Turkey Lurkey?! Ducky Lucky?! Henny Penny?! 
What’s next, Cowsy Wowsy?”

“As I was saying, Turkey Lurkey,” Hermione said, enunciating the name with great precision, 
“wanted to know what all the fuss was about, and Ducky Lucky and Henny Penny explained that 
the sky was falling, so Turkey Lurkey decided to go with them to tell the king.”

“Of course Turkey Lurkey did,” Ron said. “Probably had nothing else to do but lurk about anyway.”

“Have you ever seen a turkey lurk?” Harry asked.

“No, I have not, but perhaps they’re just so very good at it that they aren’t noticed,” Ron said. “So 
these three completely barking birds still go running down the road, yelling the sky is falling?”

“Precisely, until they run into Goosey Loosey,” Hermione said, and while she kept her voice 
perfectly even, Harry noted that the corners of her mouth were fighting to keep from grinning 
because of Ron’s inevitable reaction.

“Goosey Loosey,” Ron said, then nodded. “Yep, Muggles are the weirdest things on the planet 
earth, even weirder than platypuses. Or is it platypi?”

“Platypuses and platypi are both correct, and as you’ve most likely figured out, Goosey Loosey 
wants to know what Henny Penny, Ducky Lucky and Turkey Lurkey are doing, they tell her the sky 
is falling, and Goosey Loosey joins in the party,” Hermione said.

“Anyone else?” Ron asked.

“How funny you should mention it, but they do indeed run into yet another bird, whose name is 
Drakey Lakey,” Hermione said, still stone-faced, but her stomach was shaking from repressed 
giggles.
“Great, now I’m picturing Draco talking to a bunch of deranged birds,” Harry said.

At this the other two broke into fits of laughter, with Ron shaking his head as though he were trying to regain control and Hermione finally snapping and toppling over to one side on the floor as she laughed.

“Okay, okay,” Ron said as he attempted catching his breath, “so Draco Maco joins Henny Penny, Ducky Lucky, Turkey Lurkey, and Goosey Loosey to tell the poor king, who is going to be deeply confused by all this, that the sky is falling. Anyone else?”

“I’m afraid so,” Hermione said. “Gander Lander shows up next.”

“Gander Lander?” Ron said. “Okay, that’s not so horrid. Or I’m just readjusting my sense of what constitutes horrid.”

“As usual, he asks what’s happening, is told the sky is falling, and joins them in warning the king,” Hermione said. “I suspect you know the pattern by now, so we have Henny Penny, Ducky Lucky, Turkey Lurkey, Goosey Loosey, Drakey Lakey, and Gander Lander all running down the road and squawking.”

“And of course don’t forget Chicken Licken,” Harry said.

“Yes, when he’s a separate character from Henny Penny he does usually show up about now,” Hermione said. “It would be the exact same dialogue yet again, of course, when that’s the case, and then we get Cocky Locky, who usually shows up last.”

Harry and Ron looked at each other.

“I’m so thankful that that’s the last one that I’m going to completely bypass the obvious path my jokes should take here,” Ron said.

“Fred and George would be deeply disappointed in you,” Harry said.

“When Fred and George are proud of you, you need to reconsider your life choices very carefully,” Ron said sagely. “So… Henny Penny, Ducky Lucky, Turkey Lurkey, Goosey Loosey, Drakey Lakey, Gander Lander, Chicken Licken, and Cocky Locky all take off for the palace. Hey, I just noticed, with the exception of Henny Penny, their rhymes are all formed by using an L, aren’t they?”

“Yes, which makes Henny Penny stand out more as the original main character,” Hermione said approvingly. “The rest of the barnyard birds basically blend together.”

“So, what happens when they get to the kingy-lingy?” Ron asked with a perfectly straight face.

“On the way there, they met yet another animal,” Hermione said.

“I thought you said Cocky Locky was the last one,” Ron said, looking disappointed.

“The last bird, yes, but this is Foxy Loxy,” Hermione said.


“Precisely,” Hermione said with a nod. “Foxy Loxy listened to Henny Penny’s story, then said he knew a shortcut to the palace that would get them to the king much more quickly to tell him the sky was falling. All they had to do was cut through his burrow.”

“Remember, though, this is a chicken who mistook an acorn for the ozone layer shattering into bits,” Harry pointed out.

“The what?” Ron asked.

“The ozone layer,” Hermione said. “The protective layer around the earth that keeps the sun’s ultraviolet radiation from frying us, well, unless we keep digging a hole in it.”

Ron looked puzzled for a moment, then brightened and said, “Oh! You mean the Thaumo Portkenski Barrier!”

“The what?” Harry and Hermione said together.

“Yeah, ol’ Thaumo rigged that up around the 1920s when Muggle industrial pollution was getting so bad it was starting to interfere with being able to cast certain spells. Rotten stuff. He was able to put a protective layer over the other protective layer. That first one, the Q-zone layer?”

“Ozone,” Hermione corrected him, looking pale.

“Yeah, that’s been pretty well gone for a few decades now, just little wisps of it still there around the south pole and such,” Ron said.

“Wait, that’s… are we reading the levels backward? The holes are the healthy parts and vice versa?!” Hermione said, looking horrified.

“Well,” Ron said. “Of course, the Thaumo Portenski Barrier is getting kind of tired by now. Unfortunately, he died fifty years ago, and his notes were never found, so good luck in a decade or two.”

Harry thought Hermione might run screaming from the gymnasium out of sheer fright that the sky actually had fallen.

“Oh, yes,” she said, gamely trying to continue onward. “We’ll… deal with that next. Mercy. All right, so Foxy Loxy went into his burrow first, followed by Ducky Lucky, Turkey Lurkey, Goosey Loosey, Drakey Lakey, Gander Lander, Chicken Licken, Cocky Locky, and finally Henny Penny. All seemed to be going very well until Foxy Loxy reached a spot where the burrow opened up into a wider underground chamber where he could lie in wait for the other animals, and as each passed by, he opened his sharp jaws and bit off their heads one by one before they could utter a sound.

However, he hadn’t counted on Cocky Locky, who crowed in alarm when he saw the severed heads of the other animals lying on the floor before Foxy Loxy could kill him. Though Cocky Locky was killed as well, his warning made Henny Penny run for her life, and she scurried out of the burrow and down the road, entirely forgetting about the sky falling, and so the king was never told. The end.”

Ron blinked slowly.

“Okay, that went from a fairly snooze-worthy children’s repetition story to an outright nightmare in three seconds flat,” Ron said. “They all die except Henny Penny?”

“In some versions,” Hermione said. “In others, Henny Penny is killed too, and in still others the animals all manage to escape but never get to the king, or they do get there and he thinks it’s all nonsense.”

“Lots of versions,” Ron said, “and lots of fatalities. And you said this is usually a story for very small children, right? What a pleasant story to tell one’s sprogs!”
“It is rather dark,” Hermione admitted, “with the overall point being to stop and think things through rather than running off and panicking and possibly making things worse. It’s a good point, but not especially happy.”

“You’re a weird lot,” Ron said. “I’m getting a bit tired, though. Feel like turning in, Harry Larry?”

“I’m all in, Ronny Lonny,” Harry said.

“The first one of you to call me Hermione Lermione is going to get hit with the Jelly-Legs Jinx when he least expects it,” Hermione said, but she smiled.

Harry thought that considering the counter-jinx was just “Unjellify,” it wasn’t much of a threat. Only Crabbe and Goyle ever fell for that one after third year.

“To Slughorn’s tomorrow then?” she asked.

“I suppose so,” Ron said, then grimaced. “Blimey, Harry, this place still reeks of sweaty feet and it’s been vacant for years. It must have been unbearable while you were here.”

“It was,” Harry said, then added, “for a lot of reasons.”

He looked up at the repaired hole in the roof, remembering when an early bout of accidental magic had whisked him up there, leaving him wondering how he had managed it and without a clue to what it really meant and what his future would hold. That night, as he was getting ready to fall asleep, he tried not to think of Hermione’s story, of too many dead on false hope of a quick end to conflict, but he was haunted by nightmares of a fox with eyes that glowed the same sickly green as the Horcrux.
For once, they were in comfortable surroundings, and Harry was enjoying being warm, indoors, and decently fed just this once. A glance over at Ron and Hermione showed they were similarly thankful that Horace Slughorn was known far and wide for enjoying luxurious surroundings. While Slughorn was still up at Hogwarts and hadn’t been home for months by the look of things, he still had plenty of food stashed about along with overstuffed chairs, blankets, soft carpets, and a thousand other little pleasantries that Harry had almost begun to forget existed.

Unfortunately, while their search for a Horcrux had turned up nothing at all, Harry had found more than a few other interesting things. This had been Slughorn’s home before Voldemort returned, and when he had decided to turn to moving from Muggle house to Muggle house to keep out of the reach of Death Eaters, he had brought only some of his possessions with him. It appeared that, now that Voldemort obviously knew exactly where to find him so there was no virtue in hiding, Slughorn had returned here over the summer. Some of the same belongings Harry recalled from the Muggle house on the night when Dumbledore had asked Slughorn to return to Hogwarts, as well as those from his office at the school, were scattered about the room. Among these was his collection of photographs, and Harry took the time really to examine them. His mother and father were there, of course, along with Regulus and several other wizards and witches Harry could recognize, but he was startled to see one picture of what was unmistakably Tom Riddle. It was behind the rest of them, almost lurking out of sight as though Slughorn had been ashamed of it, but it was still there. Harry pulled it from its place at the back and stared at it for a long while as Riddle stared up at him, not moving all that much, smiling in a way that didn’t reach his eyes. He wondered whether this had been taken before or after he had become a murderer, whether there had ever been any scrap of goodness in him at all.

At length, he put the photograph back where it belonged and rejoined Hermione and Ron in the dining room around the large, beautifully carved table that was currently littered with candy box ribbons, biscuit crumbs, and dirty plates. Ron sighed with satisfaction, patting his own stomach lovingly.

“Blimey, what a treat,” he said, closing his eyes in bliss. “We owe old Sluggy.”

“Yes, precisely fifteen galleons and seven sickles, give or take a knut,” Hermione said, looking guilty.

“We can pay him back after this is all done,” Harry said.

“I'll even throw in an extra galleon just for the lodgings,” Ron said, leaning so far back in the plush dining room chair that he was in danger of toppling it over into the packed curio case behind him.

“Any luck, Harry?”

“No really,” Harry said. “I don’t think there’s anything here.”

“It doesn’t feel like it, does it,” Hermione agreed. “Maybe it’s how comfortable he’s made everything, but I have difficulty believing You-Know-Who’s soul is lying about somewhere in this place. There’s no sense of dark magic at all.”

“No, just a sore tum on the rise,” Ron said with a half-hearted look of regret.

Hermione rummaged through her beaded bag for a moment, then handed him a small bottle of stomach settling potion, which he took gratefully.
“Why do you reckon we got in here so easy?” Ron asked.

“Well, there were still wards and charms guarding the place,” Hermione said, “but I think Slughorn may actually added have something into them that assessed the intent of those trying to enter. Very clever of him, really.”

“You think he made it a refuge on purpose, just in case?” Harry asked.

“Possibly,” Hermione said, “or possibly he did it because he wanted to be able to pop back and forth here with as little trouble as possible to collect his newly delivered bonbons and second-best carpet slippers. It’s hard to tell with him, but I’d be very surprised if we weren’t safe here, at least for a single night.”

“Good, because I felt a little like that Hansel fellow for a minute, and I don’t fancy winding up in a cage and fattened for Sluggy’s dinner, even if I do get fed well on the way,” Ron said, stretching. “Any chance we can stay here a few days?”

“I don’t think so,” Hermione said. “As it is, we don’t want to draw the Muggle neighbors’ attention, and we’re safer on the move.”

“Still, eating this way every night, can you imagine it?” Ron said, smiling dreamily. “I wonder if they still have the usual enormous dinners in the Great Hall. The chicken legs, those were the stuff of legend, and the pudding! Every night, some new thing or other.”

“Making you appreciate the house-elves?” Hermione asked with a pointed look.

“I never didn’t appreciate them,” Ron said defensively. “I just appreciate them more now.”

“Yeah, well, as good as the food was—“ Harry started.

“And the beds. Soft, warm beds with curtains to pull to keep out the light and Neville’s snores,” Ron said, closing his eyes happily.

“And the beds, and everything else, I don’t know that I’d trade it if it meant being around a bunch of Tommy’s lackeys all day every day,” Harry said.

“And the constant threat of torture or worse,” Hermione added, looking deeply unhappy. “Besides which, we’d probably all be killed if we walked in the front door. It’s horrid to think of how it’s all changed.”

“I suppose you have a point,” Ron said, chewing a gingersnap forlornly. “I hope Ginny’s okay.”

Harry silently agreed with him, but he didn’t trust himself to say Ginny’s name. He wondered how all of the others were getting on: Luna, Neville, Seamus, even the Creevey brothers. He hoped they were alright. The map could show them the others, if they were still at Hogwarts, of course, but it didn’t let them know if their friends and schoolmates were safe or not.

“Want one of these?” Ron asked Harry, obviously trying to break his somber mood. “They’re awfully nice.”

Harry nodded and took a gingersnap, letting the spicy taste wash over him, stinging his nose pleasantly. He still felt worried, confused, lost, and unhappy, but at least he had a full belly, which was a definite improvement over feeling all those same things while starving.

Ron was looking around the dining room wistfully, gazing at the biscuit jar visible through the open
door to the kitchen and absent-mindedly playing with the gnawed crust of the enormous sandwich he’d eaten. Hermione’s expression was guarded, but Harry knew she was concerned that Ron was getting too comfortable.

“Just another couple days,” he mumbled, mostly to himself. “That’d be—“

“--practically suicide,” Hermione said firmly.

“Oh, come on, Hermione. You can’t know that Tommy’s minions are going to show up,” Ron said peevishly. “Why should they come here more than anywhere else?”

“We’re in a private residence, Ron,” Hermione said. “An alley or park or abandoned building all have their own risks, but here someone could walk in at any moment, and I’m sorry, but even if that’s Slughorn himself, I’m not sure how safe he is. He might wander in tonight looking for crystalized pineapple in the cupboard, find us instead, and decide that rather than having You-Know-Who use Legilimency on him and kill him for not turning us in, he’d rather get the reward.”

“I hope he’s not that bad,” Ron said half-heartedly, though he had voiced the thought himself before they came.

“He very well might not be, but I don’t trust much of anyone anymore,” Hermione said, picking at a few fragments from her crisps. “One night here, then out. That’s all I think we can risk, and even that’s a hazardous.”

“Can we at least take some food with us?” Ron asked.

“Some,” Hermione said, “but if we can manage to make it look less like a burglary and more like Slughorn just miscounted, that would work better, even if he doesn’t put together who did it.”

“Sometimes I think I’d rather just take Polyjuice every day like Crouch did to turn myself into a random student and go back to Hogwarts in spite of the danger,” Ron said.

“I don’t see that ending well,” Harry said.

“No, but I’d be well fed by the time they caught on,” Ron pointed out.

“A feast isn’t worth constant fear,” Hermione said, then stopped.

“Wait, story?” Ron asked, looking hopeful.

“Only a short one, but yes,” Hermione said. “It’s one of Aesop’s again.”

“The one who likes talking animals most of the time?” Ron said.

“Yes, it’s another of those,” Hermione said.

Ron looked at her expectantly but said nothing.

“What?” she said.

“So? Go on, then,” he said.

“If you would like me to tell you a story, you might try actually asking politely,” she said, glaring.

“Fine, fine,” he said before putting on a falsely gallant tone. “Oh Hermione, fair lady of fairy stories and talented teller of tall tales, wilt thou condescend to enchant we poor feeble-minded fools with
another of your fabulous fables?"

"Please," Harry added.

"Yeah, please," Ron finished in his normal tone of voice.

"You could have left off the first bit and just kept the second for the same result," Hermione said, laughing a little. "Quite the alliteration you had going there. In any case, once—"

"Upon a time," Ron said immediately, keeping time to the words with his fork.

"Yes," Hermione said with a sigh, "there lived two mice who were cousins. One lived in town, and the other lived in the countryside. The town mouse came to visit his relative one day, and the country mouse provided a good, hearty meal for him of acorns, rainwater, berries, and wheat seeds."

"Sounds pretty good for a mouse dinner," Ron said.

"The country mouse thought so as well, but the town mouse, though he ate well, laughed at his cousin, saying that this was nothing but the food of poverty and that he himself dined like a king each night," Hermione said.

"Snob," Ron said, grimacing.

"Yes, he is rather," Hermione said, "but he did invite his cousin to visit him in town so that he could see what he was missing by living in the country."

"At least he’s willing to share," Harry said.

"More like he wants to rub it in," Ron said. "I don’t like the town mouse."

"Sure enough, a few days later, the country mouse came to the residence of his cousin in town, and he was overawed by how enormous it was, for he lived in a hole in the wall of a rich family’s home," Hermione said.

"See, said he was a snob," Ron said.

"A few hours later, after the family had dined but before the servants cleared the table, the country mouse was led by his cousin to the remains of the great dinner that had been served. There, on fine china plates, were bits of pheasant and beef, still hot soup in lovely bowls, crumbs of fine bread, delicate sweetmeats, and every sort of wonderful food the country mouse could imagine as well as many he could not, all accompanied by the dregs of fine wine in crystal goblets," Hermione said.

"Okay, town mouse is still a snob, but he’s a snob with a pretty good diet," Ron said. "I’m willing to overlook that this is leftovers and tuck in myself."

"So were the mice, who scurried up the fine linen tablecloth and were just about to begin eating when the family cat leaped onto the table and chased them around the room with murderous intent in his eyes," Hermione said.

"Oi! Not fair!" Ron said. "He should have told him about that!"

"But he didn’t, and the mice were chased hither and thither around the room until finally they managed to scramble back into the little hole in the wall that led to the country mouse’s home," Hermione said.

"This is obviously not one of the Grimm stories since they’re still alive, which is more than I was
“And nobody lost a foot, so no Andersen either,” Ron said. “Aesop is a lot nicer than those two.”

“Three, actually, as there were two brothers Grimm,” Hermione said, “and in some tales, yes. In others, Aesop is still pretty lethal.”

“Anyway, so what happens when the obviously Slytherin town mouse and his poor cousin get back to safety?” Ron asked.

“Oh, the country mouse was very frightened by the cat, but the town mouse said it was just the price of having the chance to live life luxuriously and in style. The country mouse shook his head and said he was much happier and more fortunate living his simple life in the countryside without fear of cats,” Hermione said, “and when the next day came, he went home, perfectly happy. The end.”

Ron paused for a long moment, then said, “What about hawks?”

“Hawks?” Hermione asked. “There weren’t any hawks in this story.”

“No, but there would be some in the countryside,” Ron said, “or foxes or owls or any number of other things that eat mice.”

“Well, yes, most likely, but—” Hermione said.

“So the country mouse doesn’t get bothered by a cat when he’s at home, not that there aren’t usually some feral ones out in the countryside, but he’s still liable to wind up dinner for a load of other mouse-eating animals that wander about freely out there that the town mouse doesn’t have to deal with since one rarely sees a hawk crashing through some bloke’s window to grab a mouse or a stray fox running around the drawing room,” Ron said. “He’s really no safer in the countryside than his cousin is in the town, is he?”

“I suppose when you put it that way—” Hermione began.

“And the town mouse gets the added bonus of being safe from the elements, nice and warm at night. As long as he’s no fool, the cat can’t follow him into his hole in the wall, so if he keeps watch, he should get great food, live a pretty safe life, and really is doing better than the country mouse,” Ron said. “I think Aesop may have missed it on this one.”

“I… well, possibly,” Hermione said, turning pink.

“There’s more than one kind of danger,” Ron said.

“Yes, well, I suppose so,” Hermione said.

“I’d still rather avoid cats if I can help it,” Harry said, “especially ones in Death Eater robes.”

“Fair enough,” Ron said with a shrug. “Where are we off to tomorrow, then? Hermione, it’s your turn to pick, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said, frowning. “I’m not really sure, though. I’ve been thinking, maybe we should try somewhere different. We could try someplace associated with one of the founders, maybe?”

“Which one?” Ron asked.

“Well, You-Know-Who was in Slytherin, so maybe we should check where Salazar Slytherin was born,” Hermione said.
“We already went to where he got married and there wasn’t anything there,” Ron pointed out.

“Yes, but I thought he was born somewhere nearby at that point,” Hermione said. “It turns out I was wrong. He lived in Lincolnshire for a while, but he was born around Derry.”

“Northern Ireland?” Harry said. “Anyone else suddenly understanding why he was crazy about green?”

“It’s a thought, anyway,” Hermione said.

“Fine by me,” Ron said. “I’m turning in. Night all.”

Ron went up the stairs to sleep in one of the two guestrooms in the house, while Hermione took the other one and Harry, who had drawn the short straw earlier, retired to what seemed to be Slughorn’s bedroom. It felt odd not hearing the breathing of the others, a sound he had grown used to in the last few months, and the ticking of a particularly ornate carriage clock on the mantelpiece kept Harry awake for a while before he finally fell asleep. Unfortunately, as he slept, he had a nightmare about a gigantic cat’s eye pressed against the window, its iris vivid red.

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