Uncovering the Truth

by TitansRule

Summary

First in the Veritas series. Hermione Granger has always been the dependable one, the one her friends come to for support and advice. No one would ever guess that she was hiding such a terrible secret.

But just as that secret is discovered by an unlikely person, she finds herself cast adrift with only her friends to help her. With new powers, surprising allies, and shocking secrets, Hermione fights to uncover that which is being hidden from her.

However, evil forces are at work, and no one could have ever guessed that their fourth year at Hogwarts was heading for such a tragic conclusion …

James/Lily, pre-Harry/Hermione, mentioned Sirius/OC and Remus/OC

Notes

Disclaimer: I'm sure this isn't really necessary, but I don't own any of the characters or locations in this story, aside from my OCs, who will be mentioned in Author's Notes as and when they appear.

As far as this chapter's concerned - I do own Amanda (Mandy) Cotswold and the character of Arabella Figg (although not the name, as JK Rowling provided her grandmother and namesake).

Also, this is also an AU, as you may have noticed from the tags, which means an alternate timeline, as well as alternate pairings.

If I've got something 'wrong', chances are, I know about it (unless I've managed to tell you the Room of Requirement is on the fourth floor - that was a typo, and I don't know how it...
happened).
Hermione Granger’s room was just like that of any other teenage girl. Maybe a few more books than clothes, but all in all there was nothing about the room that suggested that strange and mysterious things often happened to the girl that occupied it, except that the titles of the books included *Hogwarts: A History, A History of Magic and Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts.*

On the nightstand, there stood a photograph of three teenagers: a girl with bushy brown hair, with her arms around two boys, one with red hair and freckles, the other with messy black hair and bright green eyes, all three waving at the camera. This was Hermione and her two best friends, Ron Weasley and Harry Potter, and, truthfully, strange and mysterious things happened to all three of them, not just her.

Avoiding strange and mysterious things when you attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was like trying to get Harry’s hair to lie flat. It just wasn’t possible. She should know; she’d tried it enough times.

To be completely honest, it may have been more possible to avoid those things, if it weren’t for Harry. Harry’s penchant for trouble had started when he was just fifteen months old, when Lord Voldemort – the most evil wizard since Grindelwald – had murdered his parents before turning his wand on the young child. Somehow, the curse had backfired, reducing Voldemort to a mere spirit and leaving Harry with a lightning bolt scar and the nickname ‘The Boy-Who-Lived’.

Trouble followed Harry around like a plague, but she wouldn’t swap him for the world.

In fact, it was because of this trouble that they were even friends in the first place: Voldemort had possessed their first year Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Quirrell, in an attempt to steal the Philosopher’s Stone – a rare gem that could create the Elixir of Life and was hidden at the school.

On Halloween night, in an attempt to lure Headmaster Dumbledore and the other teachers away from the hiding place, Quirrell/Voldemort let a mountain troll into the school – a mountain troll that trapped Hermione in the girls’ bathroom.

Harry and Ron, realising in the panic that she was missing, went to find her and, through sheer dumb luck and a cleverly placed Levitation Charm (even though Ron swore it was just the first spell that came into his head), saved her life.

The three young Gryffindors became best friends and went on to help save the Philosopher’s Stone from Voldemort’s clutches, escaping with only the slightest of injuries (except for Harry, who nearly died, but Hermione had become abnormally used to that as well).

In their second year, Ron’s younger sister, Ginny, had been possessed by a diary that had belonged to Tom Riddle, Voldemort’s alter-ego.

As a result, the Chamber of Secrets had been opened and several students, including Hermione, had been Petrified.

Despite a fake as a DADA teacher and Professor Dumbledore’s temporary removal from the school, Harry and Ron had discovered what had been going on and Harry had saved Ginny’s life.
Last year, it had seemed that Harry’s life was, once again, in danger. A dangerous criminal had escaped from Azkaban Prison and was supposedly after Hermione’s best friend.

However, as always with Harry’s luck, it swung both ways. In response to this threat, Professor Dumbledore hired Remus Lupin as the DADA teacher, a man who quickly became the favourite of most students.

Despite the intimidating presence of Dementors around the school and the inability to visit Hogsmeade with the rest of his class-mates, Harry’s year only improved with the arrival of the first Quidditch match and two rather special substitute teachers.

“I don’t like this.” Oliver Wood repeated, for the hundredth time, as the team strode through the driving rain.

“Oliver, have you ever heard of something called psychology?” Harry asked, peering through his fogged up glasses. “Because the more you say that, the more nervous we get.”

“Hey,” Fred Weasley said suddenly. “Who’s that?”

“Where?” George Weasley squinted through the driving rain.

“There,” Angelina Johnson pointed in the direction of the gates. “Fred’s right.”

Just visible to the seven students, two figures were battling the elements, each trying to manoeuvre a trunk at the same time.

“Do you think we should go and help them?” Katie Bell asked. “We’ve got time.”

Oliver glanced at his watch and sighed. “Alright, come on then. There’s nothing we can do at the pitch.”

The team battled over with umbrellas and soon reached the two visitors, who, close-up, were revealed to be women, soaked to the skin.

“Do you want a hand?” Alicia Spinnet asked, raising her voice to be heard over the howling wind.

“Thank you!” One of the women beamed. “But shouldn’t you be at the game?”

“Doesn’t start for another hour,” Oliver told her. “Come on, team.”

Oliver and George took one trunk and Fred and Harry took the other, and they battled their way back to the castle, finally arriving in the Entrance Hall.

Noise from the Great Hall told them that breakfast was still on-going, and the boys set the trunks down near the staircase.

“Thank you so much.” The first woman pushed her sopping blonde hair out of her face. She was the taller of the two, although not by much, slim, but not tiny, with warm amber eyes that took in the entrance hall with a smile. She couldn’t have been more than thirty-five.

“We had to resize them to get through security and then levitating them was too much of a push, especially in this wind. We thought about banishing them but …”

“In that wind, it would do more harm than good.” Her companion finished, wringing her cloak out,
leaving a small puddle on the floor. Her face was rounder, and her hair shorter and darker, the
colour of chestnuts. Her eyes were almost the same colour, with just as much warmth as her
companion, but with a familiarity that Harry was sure he knew from somewhere. “Ten points
apiece to Gryffindor.”

“You’re teachers?” Alicia asked.

“We’ll be covering for and assisting Professor Lupin with Defence Against the Dark Arts.” The
second woman grinned at the looks of shock on their face. “I’m Arabella Figg.”

“And I’m Amanda Cotswold,” She looked around, taking in their faces. “I think I can guess a few
names. Your Richard’s boy, aren’t you?” She pointed at Oliver. “Oliver?”

Oliver looked surprised. “Yes. How did you know?”

“I was on the team with your Uncle Tom,” Professor Cotswold smiled reminiscently. “Amazing
Keeper, that guy. I think we might be in the presence of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, Ara.”

Professor Figg chuckled. “I think you’re right. You two must be the Weasley twins. From what I
remember they gave the boys a run for their money, right Mandy?”

They grinned. “Gred and Forge, at your service.”

Professor Cotswold laughed. “You still use those names? Molly always would insist on lettering
your jumpers so that Lily could tell you apart when she baby-sat.”

“Trust James to give them other names to use.” Professor Figg turned to the three Chasers. “I’m
afraid I can’t place you.”


“Nice to meet you all,” Professor Cotswold directed her focus on Harry, who was surprised it
hadn’t happened earlier. “And you’re Harry Potter.”

Harry nodded, waiting for the familiar flick of their eyes to the scar on his forehead, but it didn’t
come.

“I suppose you’ve been told this,” She continued with a sad smile. “But you have your mother’s
eyes.”

Harry blinked in surprise. “Er … yeah. It usually comes after how much I look like my father.”

“Oh you do.” Professor Cotswold said quietly. “Small differences, but you do. But your eyes are
definitely Lily’s.”

“Did you …?” Their words came floating back to Harry. “The Lily and James you mentioned
earlier … they were my parents.”

Professor Figg nodded. “Lily was one of our best friends. Come and see us after the match, if
Oliver’s anything like Tom, he’ll be itching to drag you down to the pitch.”

Oliver grinned sheepishly. “Right. Come on.”

“One second,” Fred requested. “What position did you play, Professor Cotswold?”

“Beater,” she answered.
“And who did we give a run for their money?” George asked eagerly.

“Oh, James and his friends.” Professor Figg answered vaguely, but with a hard note that clearly ended the line of questioning.

Fred and George didn’t look like they’d be swayed by this, but their next queries were cut off when Oliver and Katie seized Fred under the arms and dragged him towards the door, while Alicia and Angelina did the same with George.

Unfortunately, it didn’t take long for Harry’s luck to swing back to bad again, and he was soon plummeting fifty feet from his broom, paralysed by the crippling effects of the Dementors. Thankfully, Dumbledore was able to slow Harry’s descent, saving his life, even if his broom did fly into the Whomping Willow and end up match-sticks.

This was then followed by the discovery of the extent of Sirius Black’s crimes: he had betrayed his best friends, and Harry’s parents, James and Lily Potter, to Voldemort and, when confronted by Peter Pettigrew, another of their friends, had blown the street apart, killing Peter and twelve Muggles.

That year had been one of the worst of Hermione’s life. Her cat, Crookshanks, seemed intent on eating Ron’s pet rat, Scabbers, and Ron had stopped talking to her, especially when Scabbers disappeared, leaving only drops of blood and ginger hairs on Ron’s bed.

Hermione knew her cat was innocent – he’d been ill in her dorm all day – but Ron – and, even worse, Harry – refused to listen to her.

Harry’s silent treatment started at Christmas, when he had received a Firebolt – the best racing broom money could buy – with no note. Worried that it might be a ploy by Black to harm her best friend, Hermione had informed their Head of House, Professor McGonagall, who had confiscated the broom for testing.

Hermione was used to being alone and ignored – she had spent her childhood like that – but now she had friends, the experience hurt. On top of the sudden loneliness, she had to deal with the utter exhaustion of taking all of the electives offered by Hogwarts.

However, the ‘Golden Trio’, as they had come to be known, were reunited for a common cause when Hagrid’s hippogriff Buckbeak was to be executed by the Ministry of Magic. Upon visiting their large friend, they were pulled into another adventure – Ron quite literally – by a large black dog that turned out to be Sirius Black himself. Despite an interruption by their Potions teacher, Professor Snape, Sirius and Professor Lupin managed to tell them what really happened that day:

Peter had betrayed Harry’s parents and, when confronted, faked his death, killing twelve people in the process, and spent the next twelve years hiding as Ron’s pet rat, Scabbers, who had been found in Hagrid’s hut that evening.

Pettigrew unfortunately escaped and knocked out when the moon rose and Lupin transformed into a werewolf. Saved by Harry’s Patronus, the two conscious teens used a time-turner to travel back in time and rescue Buckbeak from execution and Sirius from the Dementor’s Kiss, helping the two fugitives escape together.

Currently, Hermione was sitting at her bedroom window, her head pounding and a fresh bruise on her face.

Her face was bruised because her father had overreacted a little when she’d told him she was
dropping her two extra classes.

Her head was pounding because … Actually, she didn’t know why her head pounding. Recently her emotions seemed completely out of her control, things she didn’t understand, things she wasn’t even sure belonged to her.

Added to all that, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something awful was about to happen.

What was going on?
1 - Sirius Encounters

Chapter Notes

Warning for brief child abuse/violence in this chapter.
Also Jessica Brown belongs to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter One - Sirius Encounters

Hermione was shaken from her thoughts by the sight of Ron’s tiny owl speeding towards the house; she just managed to get the window open before he collided with it and grabbed him out of the air, removing the letter before he could to what Ginny had dubbed ‘the Pig Thing’.

Waving her problems aside for the moment, she focused on Ron’s letter:

Hermione,

DAD GOT THE TICKETS!! I don’t know if Ginny’s already written to you about this; I know she has been. Can you believe she managed to name my owl? What kind of a name is Pigwidgeon anyway? Dad’s going to come and pick you up next Wednesday morning at ten; owl back if that’s okay. Charlie and Bill are arriving in a few days. Harry’s not coming until a few days before the match; Dumbledore says he has to stay with his aunt and uncle until then, poor buggar. Don’t tell Mum I said that. So if you could not mention we’ve got the tickets; I’ll tell him nearer the time. We were going to wait until then to invite you over too – Mum didn’t think we should deprive your parents of time with you – but Bill and Charlie have heard so much about you from me and Ginny – and even the twins, if you can believe that – and they want to meet their new little sister. Owl back about next Wednesday, okay?

Ron

Hermione sighed, knowing that her parents were at work until late that evening.

Now what? I can’t just say yes and Dad will never let me go. It was hard enough convincing him to let me go to Diagon Alley last summer.

Hermione often acted as part-time counsellor for her two best friends, three if she counted Ginny (and she often did).

She was the one Ginny confided in about the nightmares that plagued her after her first year.

She was the one who talked to Ron about his inferiority complex, brought on by five, very successful, older brothers, convincing him that he had just as much to offer the world.

She was the only person Harry would talk to about his aunt and uncle, at least without the dismissive tone he used around everyone else.

But none of them knew that her home-life was awful. Maybe not as bad as Harry’s, but awful nonetheless.
Her mother was somewhat distant, even though she seemed to dote on her, but her father was nothing short of a control freak.

Nothing was ever good enough for Steven Granger and though his wife bore the brunt more often than not, Hermione couldn’t always escape the backlash, hence the bruise on her face.

Until she started school, the idea of other children was a foreign concept; she had practically grown up in the library, leaving her with an almost unhealthy love of books and a lack of social skills.

If it weren’t for the ‘troll incident’, she doubted she would have any friends at all.

Even now, her father needed to control her life, from where she went, to when she got her school supplies, to how she got to the station each year.

Sometimes, Jane Granger would come into her daughter’s bedroom when she thought she was asleep and apologise, although Hermione didn’t know why. Sometimes, when they talked about Hogwarts, Jane would look solemnly at Hermione, as though about to say something, but then change the subject.

Other times, lying awake at night, if she thought very, very hard, Hermione could remember warm arms and a friendly chuckle that seemed to be more in tune with ‘Dad’ in her mind than her own father, and she would dream that maybe there was another ‘father’ in her life, who would take her away.

But then logic would kick in, and she would tell herself that there was no evidence of this man anywhere, and, anyway, memories didn’t stretch back that far.

She looked back down at the letter, scowling at the news that Harry would have to stay with his aunt and uncle. Why? They don’t give a damn about him. At least he’s got Jessica, I suppose.

To make up for the lack of care and attention Harry received from his aunt and uncle, he had a next door neighbour who apparently doted on him.

Jessica Brown was the only reason Harry ever even mentioned Privet Drive and often sent him letters at Hogwarts.

Harry had confided in Hermione in first year about how much he hated lying to Jess about his new school – unfortunately, it was against wizarding law to tell Muggles about magic unless they were immediate relatives.

However, Jessica made that leap for Harry. Throughout his childhood, she had been plagued with amazing dreams, which she had turned into stories, about magic and love and friendship, all set in a huge castle with a lake and a forest.

Following his first year, she had told him of a new dream she’d had, involving him this time, and how he’d gone to that castle to learn magic, and made two best friends.

When she’d finished telling him her dream – which had basically been a condensed version of his first year – Harry had confided in her, and she had become his one ally – aside from his owl, Hedwig – on Privet Drive, giving him refuge over the summer, support over the school years, and having ever-intriguing dreams, which seemed to be becoming less literal, and more prophetic.

Hermione read the invitation again with a sigh. I could run away, I suppose. The Muggle police can’t track down anyone they can’t find. I could stay with the Weasleys; I’m sure Ginny would hide me in her room. Or I could hide in the cupboard that Harry used to live in. Or, if it comes to it, I could just
find Sirius. With a sad smile, she shook her head, her famous logic kicking back in. Like that would work.

A knock at the door cut into her thoughts, making her jump, and she checked her reflection, pushing her hair down so it covered the bruise on her face, before hurrying downstairs to answer it.

A middle-aged dark-haired woman was standing on the doorstep with a biscuit tin in her hands and a little girl and large dog in tow.

Just as Hermione realised that the dog looked familiar, he jumped up to greet her and she bit back a gasp, catching sight of stormy grey eyes that had only recently ceased sending stabs of fear through her. “Padfoot!”

At this, the little girl’s smile faded into a sulky pout, but the woman looked quite relieved. “Oh, thank heavens! Is he yours?”

“Mummy!” The little girl whined. “You said we could keep her!”

“I said we could keep him if we didn’t find who he belonged to.” Her mother corrected. “Is he?”

Hermione glanced down. “Sort of. I’m pet-sitting for a friend – he got out of the garden … I’m sorry, I don’t think I’ve seen you around here before.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Chloe Taylor, this is my daughter Madeline. We’ve just moved into Number Ten. We found the dog in the park last week, but we couldn’t see any posters.”

Hermione didn’t let her smile slip. “Yes, Harry warned me that Padfoot was an escape artist. Apparently, he likes to disappear for a few days and then come wandering back in like nothing’s happened. He advised that I wait at least a week before panicking.”

Mrs Taylor chuckled. “Quite the character then.”

“Oh, you have no idea.” Hermione murmured, scratching Padfoot’s head. “I’m Hermione Granger, by the way. Mum and Dad are the dentists in town.”

Madeline brightened at this. “I like Dr Granger!”

“I took her in for a check-up the other day.” Mrs Taylor explained with a smile. “Your mother’s wonderful.”

“I’ll let her know.” Hermione said. “She is great with children. Would you like to come in for a cup of tea?”

“Oh, that’s very kind of you, but I’m taking Madeline into the city today.” Mrs Taylor ruffled Madeline’s hair. “We were just stopping by to say hello and to bring you biscuits.”

“Oh, thank you.” Hermione accepted the tin. “Welcome to Colgate.”

Mrs Taylor thanked her and led Madeline away, the little girl complaining about wanting a puppy.

Hermione closed the door and led the way into the kitchen, setting the biscuit tin on the side. “You can change back now; I’m the only one home.”

A soft ‘pop’ from behind her told her that Sirius had done just that. “If I’d known you lived here, I’d have found you instead.”
For a split second, it seemed he was going to say something else, but he didn’t. Ignoring that, Hermione leaned against the counted, smiling at him. “What are you doing here?”

Sirius shrugged. “Well, I was heading out of the country. I stopped off at Moony’s – Professor Lupin’s – place briefly, but the sooner I get abroad, the sooner I can get ‘accidentally’ spotted and get those Dementors off your back.”

Hermione couldn’t help shuddering at the reminder. Her reaction to the cloaked demons had been nothing compared to Harry’s, but the screams in her head that started around them seemed badly-tuned and chillingly familiar, which frightened Hermione more than anything, because she had no idea what she was supposed to be remembering.

Sirius made a motion as though he was about to move towards her, but thought better of it. “Anyway, there’s only so far a hippogriff can fly in one journey so we landed in the woodland behind all these gardens. Buckbeak was exhausted and I was starving.”

Hermione was just about to offer him a biscuit when the front door opened. Her face drained of colour. “That’s Dad. You’d better hide.”

Sirius transformed into Padfoot again and darted under the sideboard. If he lay flat and stayed quiet, he could blend in with the shadows.

Steven Granger appeared in the doorway seconds later. “What’s that?”

“Home-made biscuits.” Hermione answered, her voice shaking. “Mrs Taylor dropped them off. She’s just moved in to Number Ten. Mum treated her daughter the other day.”

“Why aren’t you doing your homework?” Her father asked sharply, moving across the kitchen to open the fridge.

“I’ve already done it.” Hermione replied. “Dad, the Weasleys have invited me to stay for the rest of the summer. May I go please?”

“No.” Her father answered shortly.

“But Dad, you won’t have to take me anywhere.” Hermione said tentatively. “Mr Weasley would come and pick me up.”

“And where would you be sleeping?” Steven asked bluntly.

“In Ginny’s room probably.” Hermione answered. “Because Harry shares with Ron and …”

“Oh, he’ll be there too, will he?” Steven interrupted. “Why would they even want you there?” “Because they’re my friends.” Hermione said quietly.

Steven gave a derisive snort. “Who’d want to be friends with an insufferable little know-it-all like you?”

Hermione flinched, wanting to argue that he couldn’t expect her to get top marks in everything she did academically and not be a ‘know-it-all’, but she knew better than to do that.

A low growl sounded from beneath the sideboard and she moved in front of his, hoping to stop Padfoot from moving. The last thing she needed was for her father to know he was there.

“Harry and Ron.” She answered quietly.

Her father lifted his hand and she flinched, but he only lifted a glass out of the cupboard. “You’re not
going. End of story.”

“But …” Hermione instinctively ducked, knowing as soon as the word left her lips that she had pushed it too far, and was proved right when the glass hit the wall behind her head.

“You ungrateful little brat!” Steven spat. “Your mother and I work hard to put food in your mouth and a roof over your head and you repay us by running off to that … that … place every year and disappearing off with those boys as soon as you get the chance. Well, I’ve had it with you – the moment you walk out of that door again, you are no longer our daughter. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Hermione whispered, focusing on her feet. A sharp blow to the side of her face made her stagger backwards, clutching the sideboard for support, and amend her answer. “Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Steven packed the sandwiches into a bag, grabbed a bottle of cola from the fridge and left the room. “And for God’s sake, clean that mess up.”

Hermione didn’t move until the front door had slammed shut. Then she fetched a broom from the cupboard and began to sweep up the shards of glass, hearing the tell-tale ‘pop’ of an Animagus transformation behind her. She didn’t turn, focusing instead on keeping the tears from spilling from her eyes. “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

There were quiet footsteps behind her and she felt a hand on her shoulder. “Does that happen a lot?”

“Him disowning me?” Hermione let out a shaky laugh. “No, that’s the first time.”

Sirius took the broom from her hands and sat her down at the kitchen table. “Him treating you like that.”

“Yeah, he does it all the time.” Hermione avoided his gaze as he swept the glass out of the back door.

Sirius shook his head. “Well, if I were him, I’d be pretty glad I’m still a wanted man.”

“Why’s that?” Hermione asked, wiping her eyes.

“Because otherwise, I wouldn’t have needed a wand to kick his arse.” Sirius answered bluntly.

Hermione giggled slightly. “It’s fine, Sirius, really.”

“No, it’s not fine.” Sirius disagreed. “Nothing gives him the right to treat you like that.”

Hermione shrugged slightly. “Maybe.” She glanced up. “What do you think I should do?”

Sirius pulled the other chair round to sit next to her. “Honestly? Call his bluff.”

“What if he’s not bluffing?” Hermione whispered.

Sirius smiled at her. “Then you don’t need it. Trust me, Hermione, I was disowned after my first year at Hogwarts – never legally, for some reason; I guess Mother and Father figured they didn’t need to since I had an older brother. My parents were big on blood purity and the entire family in Slytherin. When I was sorted into Gryffindor, they weren’t happy. Telling them I was never going to join Voldemort pushed them over the edge.” He looked curiously at her. “You didn’t flinch.”

Hermione shrugged. “Around Harry you don’t have the time. So you think I’ll be alright if I walk out then?”

“People that treat you like that aren’t your family.” Sirius told her firmly. “Your family are the people
who love you.”

“The Marauders.” Hermione guessed quietly, feeling grief rise up within her. She contemplated the feeling for a few minutes, before coming to the conclusion that it was far too strong to be hers. “Sirius … is there a magical gift or creature that can sense emotions? You know, like Seers can predict the future?”

Sirius looked thoughtful. “Sounds like empathy to me. But empaths have been classified as Dark since … Oh, who am I to talk? I ran around with a werewolf once a month. And besides, it’s our choices, not our abilities, that make all the difference.”

Hermione chuckled and stood up to rummage through the fridge. “I think Dumbledore said something like that to Harry once.”

Sirius grinned. “Probably. I nicked it off him. Actually, when Harry was born, I made a list of wise-sounding sentences that I’d heard other people say.”

“Well, I am Harry’s godfather.” Sirius shrugged. “Just figured I should have some profound words for him every now then. That’s really more Moony’s forte than mine. Why were you asking about empathy?”

“I think I might have it.” Hermione admitted, setting the saucepan on the hob and turning it on. “Lately, I’ve just been … my emotions seem to be all over the place, except half of them I swear aren’t mine. Like just now – I never knew James and Lily Potter, which limits my sense of grief – I mean, it’s awful what happened, but …”

“You can’t mourn for someone you don’t know.” Sirius finished quietly.

“Exactly.” Hermione agreed wearily, sinking back into her chair. Another emotion rose between them, not quite grief, but close. She didn’t mention it, turning instead to her other piece of evidence. “And earlier, with Dad, I …” She trailed off, staring at the oven in horror.

Sirius followed her gaze. “What is it?”

“He hates me.” Hermione whispered. “My own father hates me.” A tear slipped down her cheek, quickly followed by another, and another.

As her body shook with the first heaving sob, she heard the other chair move and his arm wrapped around her shoulders, drawing her into a hug. “That’s because he’s crazy, Hermione. There’s nothing to hate.”

“And you’ve known me, what, a week?” Hermione sniffled.

His hold tightened momentarily before relaxing. “I’m a good judge of character. Besides you did break Merlin knows how many wizarding laws the other week to save my life.”

Hermione managed a weak smile. It didn’t escape her notice that she was picking up more affection and positive emotion from Sirius than she ever had from her father. He would have yelled at her to get over it; she couldn’t remember the last time her father had shown her any physical affection … or any affection at all, for that matter.

“Thanks, Sirius.” Hermione pulled away, wiping her eyes. “Harry and Ron tend to panic when I
Sirius shrugged. “Eh, Lily used to break down on me all the time, so I’m used to it. I think it was so she didn’t freak James out. He never did too well with crying girls.”

“Must be where Harry gets it from.” Hermione joked, before being distracted by a low hiss as the saucepan boiled over. She grabbed a tea-towel and removed the pot from the head, before pouring the contents on to a plate and placing it in front of him with a fork. “Eat. You look half-starved.”

“I am half-starved.” Sirius pointed out. “You didn’t have to …” Hermione gave him a look eerily reminiscent of Professor McGonagall and he dropped his protest, thanking her quietly.

“Now,” Hermione continued matter-of-factly, “what can I do about getting you a wand? Yours would have been snapped when you were arrested, wouldn’t it?”

“Actually, it wasn’t.” Sirius answered cautiously. “The Blacks are an Ancient and Noble pureblood family – they can’t snap my wand without the permission of my Head of House.”

Hermione frowned. “But … didn’t you just say you were unofficially disowned?”

Sirius chuckled. “Yeah, but I was arrested after my father died and my brother was killed. That means they can’t snap my wand without my permission.” He smiled lightly at her stunned expression. “I know. They’re crazy, our laws. My wand’s in my vault.”

“Anyway I can get into it?” Hermione asked.

“No.” Sirius said. “Well, technically, yes, but you’re not going to. You’ve done enough, Hermione.”

“I’ve done what’s right.” Hermione corrected. “And besides, what the Ministry doesn’t know can’t hurt them. Or, more importantly, me.”

Sirius observed her for a few seconds, before chuckling. “Well played.” He pulled a small golden key out of his robes. “But what do you know about Gringotts vaults?”

Hermione hesitated. “Erm … only what Harry’s told me. I know quite a bit about goblins.”

“If you’re talking about History of Magic, you know quite a bit about goblin rebellions.” Sirius corrected. “And that does nothing for goblin-human relationships, believe me. There are three types of pureblood families, Hermione.”

Hermione nodded. “Ancient, Noble and Ancient and Noble. I know that much.”

“Exactly.” Sirius confirmed. “You can be considered pureblood without being in one of those families, but generally, they fit into one of those categories.”

“Surely a pureblood is anyone with magical parents.” Hermione frowned. “If Muggle-borns are people like me with two Muggle parents and half-bloods are people like Seamus Finnegan with one magical parent and one Muggle parent …”

“Normally you’d be right,” Sirius agreed, “but you have to remember the people who think in terms of blood. For example, what is Harry?”

“Pureblood.” Hermione guessed. “Because his parents were both …” She trailed off. “But his mother was Muggle-born … and to the people who care about that sort of thing …”
“You’ve got it.” Sirius nodded. “If your parents are both Muggle-born, you’re considered Muggle-born. To be considered a pureblood, you have to have at least three generations.”

Hermione grimaced. “And no one finds this confusing?”

Sirius chuckled. “If it helps, I hate it. Anyway … the more ‘important’ the family, the better protected the vaults, which was my point to begin with. If you were entering the Potter vault – that’s another Ancient and Noble family – I wouldn’t be too worried, but …”

“But surely the wands will be in your personal vault.” Hermione pointed out. “That won’t have the same protections as the family vault … will it?”

“It shouldn’t.” Sirius agreed slowly. “But I did inherit that vault from my Uncle Alpherd. He wasn’t as big on blood purity, but I still don’t know what enchantments are on it. You might not be able to enter it.”

“Well, it can’t hurt to try.” Hermione said sensibly. “And from what I’ve read, the goblins will let you in anywhere as long as you have the right key.”

“That’s the other thing.” Sirius said grimly. “Gringotts keys cannot be taken from a person without their consent. That’s why I still have mine. The only way you could have this key in your possession is if I give you explicit consent to enter the vault. That puts you in direct contact with me, Hermione; it’s too risky.”

Hermione shrugged. “Only if the Ministry finds out. And from what I’ve heard, the goblins hate the Ministry. Or is that another misconception?”

“No, that one’s true.” Sirius sighed. “Fine, but I want you to promise me that you’ll be careful.”

Hermione nodded. “I promise.”

***

Gringotts Bank was very easily the most impressive building in Diagon Alley, a towering building of white marble that dwarfed the shops surrounding it.

Upon entering the bank, Hermione had changed some Muggle money into sickles and galleons, before requesting a private room and a meeting with a teller upon their earliest convenience.

Her mother had dropped her off at the Leaky Cauldron that morning, under the impression that Hermione was just looking to get Harry a birthday present.

But now she was sitting in one of the small rooms off of the main Gringotts lobby, her heart constricting her throat. For the last two days, Sirius had been living in the woodland behind her back garden and teaching her about goblins and their customs. She had learned more than Professor Binns could ever teach her – Sirius had made the stories exciting and interesting, something their professor had never managed.

After what seemed like an age, one of the goblins entered the room and Hermione rose to her feet to curtsey. She knew she had surprised her mother by donning a skirt for the day – she was much comfier in jeans – but it allowed far better movement. “Greetings. May your mines be forever full and your sword forever sharp.”

Her Gobbledegook was shaky and she had only learnt that one phrase, but it sounded right, from what Sirius had taught her.

The goblin looked surprised, but bowed in acknowledgement, before taking the other seat and
gesturing for her to sit. “Greetings, Miss Granger. My name is Griphook.” Thankfully, he continued the conversation in English, apparently noting her slight hesitance. “I must admit myself impressed, Miss Granger. Very few wizards and witches bother to learn our language, especially so young.” Hermione blushed slightly. “My curiosity is hard to sate, sir.”

Griphook nodded. “What can the Bank of Gringotts do for you today? You do not possess a vault of your own.”

“No.” Hermione admitted, taking a deep breath. “I wish to visit Vault 711.”

Griphook observed her for a few seconds, saying nothing, and she fought not to squirm under his gaze.

“*Just keep calm, keep eye contact and don’t fidget. Goblins pick up on subtle body language far more than humans do. You have every right to be there, so don’t let him think any differently.*”

After a few moments, Griphook spoke again. “You have the key, I presume?”

Hermione nodded, handing it over, reminding herself to thank Sirius for the advice.

Silently, Griphook held it up to the light, turning it over in his long fingers. “Not a forgery. You realise that by doing this you are admitting to contact with a convicted criminal.”

Hermione took a shaky breath. “Yes, sir, I do.”

“And yet you are still willing to aid him in this way?” Griphook prompted.

Hermione nodded firmly. “I am.”

Griphook gave her a fierce look that, thanks to Sirius, she recognised as a smile. “If there is one thing goblins value more than honesty, Miss Granger, it is bravery. And if there is one thing we value more than bravery, it is loyalty. The Bank of Gringotts has no link of the Ministry of Magic and we hold all transactions in the utmost confidentiality. Follow me.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Hermione followed the goblin through a set of double doors into a dark stone passageway, lit by flaming torches. A small cart came rattling along a set of railway tracks and stopped beside them.

Hermione shuddered inwardly, having heard about these cart-rides from Harry – she’d never liked rollercoasters. Nevertheless she climbed into the cart and took a deep breath as it took off, but to her surprise, she actually enjoyed the ride.

Griphook must have read her expression, because he said, “These carts have a goblin anti-nausea charm on them.”

“Thank Merlin.” Hermione muttered as the cart came to a halt outside one of the vaults. A loud clacking sound was coming from around the corner, but she didn’t ask – Sirius had mentioned a dragon guarding the Black vaults and how the goblins used ‘clackers’ to keep them under control, although she hadn’t completely believed him until this moment.

Griphook unlocked the vault door and turned to her, gesturing her forwards. She stepped over the threshold tentatively, feeling a soft tingling over her skin that she assumed was the wards. She froze, Waitin for something to happen.

It didn’t, so she allowed herself to relax, looking around the large vault. Most of it was filled with mounds of gold and silver, but across from her was a large storage box and, atop it, two familiar tubes of wood.
Hermione climbed over to it, being careful not to touch anything (“if anything else has been moved from the other vaults, it’s been cursed and I don’t want you to get hurt”), and picked them up, slipping them into her bag, unsure which was Sirius’s.

The wands had been lying on a photograph and Hermione picked that up as well. A much younger Sirius laughed up at her, baby Harry firmly in his arms. Lily Potter hovered in the background, trying to take Harry back, but the child just clung tighter to his godfather.

Hermione chuckled affectionately and slipped the photograph into her bag as well, before leaving the vault to travel back to the surface.

***

That evening, Hermione and Sirius were huddled in the wooded area behind her garden. It was strange to see a hippogriff rooting for worms in the same place she used to sit and do her Muggle homework.

Dusk was falling, but her parents were working late and would not be home for another hour at least. Sirius cast a glance at the darkening sky. “We should get on our way; it’ll be dark soon.”

“Hang on.” Hermione handed him a satchel. “I got this today in Diagon Alley; it’s got an undetectable extension charm on it. I filled it with enough food to last a while, mostly Muggle tins that won’t go off, but there’s some soup and stew in thermos flasks; I added runes to them at the beginning of the summer, so they should stay warm if I’ve done them right. Don’t do anything stupid and stay in touch – I’ve put some parchment, quills and ink in there as well.”

“You’re a life-saver, Hermione.” Sirius told her sincerely, shouldering the bag with a grateful smile.

“Oh, and before I forget …” Hermione pulled the two wands out of her pocket. “I wasn’t sure which one was yours.”

Sirius took the darker wand, tapping it against her face with a murmured incantation, healing the bruise. “Thanks. I feel a lot better with a wand in my hand.”

“What should I do with this one?” Hermione asked.

Sirius’s eyes took on a haunted expression. “Keep it. You never know when you might need a second wand.”

Hermione wanted to ask who it had belonged to, but the sudden surge of grief she picked up as he looked at the wand made her decide against it, slipping the wand back into her pocket. “I found this photo as well. Thought you might like it.”

“You thought right.” Sirius smiled reminiscently at the picture for a few seconds, before duplicating it and handing her back the copy. “Make sure Harry gets that?”

“Of course.” Hermione slipped it away and patted Buckbeak’s feathery neck. “Be good, Beaky. Make sure Padfoot doesn’t do anything stupid, alright?” Buckbeak tossed his head with a squawk and she took that as reassurance. She turned back to Sirius and he placed his hands on her shoulders.

“Hermione, I can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done this summer.” He told her in a low voice. “Just promise me one more thing.”

“What?” Hermione asked.

“Forget everything your father ever told you.” Sirius stated, with an unidentifiable glint in his eye. “You’re an amazing young woman with a heart of gold and a mind that could give Lily Potter a run
for her money. And I can give you no higher praise than that.”
Hermione blushed lightly. She knew enough about Harry’s mother to take it as a compliment of the
highest order as well. “Thank you.”

“No. Thank you.” Sirius hugged her tightly. “I can never repay you for what you’ve done, but …”
he released her and waved his wand in the direction of her house. “That should make the rest of your
summer here a little more bearable.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “What did you do?”

Sirius winked at her. “Never mess with a Marauder, my dear. Enjoy the World Cup and give Harry
my love when you see him.” He jumped on Buckbeak’s back and urged him forwards.

The hippogriff unfurled his impressive wings and broke into a gallop, taking off into the air.
Hermione watched them fly into the distance, until they were a tiny speck silhouetted against the
moon.

Going … going … gone …

Chapter End Notes

I haven't added pairings to this story, because they won't really appear until the sequel. However, Sirius/Hermione will NOT be one of them, and you'll see why later on.
Chapter Two - The Burrow

It didn't take long before Hermione realised what Sirius had done. Every time her father came within two feet of her, he was overcome by the inescapable need to vomit.

Thankfully, he had put this sudden illness down to food poisoning, although her mother had pulled her aside one morning and asked very seriously if she'd had anything to do with it.

Hermione had rolled her eyes and reminded her that she wasn't allowed to do magic out at school, so her mother had dropped the subject, not really upset about the turn of events.

The lack of Ministry owl had bothered Hermione for a while, but she soon forgot about it; she'd heard whispers of bias in the underage magic law and she could look it up when she arrived back at Hogwarts.

Hermione spent her last three days at home preparing to leave for good. All she could take to The Burrow without arousing suspicion was her school trunk, which was fine for clothes and school books, but that was it.

However, she had picked up another magically expanded satchel in Diagon Alley, which held everything else. She had also bought a book on empathy, hoping for some sort of explanation. The people at Flourish and Blotts had seen her so often that no one batted an eyelid at her purchase.

That, or it was because she also bought a set of DADA books at the same time as Harry's birthday present.

Unfortunately, and Hermione made sure to read it at least three times before admitting it, the information it offered was quite poor.

In the mid-1800s, the Ministry of Magic had released a report that named empaths as Dark Creatures. Empaths at the time had tried to argue that there was a political agenda – after all, reading emotions also meant detecting lies – but it was to no avail and, with prejudice worse than that against werewolves, empaths went 'underground'.

With that in mind, all the book could tell her was that she could sense other people's emotions – which she already knew – and 'see and communicate with living spirits'.

The book went on to explain:

*Since no empaths have offered their services for study, this is merely a theory. Theoretically, every magical human has a body, a soul and a spirit. In life, the soul and body are joined together and can survive without each other, but will no longer be alive. The existence of the spirit, however, is debated for the above reason. If true, the spirit can leave the body and travel elsewhere; this would be extremely rare, since the body and soul exist separately and, while they have an effect on the spirit's behaviour, it is a one-way relationship.*

So, Hermione supposed, if her spirit went to Australia, she still wouldn't know what was going on there. She couldn't really see how this would affect her, so she put it out of her mind for the moment.

By Wednesday, her room was barren, but for her bed, wardrobe and desk. All that was left to empty was one of the desk drawers, which contained memorabilia from her childhood – certificates, old
letters, Muggle school records.

Right at the back, however, Hermione found a badge that looked like a police shield, but the emblem was two crossed wands shooting sparks.

She sat on her bed and stared at it, trying to understand what it was and where it had come from. The shield was attached to a leather wallet and she flipped it open to find an ID card.

*Ministry of Magic Auror Division*

*Sirius Orion Black*

*July 1979 –*

Hermione's eyebrows rose into her hairline. She had known Sirius was an auror … but what was she doing with his badge?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the doorbell ringing loud and shrill downstairs.

Hermione didn't hurry, knowing that Arthur Weasley would relish the chance to play with the doorbell for a while, and slipped the badge into the satchel with everything else. Then she slipped the satchel into her trunk on top of her school robes and closed the lid, before scooping Crookshanks up as he threatened to slip out the door.

"Oh no you don't, darling," she cooed to the fluffy orange part-Kneazle. "I need you to come with me."

Depositing Crookshanks into his carrier, she dragged her trunk out on to the hallway, left the note to her mother on her pillow and shut the door firmly.

Hermione hurried down the stairs, placing the pet-carrier on the side table where the telephone resided, before opening the door.

Mr Weasley rang the doorbell once more, beaming at the now-louder sound. "Remarkable!" He said cheerfully. "It's good to see you again, Hermione."

"Hello, Mr Weasley. Thank you for letting me stay for the rest of the summer."

"Oh, not at all!" Mr Weasley assured her. "Think nothing of it! Now by some amazing miracle, we've managed to get a car for today. I don't know how we'll get Harry though; we'll never get a car that close to the match. Are your parents here?"

"They're at work." Hermione said calmly, despite the pang of sadness in her chest. "We said our goodbyes this morning. I'll just go and get my trunk."

"Don't worry." Another voice said from behind Mr Weasley. "We'll get it. Good to finally meet you, Hermione."

Hermione didn't need an introduction to know that this was one of Ron's eldest brothers. He was closer to the twins build, still tall, but stocky with it. His face was even more freckled than Ron's and, when she shook his hand, she could feel numerous callouses. "You as well, Charlie, right?"

Charlie raised an eyebrow. "How'd you guess?"

"Probably the burns." Yet another unfamiliar voice teased. "You know Ron tells all and sundry what you do for a living."
This had to be the eldest Weasley brother, Bill. But Hermione had to admit that he wasn't a bit like she'd pictured him. Knowing that Bill had been Head Boy at Hogwarts, she had assumed that he was like Percy, but Bill was tall, like Ron, with long hair pulled back in a ponytail and an earring with what looked like a dragon fang dangling from it.

Then again, she realised as he shook her hand with a friendly greeting, she probably should have known better than to assume head students had to be as stuffy and overbearing as Percy was.

After all, James Potter had been Head Boy and he had been a Marauder.

And Lily Potter had been Head Girl, and she hadn't exactly been an angel …

*Wait – where did that come from? I don't think I really know anything about Mrs Potter … she was Head Girl … probably a prefect. Red hair, green eyes, Gryffindor, Muggle-born … Good at Charms, I remember Harry saying … Very intelligent according to Sirius … But that's all. Where did I get the idea that she caused trouble at school?*

"Hermione?" Bill prompted. "Where's your trunk?"

"Hmm?" Hermione shook herself from her thoughts. "Oh, sorry. It's at the top of the stairs. I was just mentally running through everything I'd packed to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything."

"Organised." Bill commented. "Ron must drive you crazy."

"Not really." Hermione shrugged. "I like a challenge."

"Gryffindor." The two Weasley boys concluded in unison.

"And this must be Crookshanks." Charlie added, bending down to see into the basket. "Did he really eat Scabbers?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, somehow hiding the anger she felt towards Wormtail. "Is he still on about that?"

Bill sniggered. "Been moaning about it for the last few weeks."

Hermione couldn't help feeling surprised. Ron wasn't usually one for tact and she knew that he had taken the news about Scabbers very personally. That he had explained away his absence to his brothers without letting that shine through was quite impressive. "Well, I don't know what happened to Scabbers, but Crookshanks hadn't left my dorm all day. He was sick, weren't you, Crookshanks?"

Despite his irritation at being confined, Crookshanks let out a purr, nuzzling his mistress through the bars.

"Smart cat." Charlie remarked, as Bill levitated the trunk down the stairs. "Might be half-kneazle."

"I think he is." Hermione agreed, picking up the basket.

"You'll have to carry it the rest of the way, boys." Mr Weasley told them.

Charlie rolled his eyes. "Muggle neighbourhood. We know, Dad." He took one end of the trunk, Bill took the other, and they carried it out to the waiting car.

Hermione followed Mr Weasley out the front door, pausing only to lock it, leaving her childhood home for what would – hopefully – be the last time.
Hermione had never been to the Burrow before, electing to meet the Weasleys in Diagon Alley instead, but Harry absolutely loved the place and it turned out to be exactly how she'd imagined it – a house that looked like it had stepped right out of one of her childhood story books, with chickens pecking around the yard and so many pieces jutting out that it appeared to be held up with magic. Hermione couldn't help but feel, however, that this brand of magic was that of love and family, rather than Charms and Transfiguration.

Ginny met her at the door with a tight hug. "Hermione, it's so good to see you! Here, let's get him out." She undid the latches and gently lifted Crookshanks from the basket Hermione was carrying. Once freed, the grumpy-looking cat settled down in Ginny's arms, purring contentedly.

"Hey Mione!"

Hermione rolled her eyes, but didn't argue the nickname, as Ron came running into the kitchen, his hair smoking slightly.

"Twins." He explained briefly, gesturing to the singed areas.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Hermione sighed, hugging him in greeting. She had barely let go, when two other set of arms encircled her, almost lifting her off the ground.

"Mya!" Two voices chorused.

"Why do you call me that?" Hermione asked, unable to hold back a giggle. "And put me down!"

Fred and George set her down and gave her identical grins.

"Well, Hermione …" Fred began.

"… is too long to say …" George continued.

"… so we decided …" Fred explained.

"… to call you Mya." George finished.

"That's alright, isn't it?" They asked in unison.

Hermione gave herself a moment to connect the snippets into one sentence and nodded. "If you must. Do you have to talk like that? I feel like I've been watching a tennis match."

"It's a twin thing." George told her.

"What's a tennis match?" Fred asked.

Hermione shook her head. "Never mind. It's too complicated to explain." She was swiftly pulled away by Mrs Weasley, who hugged her tightly before holding her at arm's length.

"Hermione, how wonderful to see you again!" Mrs Weasley paused. "You're very thin, dear."

"According to you, Mum …" Fred began.

"… everyone is thin." George finished.

Hermione bit back a laugh at their antics, knowing there was no point in arguing with the Weasley
matriarch, despite the fact that she knew she was a healthy weight for her age. "Well, we sent a lot of
food to Harry."

There may well have been a better way of redirecting Molly Weasley's attention, but it had yet to be
found. Sure enough, Mrs Weasley's demeanour changed immediately. "Oh the poor boy! I don't
know why Professor Dumbledore insists on sending him to those people!"

Hermione was slightly startled at the venom in her voice. She had always assumed that Mrs Weasley
believed that everything Dumbledore said was the word of Merlin. After all, last year, she had been
very much in agreement that Harry shouldn't be told that Sirius Black was supposedly trying to kill
him.

Of course, to be fair, that was more because Mrs Weasley felt that Harry 'didn't need to know' than
because Dumbledore told them not to tell him.

*Or was that the Ministry's decision?*

At one time, Hermione too would have taken Dumbledore or the Ministry's word as law, but after
the chaos of last year, she wasn't so sure. Dumbledore knew everything that happened at Hogwarts,
or so it seemed, and yet he still didn't see fit to warn Harry about the 'mass-murderer' trying to kill
him.

She had seen how reckless Harry had acted last year – and he *had* known. She dreaded to think how
bad he would have been if he hadn't.

Realising that Mrs Weasley was still talking, she tuned back in hastily. "Ginny and I were going to
make a couple of birthday cakes for him, would you like to help?"

*Just in time.* "Of course." Hermione said with a smile. "Wouldn't miss it?" She glanced around,
noticing that there was one face missing. "Where's Percy?"

"In his room." Ron told her. "Speaking of, we'll show you yours."

"You'll have to share with me, I'm afraid." Ginny added, as they led her up the rickety staircase that
zig-zagged through the house. "We haven't got much room. Bill and Charlie are sharing with the
twins and Harry will be sharing with Ron when he gets here. Percy gets to keep his room, because
he's got to work."

Hermione couldn't help but notice the light blush that spread over Ginny's face at Harry's name, but
hoped that she'd get over it soon. Harry saw the Weasleys as siblings and would never see her as
anything more than a sister. And Hermione was sure – despite having no frame of reference – that
your sister having a crush of you tended to put a strain on your relationship.

"What does Percy do then?" Hermione asked, as they approached the second landing. "I don't think
you mentioned it."

"He only got the job a few days ago." Ron explained. "He's a junior in the Department of
International Magical Co-Operation."

"But he's a tad obsessed." Ginny warned. "So keep your voice down."

At that moment, a door just ahead of them opened and a head popped out. "Would you keep your
voices…Oh, hello, Hermione." Percy was always polite to Hermione, probably because she was the
only one who pretended to be interested during his lectures.
"Hello, Percy." Hermione replied. "Congratulations on your new job."

"Thank you." Percy puffed up importantly. "At least someone has their priorities straight." He shot a nasty look at his younger siblings and disappeared behind his door again.

"Mental, that one." Ron muttered under his breath, leading the way up the next flight of stairs to Ginny's room. "Ladies, your humble abode. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to go and play Quidditch with the others."

Hermione moved aside to let him pass, rolling her eyes in the process, and followed Ginny into her room. "Charming! Do they ever ask you to play?"

"Never." Ginny sighed, gesturing to one of the beds. "That ones yours."

The room was quite small, just big enough to allow the two girls movement around the two beds, but it was comfortably so and still bigger than Hermione had expected, given the size of The Burrow and the placing of the door.

The walls were painted a pretty pale yellow colour, and the soft green bedclothes gave the room the image of spring-time, which was amplified by the jar of wild flowers on the window sill.

The beds themselves were identical, but one (the one Ginny hadn't pointed at) had a trunk at the foot and a worn hand-knitted stuffed rabbit sat on the pillow.

"What do you think?" Ginny asked, a slight trace of nervousness in her voice.

"I think it's really pretty." Hermione answered, almost wistfully. Her bedroom at her parents' house had always been plain white, with smart mahogany furniture – hardly interesting for a young girl.

It took Hermione a few minutes to realise that she had referred to it as 'her parents' house' and not 'home'.

Ginny smiled brightly. "We'll get your trunk brought up and it'll fit under your bed."

"I'm ahead of you, Gin." Charlie floated the trunk in and landed it in the middle of the room. "Do you two want to play with us?"

Hermione grimaced slightly. The last time she'd been in the air was on the back of a hippogriff and she wasn't too excited about getting up their again.

"Normally, I'd say yes." Ginny answered. "But Hermione's scared of heights."

"I am not scared of heights." Hermione protested. "I'm just not particularly fond of them. Besides, you can go, I don't mind."

"I know." Ginny said. "But I need a girl talk."

Charlie blanched slightly. "Right. I'll leave you to it then." He practically fled down the stairs.

Hermione giggled. "Works every time, that."

Ginny nodded in agreement. "I don't often use that excuse, but it's the only way I can get any privacy with six brothers. Did you bring that book you said I could borrow? The Lion and … something?"

around in it. "Well, that's the weirdest thing I ever saw; I'm sure it's in here somewhere." She stuck her head right in and finally extracted it. "Ah, here it is."

Ginny stared at her. "What on earth is in that bag?"

"Everything but the kitchen sink." Hermione replied jokingly, handing her the book.

"Thanks. Seriously, what is in that bag?" Ginny repeated. "Are you planning on moving in or something?"

Hermione shrugged. "Not really. I just…can't go home next summer, that's all."

"Why not?" Ginny pressed gently.

Hermione took a deep breath, closed her eyes and began to talk, slowly admitting everything about her home life and her father. At one point, she started crying and the younger witch moved off her bed to sit beside her, rubbing her back soothingly. When she'd finished, they sat in silence for a few minutes, Hermione assumed while Ginny took in what she'd said.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, Ginny spoke, her voice low and shaking with anger. "First of all, you're not going back even if I have to hide you in my trunk and smuggle you back here. Second of all, what were you thinking letting Sirius Black into your house?"

Hermione froze. "Pardon?" Terror and concern was rising around her, tainted with a bit of anger, and she realised too late that her method of coping with her past, of shutting off all conscious thought while she talked, had led to more than she had anticipated being revealed.

Her heart thudding, she grasped Ginny's arm. "Ginny, I need you to hear me out and not tell anyone, understand?"

Ginny fought off her arm and closed her bedroom door, fixing Hermione with a stern look she had inherited from her mother. "Explain. Now."

"Harry's going to kill me." Hermione muttered, before launching into the story of the Marauders, four boys who had become brothers and who were ripped apart by the terror of war. By the time she'd finished, Ginny was almost in tears herself. "Poor Professor Lupin."

Hermione had to admit that she hadn't thought about it from that angle; her thoughts had lain firmly with Sirius – and with Mr and Mrs Potter when the shock had worn off – and she was ashamed to admit she'd never even thought about how the whole debacle had affected the other remaining Marauder.

"It can't have been easy for him." Ginny continued softly. "Werewolves have it hard enough without losing his entire family and then to find out that he didn't have to be alone for the last thirteen years …"

"At least he had Mandy and Arabella." Hermione commented softly, falling easily into the way Harry had addressed them outside of class. "You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"Not a soul." Ginny assured her. "I promise. Are you going to talk to my parents about your parents?"

Hermione sighed. "Only if I need to. I don't want to put them out or anything; you know, make them feel like they have to have me next summer."
Logically, she knew that wouldn't be the case, but that was how it would feel, she knew, if Mrs Weasley immediately extended an invitation.

Ginny looked like she wanted to argue, but she just smiled comfortingly and jumped to her feet. "Come on; let's go and help Mum make birthday cakes."

Hermione smiled as well, relieved that Ginny wasn't going to push the subject. "Good idea. Baking always makes me feel better; it's therapeutic. Only if you do it the Muggle way though."

"Oh, Mum always makes birthday cakes the Muggle way." Ginny told her. "She says it adds more love to them."

"It does." Hermione agreed absently. "Strawberry or chocolate …"

As the two girls made their way downstairs, Hermione pushed the feeling of unease to the back of her mind, but it wouldn't disappear, as it very rarely does. What she didn't know was that, in a few weeks time, Harry, and, by default, Sirius, would be getting that very same feeling …
Chapter Three - Dreams and Dreads

During the next few weeks, Hermione realised that Sirius had been right. It wasn't that she'd ever really doubted that, but blindly acting on the word of someone she'd only known for a few weeks wasn't exactly a smart thing to do, even if that someone was your best friend's godfather.

The Weasleys were the kind of family that anyone would want to belong to. Even when sibling arguments erupted – which they frequently did – it was always more fond bickering that full-blown rows.

After a couple of days, Ginny convinced Hermione to tell her brothers about her parents and all five – Percy had been at work and wasn't really the kind of person you could tell something like this anyway – promptly adopted her as an honorary Weasley, just as they already had with Harry. Bill and Charlie had then talked Hermione into telling their parents.

Like she thought, Molly immediately invited her to stay with them the following summer as well, despite Hermione's insistence that she would find other arrangements.

On Sunday evening, the day before the World Cup, Arthur, Fred, George and Ron went to get Harry from the Dursleys via floo.

Hermione was sure the Dursleys wouldn't have an open fireplace, but Arthur had gone to such trouble to get the house hooked up to the network she didn't say anything.

Besides, Harry's aunt and uncle deserved to have people show up in their chimney and have to blast the living room apart, which was exactly what had happened.

As always, Molly outdid herself with dinner that night. Hermione tucked in to chicken-and-ham pie, potatoes and salad, only half listening to the conversations around her. Percy was telling his father about his report, Molly and Bill were arguing yet again about his earring and the length of his hair and Charlie and the twins were discussing the World Cup.

It was while they were finishing up some delicious home-made strawberry ice-cream that Harry fixed Hermione with a stare and said, "It's later."

Hermione rolled her eyes. She had been delaying the inevitable talk about her parents since Harry arrived earlier that day. "For someone who's more cryptic than a crossword sometimes, you've certainly got something about opening up to people." She took a deep breath and told the bowl in front of her – which was somehow easier to look at than Harry's expression – everything that had happened with her father in an undertone.

Even though the other Weasleys knew what had happened, they didn't know about the physical abuse that she'd suffered, because she'd only told Ron and Ginny. By the time she'd finished, his arm was around her shoulders again and he'd abandoned his ice-cream.
"If I ever meet him..." Harry trailed off ominously.

"Get in line, mate." Ron muttered.

Hermione couldn't help but smile at his best friends' protectiveness. "So I decided to do what Sirius suggested and..."

"Hermione!" Harry hissed, nodding almost unnoticeably at Ginny.

"You're about three weeks too late." Ron told him. "Ginny knows."

Hermione sighed. "In my defence, I was a little distraught when I told her."

Harry squeezed her shoulder lightly, before removing his arm. "You won't tell anyone, will you, Gin?"

Ginny mimed doing up a zip across her mouth. "Not a soul. I swear."

"Solemnly swear?" Harry asked and Hermione knew immediately that he wasn't really upset.

"Yeah." Ginny looked a little confused. "Was that a joke? Because, if it was, you might want to warn us in future, so we remember to laugh."

Harry grinned at her. "Inside joke, Gin. We'll explain everything after the World Cup."

"Why not now?" Ginny asked curiously.

"I don't know the Silencing Charm." Harry explained. "I'd rather tell you when we can actually talk about it."

Ginny nodded. "That makes sense."

"Speaking of Sirius..." Hermione searched her pockets and pulled out the photo that Sirius had duplicated. "Long story."

Harry smiled at the picture. "Thanks."

Ron leaned in. "Harry, have you heard from..." he glanced up and down the table "...Padfoot at all?"

"A couple of times." Harry answered. "Big birds though."

Hermione laughed quietly. "Tell me about it. He's written to me a couple of times as well."

"Oh, that's who the other letters were for." Harry nodded. "That makes sense. I wrote to him the day before yesterday, so he might write back while I'm here."

Hermione felt a strange expression rise briefly in the air; worry mixed with...grief? Fear? "You okay, Harry?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Fine."

"No, you're not." Hermione accused.

Harry sighed. "I'll tell you after the Cup, okay?"

"How did you do that?" Ginny whispered.
Hermione paused, wondering how to tell them that she was a classified Dark Creature. She had just 
steeled herself for it, when the adults stood up.

"Time for bed." Molly announced. "You'll be up early tomorrow."

Hermione jumped to her feet, glad for the distraction, and they followed the Weasley matriarch inside 
and up to their rooms. Outside their room, Hermione hugged both boys goodnight and the two girls 
slipped into bed.

"Well?" Ginny asked into the darkness.

Hermione grimaced, knowing her room-mate couldn't see her. "After the Cup."

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"Harry Potter! You do know who he is!" Fudge repeated, loudly for the fifteenth time.

"He's not going to suddenly understand." Ron muttered to Harry. "Show him your scar, why don't 
you?"

Harry self-consciously flattened his hair over his scar. "I'd rather not."

"Harry Potter!"

Hermione stood up suddenly, her head pounding. "Excuse-moi, Monsieur. Parlez-vous 
français?" (Excuse me, Sir. Do you speak French?)

The Bulgarian Minister nodded. "Ah, oui. Je parle anglais aussi, mais votre ministre est un idiot. 
Vous semblez pour avoir un cerveau. Peut-être que vous pourriez traduire, Mademoiselle?" (Ah, 
yes. I speak English also, but your Minister is an idiot. You seem to have a brain. Perhaps you 
could translate, Miss?)

"Certainement." Hermione turned to Fudge. "Sir, he doesn't speak a word of English, but he's fluent 
in French. Would you like me to translate?" She didn't intend to volunteer, but Fudge was being 
unnecessarily loud and her head wasn't thanking him for it, with the already heightened emotions 
around them.

Despite the annoyance in the air, Fudge sighed in relief. "Thank you, young lady. I'm no good with 
languages; no good at all. I really need old Barty for this.

Hermione turned back to the Bulgarian Minister – Mr. Oblansk – and introduced herself and Harry, 
then, at Fudge's request, everyone else in the box. Mr. Oblansk seemed to be entertaining himself by 
insulting everyone in French, except for the Weasleys, whom he seemed to like, and Hermione had 
to fight not to laugh.

It wasn't long, however, before an unwelcome – to her, at least – visitor entered the box: Lucius 
Malfoy and his wife and son.

Hermione barely heard Lucius introducing his wife and son to Fudge; she was focusing on the 
emotions around him.

He obviously felt himself better than Fudge – then again, who wasn't – and, oddly enough, there was 
very little affection towards his wife and son.

Mrs. Malfoy – Narcissa, Hermione remembered from her extra reading in the library, one of Sirius's
cousins – felt no affection towards her husband at all, but seemed to dote on her son.

And Draco …

Hermione wasn't sure whether to be worried or relieved that he appeared to hate his father, although he did still love his mother.

She was shaken back to reality when Fudge addressed her.

"I'm sorry, young lady; I didn't catch your name. A charming young lady offered to translate for me. This is Minister Oblansk of Bulgaria."

Hermione didn't bother telling Fudge her name; she knew he didn't really want to know. Seeing Lucius sneering at her, she focused her energy on keeping her expression blank instead.

"Monsieur Oblansk, permettez-moi de présenter Lucius Malfoy, sa femme, Narcissa, et leur fils, Draco." (Mr. Oblansk, allow me to introduce Lucius Malfoy, his wife, Narcissa, and their son, Draco.)

Mr. Oblansk shook their hands and turned to Hermione. "Mademoiselle, pourquoi est-il ici? Il est un Mangemort. Même je sais ceci. Et pourquoi pas il vous aime?" (Miss, why is he here? He is a Death Eater. Even I know this. And why doesn't he like you?)

Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Lucius and Draco looking lost, but Narcissa seemed … worried?

Hermione tested the air. Not worry, but an odd kind of triumph.

Clearly, she understood, but Hermione had no idea what one of the words meant. Hang on. "Manger" is "to eat" and "Mort" is "death". So "Mangemort" must mean "Death Eater".

"Oui, il était, mais maintenant il est un bon ami de Monsieur Fudge." (Yes, he was, but now he is a good friend of Mr. Fudge.)

Hermione paused, wondering how to answer the second question. She glanced at Narcissa. The emotions around her led Hermione to believe that she could trust her.

Should she stain the whole family in Mr. Oblansk's eyes because of the head?

"Je ne sais pas pourquoi il ne m'aime pas." (I don't know why he doesn't like me.)

Surprise and gratitude flared in the air and on Narcissa's face for a second, before her expression was back to one of carefully schooled neutrality.

Just then, Ludo Bagman bounded into the Top Box. Fudge thanked Hermione casually and sat down, but Mr. Oblansk shook her hand once more. "Merci beaucoup encore, Mademoiselle. Appréciez le jeu." (Thank you again, Miss. Enjoy the game.)

"Merci. Et vous aussi." (Thank you. And you as well.)

Hermione bowed her head respectfully and re-joined Harry and the Weasleys, grinning at the look of shock on their faces.

"Since when do you speak French?" Ginny asked.
Hermione laughed. "My cousin lives in France."

"Everyone ready?" Bagman asked, his face shining like a large Edam.

"Minister, ready to go?"

"Ready when you are, Ludo." Fudge said comfortably.

Ludo directed his wand at his throat. "Sonorous." When he spoke again, his voice carried over the roar of sound filling the stadium. "Ladies and gentlemen … welcome! Welcome to the final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup!"

The spectators cheered and screamed. Special flags waved, adding the two national anthems to the racket. The giant board opposite the Top Box, currently advertising Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans, wiped clean and flashed **Bulgaria: Zero; Ireland: Zero** across the crowd.

"And now, without further ado," Bagman announced, "allow me to introduce the Bulgarian National Team Mascots!"

While the right hand side of the stadium roared their approval, Arthur leaned forwards. "I wonder what they've brought. Ah!" He whipped his glasses off and wiped them hurriedly. "Veela!"

Hermione and Ginny exchanged a confused look as a hundred Veela glided onto the pitch; women with pale blonde hair, who were just too beautiful to be human. And then they began to dance.

Ginny shrugged at Hermione. Neither of the two girls could see what was so amazing about the Veela, except they were clearly more attractive than either of them.

Hermione was momentarily distracted by a note being pushed into her hand from behind her. She looked back, but no one seemed to be watching to see if she'd received it.

She shoved the note into her pocket, before glancing at Harry to tell him what had happened, but the note was instantly forgotten as her blood ran cold.

Arthur, Bill, Charlie, Percy, Fred and George had their hands over their ears, but Ron and Harry hadn't bothered.

Ron was in a spring-board position and Harry was standing with one leg on the wall of the Box, as though he was about to jump.

"Harry, what are you doing?" Hermione asked in alarm.

The Veela had stopped dancing and the stadium was filled with angry shouts. Harry shook his head slowly, taking his leg off the wall, but stayed standing. Ron was mindlessly shredding the shamrock on his hat, staring open-mouthed at the Veela.

Arthur tugged the hat out of Ron's hand with a smile. "You'll be wanting that once Ireland have their say."

"Huh?" Ron asked eloquently, still gawping.

Hermione tutted and tugged Harry back into his seat, hitting him over the back of his head for good measure.

"Honestly!"
"And now!" Bagman roared. "The Irish National Team Mascots!"

What appeared to be a green and gold comet came hurtling into the stadium and circled it once, before separating into two smaller comets. As the leprechauns flew up above the stadium to form a giant shamrock, gold showed over the crowd.

Ron shoved a fistful of gold coins into Harry's hand. "There you go! For the Omnioculars! Now you've got to get me a Christmas present!"

The shamrock dissolved and the leprechauns settled on the other side of the pitch to watch the game.

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Hermione took a deep breath and managed to block out the majority of the emotions around her. "Let the games begin."

The morning after the World Cup, the Weasleys, Harry and Hermione took the earliest Portkey they could back to Ottery St. Catchpole.

"They'll be talking about this one for years." Ludo Bagman had said, after Bulgaria's shock victory – and they certainly would, though not for the right reasons.

The team mascots had started a brawl on the pitch, a group of wizards and witches – who may or may not have been the Death Eaters who escaped Azkaban – had kidnapped a family of Muggles and gone on the rampage, and the Dark Mark – Voldemort's sign – had been fired into the sky metres from where Hermione, Ron and Harry had been standing.

But the thing that preyed on Hermione's mind happened in the woods around the camp site while they were hiding from the rioting crowd …

_The coloured lanterns that had lit the path earlier in the evening had been extinguished. Figures were blundering through the trees; children were crying; shouts and cries were reverberating around them. Hermione felt Harry grab her hand, her head almost bursting with the swirling sea of emotion, as they were buffeted around by terrified campers._

_Then they heard Ron cry out in pain._

"What happened?" Hermione asked, her stomach feeling as though it had disappeared. "Ron, where are you? Oh, this is stupid! _Lumos!_" Illuminating her wand, she directed its beam across the path.

Ron was sprawled on the ground. "Tripped over a tree root." He explained irritably, climbing to his feet.

"Well, with feet that size, hard not to." A voice drawled.

_They all spun around to see Draco Malfoy, leaning casually against a tree. He was watching the carnage out on the field, a smirk on his face. Despite this, Hermione could sense nothing but fear and disgust coming from him. Putting this aside to think about later, she grabbed Harry's hand before it could reach for his wand._

"Oh, fuck off!" Ron snapped.

"Language, Weasley." Draco smirked. "Hadn't you better be hurrying along, now? You wouldn't like her spotted, would you?" He nodded at Hermione.
At the same moment, a blast like a bomb sounded from the field and the air momentarily lit up green.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hermione asked defiantly, inwardly marvelling at how steady her voice was. She could sense concern in the air...but was that Draco's himself or were Ron and Harry's emotions over-riding his?

"Granger, they're after Muggles." Draco elaborated. "Do you want to be showing off your knickers in mid-air? Because if you do, hang around...they're moving this way and it would give us all a laugh."

Disgust again. Harry and Ron's? No, Hermione thought. It was self-disgust. Could it be that Draco only acting like this because of his father?

"Hermione's a witch!" Harry snarled, moving in front of her protectively.

"Have it your own way, Potter." Draco grinned. "If you think they can't spot a Mudblood..." the self-disgust escalated briefly "...stay where you are."

"You watch your mouth!" Ron shouted.

Hermione grabbed his arm. "Never mind, Ron."

Another bang sounded from the other side of the trees, causing several people to scream.

Draco chuckled. "Scare easily, don't they? I suppose your daddy told you all to hide? What's he up to – trying to rescue the Muggles?"

"Where're your parents?" Harry snapped, his temper flaring; Hermione put a calming hand on his shoulder. "Out there wearing masks, are they?"

Draco smirked. "Well, if they were, I wouldn't be likely to tell you, would I?" He turned his gaze back to Hermione, seeming to read the expression of concern and curiosity on her face. He was still smirking maliciously, but the emotion swarming around him was...Hermione couldn't place it. "Come on." She said uneasily. "Let's go and find the others."

"Keep your head down, Granger." Draco called with a slight sneer in his voice.

It was quite unnerving, realising that she had misjudged someone who she had gone to school with for three years, especially someone who regularly inserted himself into their lives without invitation or provocation.

How many other people have I done that to?

Mrs Weasley was, understandably, frantic by the time they arrived home and it was only once she'd been given a cup of tea with a shot of firewhiskey in it and Arthur and Percy had gone to work that Hermione had a chance to talk to the others.

Harry, Ron and Ginny followed her up to the boys' room and the trio told Ginny about the events in the woods, elaborating where they hadn't the night before. Like Harry and Ron, Ginny was intrigued at the speed with which Hermione had managed to drag Harry and Ron away from Draco – which was usually at least a three-person job (one to talk Harry down and two to grab hold of Ron).

"That's a good point, Hermione." Harry agreed. "You've never managed to get us to do that before."
"I'd say it wasn't the time, but I'd be lying." Hermione sighed. "I'm an empath."

Ginny and Ron's expressions didn't change, but their emotions changed from curiosity to worry laced with panic.

Hermione collapsed on Harry's bed. "Come on, guys; I'm still me."

"What is an empath?" Harry asked.

"A Dark Creature that feeds of other people's emotions." Ginny answered quietly. "A bit like a Dementor, but doesn't focus on happy thoughts."

Hermione laughed. "Ginny, that's ridiculous! Empaths don't feed on emotions!"

"They don't?" Ron asked. "That's what the legends say."

"Yeah, well, the legends say that werewolves eat small children even when it's not the full moon, don't they?" Harry frowned. "Besides Hermione's not dark."

Hermione beamed at him, as the panic in the air receded rapidly.

"Of course she's not." Ginny agreed. "I'm sorry, Hermione – I should have known those stories weren't true."

"Yeah, we should." Ron seconded, his ears bright red.

Harry sighed wearily. "We still haven't established what an empath actually is."

Hermione chuckled and told them everything she'd read and found out, before explaining what had happened in the woods. "Malfoy wasn't making any sense."

"Does he ever?" Ron asked blankly.

Hermione stifled a snigger. "I mean his emotions weren't making any sense. At the match, it was like he hates his father."

Ron frowned. "How can you hate your own father? Besides, Hermione, we were there in the woods with you, remember? He loved what was happening."

Hermione shook her head. "He was scared, Ron. When he warned me …"

"Threatened you, you mean." Ron growled.

"Self-loathing." Hermione corrected. "He was genuinely concerned and he was telling us that his father was in that crowd. Lucius Malfoy knows who I am; he would know I was Muggle-born, even if the others didn't. Oh!"

"What?" Harry asked sharply.

"In the Top Box, someone passed me a note while everyone else was distracted by the Veela." Hermione rummaged through her pockets, and finally found the crumpled piece of parchment. "Tell SB I'm sorry. He was right. NBM."

Ginny's eyebrows rose into her hairline. "What?"

"Well …" Hermione frowned. "SB … Those are Sirius's initials."
"Wait, someone knows …" Harry's face paled. "What if …"

Hermione held up a hand. "NBM – Narcissa Malfoy."

Ron snorted. "What's her middle name? Betty?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "That's not a middle name, Ron; it's a maiden name. Narcissa Black-Malfoy. She's one of Sirius's cousins."

"She is?" Harry asked blankly.

"What was Sirius right about?" Ginny asked.

Hermione shrugged. "He'll know."

"But what if they're watching?" Harry protested.

"We'll send it with a school owl." Ginny said. "They'd be less conspicuous than Hedwig. Speaking of Hedwig, why'd you ask Mum if she'd come with a letter?"

"There's something I haven't told you." Harry admitted. "On Saturday morning, I woke up with my scar hurting."

Hermione gasped and Ron looked dumbstruck.

"It might just be me." Ginny spoke up. "But what's so terrible?"

"The last time my scar hurt, Voldemort was at Hogwarts." Harry explained in an undertone, causing Ginny to turn white.

"But…But You-Know-Who couldn't have been near you, could he?" Ron asked.

Harry shook his head. "I don't think he was in Privet Drive, but I had this weird dream, about Voldemort and someone else and they were talking about a plan. I couldn't figure out what it was supposed to be. But they'd definitely killed someone."

Ginny gasped. "Tell someone!"

"Who?" Ron asked. "Who is going to believe…?"

"Write to Dumbledore." Hermione interrupted. "Did you? Is that why you wanted to know if Hedwig had come?"

"No, I wrote to Sirius." Harry corrected.

Ron's face immediately cleared. "Good idea! He'll know what to do!"

"But I haven't heard back yet." Harry sighed. "I'm worried."

"About Sirius?" Ginny asked sympathetically.

"No." Harry sighed again. "They were plotting to kill someone else. Me."

Hermione and Ginny looked worried, but Ron clapped him on the back. "It was just a dream! A nightmare!"

"Yeah, but was it?" Harry asked, turning to look out of the window at the brightening sky. "It's a
weird coincidence, isn't it? My scar hurts and, three days later, Death Eaters are on the march and Voldemort's sign appears in the sky for the first time in thirteen years."

"Don't say the name!" Ron hissed.

"It was awful." Ginny shuddered. "And it's only a name." 

"How can you say it?" Ron asked. "And how did you know what the Dark Mark was?"

Ginny flinched. "Tom already had that sign made when he was sixteen."

Harry gave her a comforting smile and turned back to Ron. "And remember what Trelawney said at the end of last year?"

Hermione gave a derisive snort. "Oh, Harry, you aren't going to believe anything that old fraud says?"

"You weren't there." Harry reminded her. "It was different. You didn't hear her. She was in some kind of trance; a real one. She said that the Dark Lord would rise again – greater and more terrible than before – and he would manage this because his servant would return to him…and that night Wormtail escaped."

Hermione changed the subject hopefully. "Speaking of prophecies, what about this dream, Harry? Jess's, I mean."

"Who?" Ginny asked.

Ron explained about Jessica's propensity for true/prophetic dreams while Harry searched his trunk, eventually pulling out piece of Muggle paper, half-covered in neat handwriting.

Hermione took it and read it through. "The pits of dark are seeded, this warning must be heeded, touch of cup brings respite's end, and love and strength are keys to mend." She pulled a face. "You're right, Harry. This is much more cryptic than the last one. Although you did tell me that one in hindsight, which may have made it a bit easier for us. Anything else?"

Harry sighed. "Well, yes and no. She said that she couldn't see anything, just hear it. It was like a voice talking in her ear, but before and after that poem was recited, the voice was too quiet to really hear, except a few words that were shouted." He pointed to the next line.

"Red … rat … grim … heed warning …" Hermione pulled a face "… betrayal … end respite … cup." She sighed. "I honestly have nothing."

Ginny held out her hand. "Can I try?"

Hermione shrugged. "Knock yourself out."

Ginny ran her gaze over the page several times. "When did she have it?"

Harry frowned thoughtfully. "June, I think."

"So about the time you found out about Sirius." Ginny concluded, frowning at the page. "Is that 'grim' with a capital letter? Because if it is," she continued, not giving Harry a chance to respond, "then it could refer to everyone's favourite fugitive."

"How?" Ron asked blankly.
Hermione sighed wearily. "Grim without a capital letter is an adjective, Ron, meaning dismal or gloomy. Grim with a capital letter is a proper noun, meaning a large black dog. As in the kind Trelawney insisted was following Harry all last year."

"And he was." Harry put in slightly smugly. "Makes that prophecy seem a bit more genuine, doesn't it?"

Hermione just rolled her eyes. "You're right, Gin. And running with that line, the red would be your family – redheads – and the rat would be Wormtail." She stood up from Harry's bed and began pacing, which wasn't easy in the small space. "Harry, did Jess write those words down in the order she heard them?"

"I think so." Harry confirmed. "Why?"

Hermione sighed. "Because 'heed warning', coupled with that poem, seems to refer to something that's going to happen. Now, if the word 'betrayal' came first, then it could refer to Wormtail. But it came afterwards." Her gaze swept over them, resting on Ron a fraction of a second longer than Ginny and Harry. "There may well be a split here."

"Never." Harry stated simply.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Harry," she said gently, "don't you think that's what the Marauders once said?"

"Come on, Hermione." Ron rolled his eyes. "None of us is going to betray him to You-Know-Who."

"There are different kinds of betrayal, Ron." Ginny said quietly.

Ron looked uncomfortable. "Well, maybe. But some of those words are repeated in that poem. What cup's it talking about? And what's a respite?"

"It's a temporary suspension of something." Hermione recited.

Ron shook his head. "I swear you're a walking dictionary. In English, please?"

Ginny rolled her eyes and swatted her brother on the head. "Honestly, Ron. A respite is when there's a pause in something. In this case, this temporary holiday you three have had from danger is going to end, and you'll be right back in the thick of it."

"Story of my life." Harry muttered. "Do you think it means the Quidditch World Cup? Could it be a warning about the Death Eaters?"

"I don't think so." Hermione sighed. "That first line – the pits of dark are seeded – I think it's talking about the prophecy, Harry."

"Oh, so you believe in Trelawney now then." Harry teased.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I believe Jess, Harry. Besides, what happened at the Cup wasn't personal. All through the summer, I've felt that something awful's going to happen, and I still have that feeling."

As the four sank into silence, Hermione sank back onto the bed and closed her eyes. As much as it pained her to admit it, she knew she was right. This ride was only just beginning.
Chapter Four - Revelations

The rest of the summer passed in a blur of activity, Ginny’s birthday and trying to figure out how possessions had spread across the house so thoroughly. Illusions to something happening at Hogwarts were made several times, but, unfortunately, by September 1st, they were no closer to figuring out what this mysterious event was.

Hermione really wasn’t that bothered about what was going to happen. She was far too distracted by Jess’s dream, by Malfoy’s emotions and by Narcissa’s note.

At Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters, Fred made one last-ditch effort. “Tell us what’s happening at Hogwarts!” He called out of the window as the train began to move.

But Molly, Charlie and Bill just waved and, before the Express had rounded the corner, they had disappeared.

Disappointed, Fred and George disappeared to find Lee Jordan and Ginny wandered off with her friends. Hermione, Ron and Harry found an empty compartment and stowed their luggage away, trying to ignore the rain pounding on the window.

Ron grumbled something under his breath, but Hermione didn’t hear what he said; she was too busy staring at the horrible maroon, lacy…thing that he’d thrown over Pig’s cage in an attempt to shut the tiny owl up. “What in Merlin’s name are those?”

“My dress robes.” Ron answered, glaring at her as if daring her to make a comment.

Hermione nodded with a slight smirk. “They’re interesting.”

“Oh, shut up!” Ron snapped.

Hermione began to retort that her own weren’t exactly the epitome of fashion when…

“Ssh!” Harry hissed suddenly.

A familiar voice was floating through the open door. “…Father actually considered sending me to Durmstrang rather than Hogwarts.”

Now she was aware of it, Hermione could hear the mocking tone in his voice when he talked about ‘Mudbloods’ and quoted his father’s rather scathing view of their headmaster.

Thoroughly irritated that she didn’t know what was going on with Draco Malfoy, Hermione got up and slid the door closed. “So he thinks Durmstrang would have suited him, does he? I wish he had gone, then we wouldn’t have to put up with him.” She muttered, feeling uncharacteristically vindictive.
This, of course, sparked a conversation about different wizarding schools and Hermione took it upon herself to explain the different methods of protection the schools could use.

Ron, of course, wasn’t paying any attention. “Ah, think of the possibilities. It would’ve been so easy to push Malfoy off a glacier and make it look like an accident. Shame his mother likes him.”

Hermione bit back a disapproving remark and went back to staring out of the window. The further north they went, the heavier the rain became. By mid afternoon, the lanterns had been lit just to allow them to see clearly. Seamus, Dean and Neville had joined them and the boys were sitting among empty sweet wrappers, talking nothing but Quidditch.

Uninterested with the conversation, Hermione was buried in *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4*. However, she wasn’t reading it.

Instead, she was composing a letter to one of her year-mates and trying to disguise her handwriting. She’d have to be careful, though; Harry and Ron might trust her judgement, but they still wouldn’t be happy about her corresponding with Draco Malfoy, of all people. She vaguely heard Neville telling the others how lucky they were, because his grandmother hadn’t let him go, and saw, out of the corner of her eye, Ron showing him the model of Viktor Krum.

“**Saw him right up close too.**” Ron was saying excitedly. “Show him what he gave you, Harry! Hermione translated for the Bulgarian Minister.” He explained to the other three. “He introduced them.”

“How’d you end up doing that?” Dean asked, when Hermione glanced up at her name.

Hermione turned slightly pink. It hadn’t been a conscious decision. “He was giving me a headache.” She grimaced. “It just sort of happened. He spoke English anyway – just didn’t like Fudge.”

Over the sniggering, Harry pulled a Snitch out of his trunk. “Look.”

Dean gasped. “That’s not …”

“That is!” Seamus gaped. “He gave you the game-Snitch?!?”

Harry nodded, a broad grin on his face.

Hermione buried her face back in her book, hiding a frown. It wasn’t the action that bugged her, but the exchange that followed …

“**Viktor, I would like you to meet Hermione Granger and Harry Potter.**”

**Viktor**’s eyes widened as he shook their hands. “**Harry Potter, you are indeed a legend.**”

**Harry** looked slightly star-struck. “**Thank you. That Wronski Feint, by the way …**”

“**Don’t even think about it.**” Hermione told him.

“**I already get a heart attack every time you play, without that added in.**”

“**You are a Seeker as well?**” Viktor asked. “**Are you any good?**”

Harry shrugged modestly. “**Well …**”
“He’s amazing.” Hermione answered. “The only time he’s lost a game is when he’s been unconscious. Even with a jinxed broom and a cursed bludger.”

Viktor looked impressed and pressed the Snitch into Harry’s hand.

“In that case, ve may vell be playing each other in a few years.”

As the Bulgarian team filed out, Harry turned to Hermione. “Do you realise what just happened?!?”

Hermione nodded. “You just got the game Snitch! Let me see?”

Harry held it out. “How cool is this?”

“So cool!” Ron answered from behind him. “I am so jealous!”

Harry laughed. “Well, I’m glad you can tell me that. Apparently, when you keep stuff like that bottled up, it can cause problems.”

Hermione winced slightly – Ron may have been joking, but there was definitely envy bubbling away beneath the surface. She just hoped it stayed there.

Hermione sighed, pushing her concern about Ron out of her mind, and focused her attention back on disguising her handwriting. Now the only problem lay with actually getting the note to him.

Shouldn’t be too hard.

“We were right up in the Top Box …” Ron was saying.

“For the first and last time in your life, Weasley.”

Hermione glanced up and suppressed a smirk. Draco Malfoy and his two cronies, Crabbe and Goyle, had predictably appeared in the doorway.

“Don’t remember asking you to join us, Malfoy.” Harry said coolly, putting the Snitch back in his trunk.

“Weasley, what is that?” Draco asked, pointing at Pig’s cage. Ron’s dress robes were still covering it, one lacy sleeve swaying with the motion of the train.

While he was distracted, Hermione flicked her wand and floated the disguised note into the pocket of his robes. Trouble with your father? You’re not alone. A friend.

Ron turned red and tried to stuff the robes out of sight, but Draco was too quick for him and grabbed them.

“Look at this!” He held them up to show Crabbe and Goyle. “Weasley, you weren’t thinking of wearing these, were you? I mean, they were very fashionable in about 1890 …”

“Oh course he wasn’t.” Hermione cut in, before Ron could say anything. “He’s going to magically alter them. Just because he has manners and isn’t about to insult a great-aunt when she sends him gifts doesn’t mean he’s stupid.”

Draco raised an eyebrow at her and threw the dress robes back. “So, going to enter, Weasley?”
Going to try and bring a bit of glory to the family name? There’s money involved as well, you know …”

“What are you talking about?” Ron snapped.

“Are you going to enter?” Draco repeated. “I suppose you will, Potter; you never miss a chance to show off, do you?” A smile spread across his face. “You don’t know, don’t you? Father heard about it from Cornelius Fudge himself, but then he’s always associated with top people at the Ministry.”

“Oh, you must be talking about what Mr. Bagman was on about.” Hermione said coolly. “Too bad Mr. Crouch stopped him before he could tell us.”

She turned to the other three boys. “Apparently, it’s ‘classified information, until such time as the Ministry sees fit to release it’. Clearly, some people have more respect for Ministry guidelines than others. But, in answer to your question, Malfoy, no, I don’t think any of us will enter. The rules have been changed and the only thing that would make Mrs. Weasley that relieved would be if we couldn’t enter.

So thank you for your concern; good day.” She watched smugly as the three Slytherins walked out, stunned shock on their faces.

Ron stood up and slid the door shut so hard that the glass fell out and shattered.

“Ron!” Hermione snapped reproachfully. She pulled her wand out and pointed it at the glass. “Repairo!” The glass flew back into the door.

“Well, making it look like he knows everything and we don’t …” Ron snarled. “Father’s always associated with the top people at the Ministry. Dad could’ve got a promotion any time he likes; he just likes it where he is!”

“Of course he does.” Hermione soothed.

“I want to know why he hasn’t made any comment yet about you undermining his father in the Top Box.” Harry frowned.

“With the Bulgarian Minister, do you mean?” Ron checked. “I was wondering that. Unless he doesn’t care.”

Hermione laughed. “I’m a Muggle-born, Ron; of course he’ll care. At least his father will.”

“There’s something off about that.” Seamus agreed. “Any ideas?”

“A few.” Hermione admitted cautiously. “But I’d rather keep it to myself for now.” She glanced at Ron. “Just don’t let him get to you.”

“Him! Get to me! As if!” Ron picked up a Cauldron Cake and squashed it into a pulp.

***

Two weeks later Hermione found herself walking down a corridor she had never been down before, thinking over everything. Maybe she was taking the house-elf thing too far. She still didn’t know everything about the wizarding world; maybe Ron was right.
“They’re used to it!”

She rolled her eyes. *That doesn’t make it right.*

Still, maybe the library would yield evidence that house-elf magic worked that way. Maybe she could just protest about how some people treated them … yes, that was a good idea.

But she couldn’t still shake the feeling that something bad was going to happen

Maybe it was Hagrid’s new pets; Blast-Ended Skrewts. Hermione wouldn’t have minded this nearly as much if it weren’t for the fact that she couldn’t find any mention of the damn things anywhere in the library.

Maybe it was the Tournament, she reasoned. Maybe she was still caught up in the ‘death toll’.

The rules had changed; Dumbledore wouldn’t allow students to get hurt on Hogwarts grounds anyway. But the prize …

It wasn’t the money that worried her; it was the cup. “*Touch of cup brings respite’s end.*” Of course, it could also have had something to do with Moody teaching them about the Unforgivable Curses …

*Hermione…*

Hermione started as her name echoed through the corridor. *Who said that? And where am I?*

Tentatively, she kept walking, glancing around her. A door stood open at the end of the corridor and she peered around it. Four people, shimmering like ghosts, were standing in front of her.

“Holy Merlin…” Hermione whispered, taking a few steps forward. A gust of wind blew the door shut behind her and she jumped.

“Hermione Jane, welcome.” One of the men greeted solemnly.

“Er, thank you, sir.” Hermione curtsied, having read a lot of period stories when she was younger.

“May I ask who you are and why I’m here?” Wherever ‘here’ is.

The four smiled at her, instantly putting her at ease.

“You may.” The man agreed. “Please, take a seat.”

“Thank you.” Hermione seated herself in the chair that appeared behind and took a good look at the people in front of her, under the cover of adjusting her robes.

The man who had spoken had wild red hair and a beard; he reminded her a little of the lion Aslan in the Narnia stories in that there was an air of strength around him that made one respect him and yet he seemed kind and gentle. The other man was bald, but with a long beard that almost reached the floor.

Of the two women, one was tall and willowy with long dark hair, the other was short and plump with tightly curled red hair. She’d seen them somewhere before, or maybe she hadn’t, but either way, they seemed familiar.

“As to our identities,” the dark-haired woman began, “you know of us, but have never met us.”

And suddenly, Hermione did know who they were, as though she’d known all along. “Lady Ravenclaw …” She whispered. “Lady Hufflepuff. Lord Gryffindor. Lord Slytherin. May I enquire
“as to why you are appearing to me, of all people?”

“You may.” Rowena smiled. “But you can drop the formality, my dear. We wanted to warn you.”

“Warn me?” Hermione asked.

“You’re an empath.” Salazar told her. “More importantly, you’re the first pure-of-heart empath to pass through these doors. You’ll be more sensitive to the magic of the castle, because we put some of ourselves into her. Unlike your empathy, you can’t shut this out. It will be painful, but we have no doubt that you can handle it. Hogwarts needs someone to listen to her.”

“We sorted students, because there were certain qualities we knew how to nurture.” Helga continued. “Hogwarts is no longer united. Our history has become so warped, you can no longer distinguish truth from rumour.”

Hermione swallowed hard. “As much as I’d like to, I don’t think I can unite the houses on my own.”

“Of course not.” Godric agreed. “But you can make a start. You already have.”

Hermione frowned in thought. Then it hit her. “You mean the note? But I don’t even know if he read that.”

“It’s still a start.” Salazar told her. “Now we’ll give you a tool to deal with the pain of listening to Hogwarts in a minute. First of all … Rowena?”

Helga smiled faintly at Hermione. “Rowena’s a Seer. Thankfully, it was never passed down to her descendants.”

Rowena had stiffened; she closed her eyes and her voice became flat. “The true leader of the light is hidden … her mind is locked away, but her gift is not … answers shall be revealed in the place where the fire maid almost met her doom …” Her eyes flew open and she started coughing harshly. “I hate it when that happens.”

Hermione pulled a piece of parchment from her bag and scribbled the prophecy down. “Won’t the Ministry now have a copy of this?”

“I’m dead, remember?” Rowena winked at her. “What they don’t know can’t hurt them.”

Hermione smiled. “I … er … I don’t suppose you know what this all means.”

Helga laughed. “Oh, I like this one. No, dear, you’ll have to figure it out yourself. As for how we’re here, we put so much magic into the school that we can’t really leave it. But we’re not ghosts, so we may only be seen by empaths and our heirs, if we choose to appear to them. You’re the first, actually, now I come to think about it.”

“Now to dull the pain. Stand up, my dear.” Godric stated, waving his hand. “Think the words Animagus Transformo.”

Hermione did as instructed and heard a small pop, similar to when Sirius turned into Padfoot. Her vision appeared to have changed, her sense of smell was sharper and her posture was different; she was now crouched on all fours.

Helga conjured a full-length mirror and Hermione saw that she was now a dark-brown lioness with chocolate-brown eyes. She concentrated on her human form, hoping it would turn her back, and, with a soft pop, it did. “Thank you, sir.”
“And now that you’ve transformed once, you won’t need the incantation next time.” Salazar told her kindly. “Ordinarily, we would have advised you to study the transformation progress first, but with the other schools arriving and the wards being lowered, you really don’t have the time.”

Hermione couldn’t help herself. “Sir, I have to ask … don’t you hate Muggle-borns?”

Rowena and Helga exchanged a mysterious smile, but Salazar shook his head. “I never hated Muggle-borns, Hermione. Given the circumstances at the time, I did suggest that maybe Muggle-borns should be taught in a different school for the first year to introduce them to the wizarding world without putting the rest of us at risk.”

“We disagreed because there was already tension between purebloods and Muggle-borns.” Godric sighed. “We thought it would cause more of a problem. One young girl ran away after one term because she was bullied – not for being Muggle-born, but because she was a lot more intelligent than everyone else.”

Hermione felt a pang of sympathy for the girl. She knew how lonely that could be.

“Her family formed a mob and came after us.” Helga continued, resting a gentle hand on Salazar’s shoulder. “They couldn’t get through the wards, of course, but Salazar’s Muggle-born wife was returning from a trip and they killed her, and their unborn daughter.”

Hermione gasped in horror, any sympathy dissipating in an instant. “Sweet Merlin!”

“I know.” Rowena agreed heavily. “We were all shocked. Elizabeth was a wonderful young woman and it was an honour to have known her. That was when we developed the Memory Charm to …”

“You developed that?” Hermione asked. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Rowena smiled at her. “It’s fine, Hermione. Yes, that was us. We began using it on students who decided to leave. Immoral, maybe, but we had the other students to think of. But after that, Salazar left the school to travel the world.”

“Wait, so there was no great argument?” Hermione asked, remembering the story Professor Binns had told them.

Salazar chuckled. “My dear girl, I have argued no more with my friends and colleagues than any other wizard. I assure you that any reports of any altercation have been grossly exaggerated.”

Hermione was now very confused. “But what about the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets?”

“I did build the chamber, that’s true.” Salazar confirmed. “I felt we should have a private library, but never got around to telling the others where to find it.”

“Oh how to get into it.” Rowena muttered darkly. “It was my castle.”

Salazar shrugged. “You offered. But I certainly did not put any basilisk in there. That was courtesy of my charming great-grandson.”

“Of course, that’s when the rumours started.” Hermione murmured.

At that moment, the air around her began to shimmer and she jumped.

“A warning. We’ve kept you long enough, my dear.” Rowena said softly. “Tell only those you trust of your encounter with us.”
“Of course.” Hermione agreed shakily. *As if anyone else would believe me.*

The room brightened for a moment, making her shield her eyes. When the light had vanished, so had the four founders.

Hermione picked up her bag and left the room, almost in a daze. Had that just been a figment of her imagination?

As she recapped the conversation she’d just had, trying to find something that might tell her that it was all a practical joke, she walked straight into the twins, who caught her before she hit the ground.

“Careful, Mya.”

“Sorry.” Hermione murmured, glancing around and trying to place her location. “Caught in my thoughts.”

“House-elves again?” Fred asked with a sigh. “They’re all happy here, Mya. Ask them.”

“I would.” Hermione told him, glad of something to take her mind off the meeting. “But I can’t find any.”

Fred and George exchanged a loaded glance, before the latter grabbed her arm and steered her down a corridor into the Entrance Hall, then down a flight of stairs into a stone corridor towards a painting of a fruit bowl. “Gred, if you would?”

“Certainly, Forge.” Fred reached out a hand and tickled the pear in the painting. The pear giggled and turned into a handle, which Fred seized and pulled, opening a door into a large kitchen. Five tables were placed exactly like the house tables; Hermione assumed the food was placed on them down here and sent up.

“House elves.” George called. “Could I have your attention please?”

The chatter and noise in the kitchen quietened.

“Thanks.” Fred grinned. “Hermione here doesn’t quite understand the wizarding tradition of house-elves at the moment. Are you all happy here?”

“Oh, yes, sirs, miss.” One of the house-elves spoke up. “We is very happy.”

House-elves throughout the room nodded vigorously.

“And you’re well-treated, aren’t you?” George added, sitting down.

More nods.

Hermione sighed in relief and caught sight of the twins’ faces. “Alright, I’ll stop. I guess it’s just because the only two house-elves I’ve ever met weren’t treated very well by their families … but I suppose that’s just from my point of view.”

“Sometimes, miss,” the house-elf who had spoken before said hesitantly, “sometimes, miss, masters are cruel and some of us have family who is treated very badly miss, but clothes is a big dishonour, miss.”

Hermione sat down. “What if …” She hesitated. “What if someone could make it so that people had to treat their house-elves well? Would that be a good thing or a bad thing?”
“A good thing, miss.” The house-elf answered. “But not if we was given clothes.”

“What about a uniform?” Fred asked, sounding interested. “You may be on to something, Mya. I don’t think a lot of wizards even know how house-elves became … well, house-elves. Do you know, Kady?”

The house-elf nodded hard. “Oh, yes, sir. We is told of our history by our mothers and they by their mothers.”

“Could…Could you tell us?” Hermione asked. “That is, if you haven’t got work to do.”

Kady looked delighted. “Oh, no, miss. No witch or wizard has ever wanted to know our history before, miss!”

“We couldn’t have some of those éclairs while you’re telling us, could we?” George asked hopefully.

Several house-elves appeared next to him with a tray and the three Gryffindors settled down to hear a story that very few wizards cared about.

***

After the trip to the kitchens, Fred and George escorted Hermione to the library, before disappearing off to do…Merlin knows what. Hermione did a bit more research and found out that there was nothing in wizarding laws about treating house-elves fairly. She tried to find out how to go about getting a law introduced, but there was nothing in the library about the Wizengamot or – when she tried to satisfy her curiosity about the heirs – the Hogwarts founders.

After she had browsed the shelves for half an hour, Madam Pince came over to her. “Miss Granger, what are you looking for?”

Hermione sighed. “Anything about the Hogwarts founders or the Wizengamot.”

Madam Pince raised an eyebrow. “Professor Dumbledore had all books like that removed several years ago. Come to think about it, I think it was the summer before you came. Yes, it was, because Professor McGonagall and I were rather annoyed about it and we had a good chat about that and the fact that Harry Potter would be attending in September, because everything that even mentioned the Potter family was removed as well.”

“Why were the books removed?” Hermione asked.

“I don’t know.” Madam Pince admitted. “Professor Dumbledore never told me. If it’s absolutely necessary, _Flourish and Blotts_ take owl orders.”

“Thank you, Madam Pince.” Hermione walked back to her table and was about to give up, when she was hit with a brainwave.

***

By the time Hermione got back to the Common Room she had decided what she was going to do about house elves. Balancing the box of buttons she’d made in one hand and a sheaf of parchment in the other, she picked her way across the Common Room to where Ron and Harry were finishing their Divination homework. Crookshanks jumped off of Harry’s lap and wound himself around her legs.
“Hello!” She greeted. “I’ve just finished.”

“So have I!” Ron announced triumphantly, throwing his quill down.

Hermione sat down, dumping her cargo onto the table and pulled Ron’s predictions towards her. It started with developing a cough and got steadily worse. “Not going to have a very good month, are you?” She commented, Crookshanks curling up in her lap.

Ron yawned. “Well, at least I’m forewarned.”

Hermione tutted. “You seem to be drowning twice.”

“Oh, am I?” Ron asked, seeming surprised. “I’d better change one of them to getting trampled by a rampaging hippogriff.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Don’t you think it’s a bit obvious that you made these up?”

“How dare you!” Ron gasped. “We’ve been working like house elves here! It’s just an expression!” He added hastily.

Harry sighed. “Hang on … decapitation!” He decided, scribbling it down. Dropping his quill and stretching, he pointed at the box Hermione had dropped on the table. “What’s that, Hermione?”

“I’m glad you asked.” Hermione shot a nasty look at Ron and opened the box.

Harry picked up one of the badges. “Spew? What’s this about?”


“Never heard of it.” Ron told her.

“Of course you haven’t.” Hermione agreed. “I’ve only just started it.”

“Oh, yeah?” Ron sounded interested. That, or surprised. Hermione tested the air and sighed. Surprised. “How many members have you got?”

This was the hard part. “Well, if you two join, three.”

Ron raised an eyebrow. “You think we want to walk around with badges saying ‘spew’, do you?”

“S.P.E.W!” Hermione repeated. “I was going to call it Stop the Outrageous Abuse of Our Fellow Magical Creatures, but it wouldn’t fit, so that’s the heading of our manifesto. I’ve been researching and I talked to the house-elves in the kitchens …”

“Hermione, open your ears!” Ron groaned. “They … like … being … enslaved!”

“Yes, they do.” Hermione agreed. “We’re not campaigning to free them. We’re campaigning to change the laws so that they’re treated properly.”

“And how are we going to do this?” Harry asked.
Now that was interested. “We start by recruiting members. I thought two sickles to join – that buys a badge – and the proceeds can fund our leaflet campaign.”

Harry fished in his pocket and pulled out two sickles. “I’m in.”

Hermione beamed at him. “Thanks, Harry.”

“No problem.” Harry told her, fixing the badge to his robes. “I hated the way Dobby was treated. Freeing them isn’t the way to go though.”

“Of course not.” Hermione agreed. “If we can get a mistreatment clause pushed into the contract it’ll be a start. Ron?”

Ron sighed. “Fine. But you’ll have to wait because my money’s in my dorm and I can’t be bothered to move.”

“Deal.” Hermione closed the box and leaned forwards. “Harry, can I borrow the Map?”

“Why?” Harry asked, sounding confused.

Hermione didn’t blame him. She didn’t have a problem with him using the Map (especially since it had been made by his father), but had never used it herself. “I found a room earlier and I don’t think it’s on there.”

Harry frowned. “I thought everything was on there, but here.”

“Thanks.” Hermione waved her wand over the piece of parchment, whispering the password. The Map formed and she quickly found the kitchens.

Let’s see. Fred and George led me down one corridor to the Entrance Hall, so I met them … there. And I came down that flight of stairs … from that corridor … turned right … crossed that empty classroom … along that corridor … up another flight of stairs and …

Hermione frowned. Her finger, tracing her route backwards through the school had come up against a wall. “I was right.” She murmured, drawing her wand and tapping it against the markings on the Map. “Unless there’s something hidden there …” Remembering Harry’s story about Snape’s battle with the Map, she decided to try something. “I, Hermione Granger, would like to know if there is any room hidden behind that wall.”

As though responding to her question, the Map vanished and writing began to appear on the page. Mr Padfoot would like to inform Miss Granger that the Marauders know of no hidden room in that part of the castle.

Mr Prongs would like to add that if Miss Granger has found a hidden room in that part of the castle, then he takes his hat off to her. Or would if he was wearing one.

Hermione giggled. “No, it’s not on here.”

Harry read the words over her shoulder and tapped the parchment with his own wand. “My name is Harry Potter.”

Immediately the words changed:

Mr Prongs would like to enquire whether Mr Potter is his son.

Mr Moony would like to point out that, having no time-frame, Mr Potter could be Mr Prongs’
Mr Prongs would like to ask Mr Moony to stop making him feel old.

Mr Padfoot suggests that it sounds like Miss Jade may have finally said yes and asks if Miss Shadow may have followed suit.

Mr Moony suggests that Mr Padfoot might want to get over it and welcomes Mr Potter to the Marauders.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Who’s Miss Shadow, do you think? I didn’t think there were any female Marauders.”

“Not asking about Miss Jade then?” Harry asked.

Hermione laughed. “Harry, I’d say that’s obvious. Miss Jade was your mother.”

“How’d you know?” Harry pressed. “For all we know, Dad had another girlfriend when they wrote the Map.” He pulled a face. “Not that I want to think about that.”

“Green eyes.” Hermione pointed at his face. “I’m sure it was her.” She frowned. “Although … I can’t help but feel I knew that anyway. Professor Lupin – sorry, Remus and Sirius never said anything, did they?”

Harry frowned. “I’m sure they didn’t. Although now you mention it, I can’t help feeling like I’ve heard that nickname before.”

“Well, I haven’t.” Ron stated, finally joining the conversation. “I know they never mentioned it in the Shack. How’d you find this room, Mione?”

Hermione sighed. “Well, you’re never going to believe me.”

“Try us.” Ginny suggested, taking a seat next to her. “Wait, what are we not going to believe?” Hermione sighed again, and launched into the story of what happened in the small room with the founders. When she’d finished, the other three sat in thoughtful silence, while she waited with bated breath to see if they would believe her.

Finally, Harry let out a deep breath and waved his wand over the Map. “Mischief managed.” He looked up to meet her eyes. “Are you sure you just haven’t been working too hard?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Harry, how can I imagine that I’ve met the founders when I didn’t even know what they look like?”

“But you could have imagined that.” Ron pointed out.

“Wow, that was actually logical.” Ginny teased him, before turning to Hermione. “Hermione, I don’t want to think you’re crazy, but it is a little unbelievable.”

“A little?” Harry muttered.

Ginny elbowed him. “Can you prove it? What about the Animagus thing?”

Hermione stood up and paced around the common room, making sure they were the only people still awake. Satisfied, she returned to the fireside and gestured for them to stand up. “I don’t want to be seen by anyone coming down the stairs.”

The three stood as one and formed a wall between her and the staircases. Hermione closed her eyes
and focused on the lioness she’d seen in the mirror. With a soft ‘pop’ she felt herself transform. She held the form for a few seconds, then transformed back, opening her eyes to see three stunned expressions. “Well?”
“I believe you.” Ginny said faintly, falling back into her chair.

“Me too.” Ron and Harry seconded in unison.

Hermione smiled gratefully. “Thanks, guys.” She pulled the prophecy out. “What do you think then?”

“Gin?” Ron looked over at her. “You did pretty well on the last one.”

Ginny read it through. “Chamber of Secrets.”

“Pardon?” Harry asked.

Ginny sighed, slightly pale. “I almost died down there and I’m a redhead. ‘Fire maid almost met her doom’.”

“She’s right.” Hermione realised. “Now?”

“No!” Ginny answered quickly, shaking.

Harry put a comforting arm around her shoulder. “We’re not going down there yet.”

“Of course not.” Ginny agreed, recovering quickly and with only a hint of pink in her face. “We have to wait for the leader of the light.”

“Who is she?” Ron asked with a frown.

“Well, it’s someone who’s hidden.” Ginny scowled at the parchment. “But has a gift that won’t be …”

“Let’s sleep on it.” Harry suggested.

“Yeah, because it’ll be so much clearer tomorrow.” Ron rolled his eyes.

Hermione sighed. “Muggle term, Ron.” Before she could explain, Hedwig dropped a letter off, landing on the table.

Harry read it aloud. “Harry, I’m flying north immediately. This news about your scar is the latest in a series of strange rumours that have reached me. If it hurts again, go straight to Dumbledore – they’re saying he’s got Mad-Eye Moody out of retirement, which means he’s reading the signs, even if no one else is.”

“What signs?” Ron asked in bewilderment.

Harry shrugged. His eyes strayed to Hermione’s and she knew that he was as worried as she was.


Hermione suddenly remembered Narcissa’s note and smacked herself for forgetting it so easily. “Harry, if you’re not comfortable with including Mrs. Malfoy’s note, I’ll put it in my next letter.”
“Right.” Harry cocked his head and observed her. “You never did tell me why you were writing to him.”

“He stopped off in the summer.” Hermione told him. “I went and got his wand from Gringotts; it was in his vault.”

“Bit risky, isn’t it?” Ron frowned. “I mean, they’d never prove the whole …” he lowered his voice “… time-turner thing. But,” he said normally, “that?”

Hermione shrugged. “May as well be hanged for a dragon as for an egg.”

“Hey, you’re picking up on wizarding slang!” Ginny hugged her. “You’re in!”

“Maybe it’s just me,” Harry sighed, “but what does that mean?”

“Muggles have a similar saying.” Hermione told him. “If you’re going to get punished for doing something, you may as well do the thing properly. There were two wands in the vault, though. He told me to keep hold of the other one; you never know when you’ll need a spare wand.”

Ron raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like something Moody would say.”

“Of course it does.” Ginny rolled her eyes. “Sirius was an auror too, wasn’t he? Where do you keep it?”

“Well, I don’t have a wand holster.” Hermione admitted. “I thought I’d get one next summer at Diagon Alley…”

“Or at Hogsmeade.” Ron suggested. “There’s got to be somewhere.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.” Hermione replied. “Anyway, I improvised.” She pulled her robes up slightly, pulled her sock down and removed her wand from the band holding it in place. “Here.”

“What’s it made of?” Harry asked.

“I’m not sure.” Hermione examined it. “If I had to guess, I’d say willow and dragon heartstring. But I’m not a wand-maker, so I wouldn’t like to say. Merlin knows who it belonged to.”

“Well, I didn’t know that Malfoy’s mother was a Black.” Harry confessed. “So you know more than I do.”

“Well, that’s the thing.” Hermione frowned. “There’s not much about the Black family in the library. I know that it’s an incredibly old pureblood family, like the Potters,” she nodded to Harry, “but they were on the darker side.”

“What; the Potters?” Ron frowned.

“No, the Blacks.” Hermione sighed. “But I know that Mrs. Malfoy has two sisters.”

“Maybe it belongs to one of them.” Ginny suggested.

“I don’t think so.” Hermione disagreed. “I got grief, so I think whoever it belonged to is dead and they’re both alive. Plus, one of them, I believe, is a healer, so has her wand and the other one is in Azkaban and will have had her wand snapped.”

“But you need a special wand to become a healer.” Ginny told them. “So she might have put her first wand in the family vault and she believes that Sirius is a mass-murderer and that’s why he’s sad.”
“Maybe.” Hermione agreed tentatively. “I’ll ask. But I doubt he’d be able to give that wand away.” At that moment, something Harry had read hit her full-force. “Wait. He’s flying north? He’s coming back?!”

“And what signs?” Ron repeated. “**Harry, what’s up?**”

Harry had suddenly hit his forehead. “**I shouldn’t have told him.**”

“**What are you on about?**” Ron asked in surprise.

“I’ve made him think he’s got to come back.” Harry said, slamming his fist on the table, causing Hedwig to flutter to the back of Hermione’s chair, hooting indignantly. “**He’s coming back because he thinks I’m in trouble and there’s nothing wrong with me! And I haven’t got anything for you!**” He snapped at Hedwig. “**You’ll have to go to the Owlery if you want any food!**”

Hermione gave him a reproachful look and gave Hedwig an Owl Treat. Hedwig nibbled her finger affectionately and took off for the open window, cuffing Harry with her wing as she did.

Turning back to Harry, Hermione laid a soothing hand on his arm. “**Harry…**”

“I’m going to bed.” Harry interrupted, pulling away abruptly and stalking up the stairs. Ron shrugged apologetically, bid her goodnight and left as well.

Ginny shook her head in exasperation. “Boys! Night, Hermione.”

“Night.” Hermione stared at the fire for a few minutes, hearing Ginny make her way up the girls’ staircase, then grabbed a quill and began to write her own letter.

**Padfoot,**

*Harry reacted quite badly to the news that you’re coming back. Hopefully, you’ll get this letter before his; he’ll probably write to you immediately tomorrow morning. Don’t take it personally; he’s just worried about you. I’m worried about you.*

*Did you know that the Triwizard Tournament is being held again this year? I think Harry’s relieved that under 17-year-olds can’t enter; he isn’t under any pressure.*

*About the second wand, was it one of your cousins? I know one – Andromeda, is it – is a Healer, so she’d need a specialty wand.*

*I doubt it’s hers, but I promised Ginny I’d ask. Ginny’s Ron’s younger sister – yes, she knows. No, she won’t tell anyone.*

*Speaking of cousins, I saw Narcissa Malfoy at the World Cup and I think she may have given me a note. It says ‘Tell SB I’m sorry. He was right. NBM.’ Makes no sense to me, but hopefully you’ll understand it.*

*Harry and I were looking at the Map today and you, Prongs and Moony had a little discussion when Harry said his name. Was Jade Mrs Potter’s Marauder name? Because I’m fairly sure it is, even though I don’t think you’ve ever mentioned it.*

*Here, Hermione paused, wondering whether to ask about ‘Miss Shadow’. She decided not to – it didn’t seem to fit Arabella or Mandy, which meant that the owner of that nickname was most likely dead. And given that she’d just thrown the Potters in there without warning, it was probably best to*
leave *that* can of worms unopened for the moment.

*On a more important note, Sirius, be careful. I won’t try to convince you not to come back – I think Harry needs the support, personally – but please, please be careful. I don’t know how or even if Harry would cope if you were recaptured and I’m fresh out of last-minute, law-breaking escape plans.*

*With love,*

*Hermione*

*PS. I mean it, Padfoot. Take care of yourself.*
Weeks passed, and Sirius still hadn’t replied. Everyone seemed oblivious to Harry and Hermione’s joint worries, as they scanned the post owls every morning, and only Hermione paid attention to the dark circles under Harry’s eyes, identical to her own.

Only lessons were keeping her mind of whatever horrible things that could happen, and they were become more demanding than ever, particularly Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Everyone else was duly distracted by the announcement that the delegates from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons would be arriving the evening before Halloween, in time for the announcement of the three champions the following evening.

The impending arrival of the other two schools seemed to put a spell on the castle. The Tournament was the only subject of conversation, the teachers were even snappier than usual, the paintings were grumbling about rashes, the suits of armour had stopped squeaking and Filch was behaving so ferociously that he’d reduced two first year girls to tears.

Hermione noticed very little of this, though. She had a blinding headache. Of course, she reflected after a day, she should have realised. The founders had warned her, after all, that she would pick up on what the castle was feeling, and Salazar Slytherin himself had mentioned this event specifically.

After a week, she taught herself the Silencing Charm and placed it on the curtains around her bed, satisfied that Lavender and Parvati were never going to burst through her bed-curtains to wake her. Every night, she would transform and sleep as a lioness; the effect dimmed and, by Friday, it was nothing more than a dull ache.

At breakfast, she was talking about who the judges might be with Ron and the twins, when Harry choked slightly on his bacon. Ron thumped him on the back and Hermione looked up to see Hedwig fluttering down to them, with two letters tied to her leg.

“Tell me later.” Ginny muttered in Hermione’s ear. “Fred, George, how’s WWW coming?”

The twins sufficiently distracted, Harry pulled one letter off of Hedwig’s leg and she hopped across the table and stuck out her leg again. Hermione pulled the other letter off and gave Hedwig some bacon rind, which she ate gratefully.

“What does it say?” Ron whispered.

Harry unrolled it and read it out to them. “‘Nice try, Harry. I’m back in the country and well-hidden. I want you to keep me posted on everything that’s going on at Hogwarts. Don’t use Hedwig; keep changing owls. And don’t worry about me, just watch out for yourself. Remember what I said about your scar. Love, Sirius.’ Looks like you’ve got to get up earlier than I did to fool a Marauder. And I got up pretty damn early.” He looked up at Hermione. “What about yours?”

Hermione unrolled it. “‘Dear Hermione. First of all, I promise I won’t do anything stupid. Secondly, you were right; I got his letter a few hours after yours. I’m mentioning it in his letter, but remind him to keep using different owls. Hedwig stands out too much. Tell Ginny it was a good guess, but it didn’t belong to any of my cousins and, to be honest, it’s painful to think about. Just keep it on you at all times. Speaking of family, thanks for passing on Cissy’s message – you’re right, it made perfect sense to me. I want Harry to tell me everything odd that happens at Hogwarts, but I have a feeling
that he’ll hold back, so I want you to do the same. And, yes, Jade was Lily’s nickname, although I
can’t think where you’ve heard it recently. All of you, be careful; don’t do anything I’d do. Stay
strong; be safe. Love, Sirius. PS. Welcome Ginny to the ‘aiding and abetting’ club for me. Do you
think there’s enough people for t-shirts yet?”
Ron sniggered. “It’s kind of obvious he was a Marauder, isn’t it?”

Hermione, however, was frowning at the letter. “Do you ever get that feeling that something bad’s
going to happen?”

“Yes.” Harry confirmed. “You have it too?”

Hermione nodded. “And so does Sirius. I don’t think this tournament is going to go as smoothly as
the Ministry wants it to.”

***

By Halloween morning, Hermione’s headache had all but disappeared, but that didn’t make her feel
any better. The arrival of Durmstrang the night before – by ship, in contrast to Beauxbatons
appearance minute earlier in a powder-blue carriage – had been accompanied by rather strange
discussion (for want of a better word) with the castle herself …

Hermione watched in fascination as a whirlpool appeared in the middle of the lake and a ship
slowly rose from it’s midst. As it reached the bank, there was the splash of an anchor and the thud of
a plank being lowered onto the bank.

As the students disembarked, they all seemed to be built like Crabbe and Goyle, but, as they walked
up the lawns towards them, it became apparent that the bulk due to shaggy cloaks.

The man at their head was tall and thin, like Dumbledore, but had a curled goatee, rather than a
long beard, that didn’t quite hide his weak chin. As he approached the castle, Hermione felt the
wards shiver and the pain in her head exploded again.

“You alright?” Harry whispered, looping an arm around her waist as she staggered sideways.

“She doesn’t like him very much.”

Harry squinted at the man. “Can’t you just promise to keep an eye on him?”

Hogwarts? I know you don’t like the Durmstrang Headmaster, but there’s
nothing I can do at the moment. I promise to keep an eye on him and I’ll report anything I find to
Professor Dumbledore.

The castle flared again in irritation and Hermione bit back a gasp.

Professor McGonagall?

Apparently, Hogwarts was satisfied by this and settled down. Hermione rubbed her head as the pain
receded, barely paying attention as Dumbledore greeted Professor Karkaroff, or as Viktor Krum
was revealed to be one of the Durmstrang students. Why didn’t the castle want her to trust
Dumbledore?
Her concerns about Professor Karkaroff, however, were nothing compared to the sheer worry that had overtaken her when the ‘impartial judge’ had been revealed.

The Goblet of Fire may have been a very powerful magical object, but all that mattered to Hermione was that it was technically a cup and her own voice kept echoing in her mind.

“Toch of cup brings respite’s end.” Alright, Hermione, just calm down, alright? Harry hates attention – he wouldn’t go near that cup even if he was able to enter.

On top of all this, Hermione had seen her first ‘living spirit’, proving the theory in the book. She knew the red-headed woman she kept seeing out of the corner of her eye must have been a spirit, because no one else seemed to pay the least bit of attention to her.

The woman had yet to speak to Hermione and she was waiting for the spirit to make the first move – she wasn’t entirely sure of the etiquette in this situation.

After all, she looks vaguely familiar, but I don’t know if I know her. And I wouldn’t walk up to a complete stranger and just say hello just because I could.

Her mind firmly back on the Goblet of Fire, Hermione pulled on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt (the castle could be freezing in the winter), before fastening a robes over the top. She ran a brush through her hair, pulled it up into a ponytail, and made her way downstairs, stumbling into the Entrance Hall and running straight into Ginny.

Mumbling a greeting, she wiped the sleep from her eyes to see that Ginny looked just as tired as she was.

“You didn’t sleep much either, huh?”

Ginny yawned. “I was this close to sneaking into the boys’ dorm, nicking Harry’s cloak and sleeping down here just to keep an eye on it.”

Hermione shrugged. “I kept an eye on the Marauders’ Map all night. Only Mr. Crouch came anywhere near it and he’s one of the judges, so we’re alright.”

“Thanks for telling me.” Harry muttered in her ear.

Hermione jumped as his breath ghosted past her skin and turned to face him. “Sorry; you were asleep.” She replied just as quietly, managing to slip the Map from her pocket into his in one slick move.

“Anyone put their name in yet?” Ron asked, changing the subject.

“All the Durmstrang lot.” A third year girl informed him. “But I haven’t seen anyone from Hogwarts yet.”

“I’d have done it last night after everyone had gone to bed.” Harry admitted. “Less nerve-racking that way.”

As Hermione woke up properly, she realised that there wasn’t just excitement in the air. Frowning slightly, she tried to place the sense of grief she felt, finally reaching Harry.

Once she’d done that, she mentally slapped herself for not realising earlier. Ever since first year, she had been convinced that Halloween was both a blessing and a curse, especially for Harry.
First year – a troll had been released into Hogwarts and nearly killed her BUT she gained the two best friends she could ask for.

Second year – Mrs Norris was attacked and Petrified by a basilisk BUT it could have been a student and it could have been a lot worse.

Third year – Sirius Black attacked the Fat Lady BUT that was when Hermione began to subconsciously question his guilt (surely he’d realise the Tower would be empty on Halloween).

Harry’s hatred of the holiday journeyed back even further, to the night, thirteen years ago, when his parents were murdered by Lord Voldemort.

BUT Voldemort had fled, powerless, unable to kill the Boy-Who-Lived.

Not worth it. Hermione sighed, watching Harry fake a smile as the twins appeared either side of her.

“Done it!” Fred announced in a triumphant whisper.

“Done what?” Ron asked.

“The Aging Potion, dungbrains!” George rolled his eyes. “One drop each. We only need to be a couple of months older.”

“We’re going to split the money equally if one of us wins.” Lee added.

“It’s not going to work.” Hermione sang, with a smirk.

The three sixth years ignored her and she tried to hold back her laughter as the twins stepped across the Age Line, only to be catapulted back with long white beards.

“I did warn you.” Dumbledore pointed out in amusement. “I suggest you both go up to Madam Pomfrey. She is already tending to several other students who seemed to think that an aging potion would fool the Age Line. Though, I must say, none of them sprouted beards as fine as yours.”

Fred and George set off sheepishly towards the Hospital Wing, accompanied by Lee, who was laughing hysterically.

Chuckling under her breath, Hermione followed Harry and Ron into the Great Hall, where, appropriately, hundreds of live bats fluttered around the hall.

The Durmstrang students and many of the Hogwarts students were already and the four Gryffindors joined Seamus and Dean for breakfast.

“There’s a rumour going round saying that Warrington got up early and put his name in.” Dean was saying. “That big bloke from Slytherin who looks like a sloth.”

Harry shook his head in disgust. “We can’t have a Slytherin champion!”

Before Hermione could agree, a voice beside her muttered, “Typical.” There was a flash of red in her peripheral vision; she turned, only to see an empty space.

Whoever it is, she’s hanging around us a lot. Maybe I should talk to her next time she appears. If I can think of way of doing that without looking like a raving lunatic, of course.

“And all the Hufflepuffs are talking about Diggory.” Seamus scowled. “But I wouldn’t have thought he’d have wanted to risk his good looks.”
“There’s nothing wrong with him.” Hermione snapped. “He hexed a Slytherin last year when he called me a Mudblood.”

“Which Slytherin?” Harry asked immediately, overriding Ron’s, “Which hex?”


“Listen!” Seamus said suddenly.

Cheering was floating in from the Great Hall and, moments later, Angelina Johnson walked in. “I’ve done it.” She announced, taking a seat next to Hermione. “I’ve put my name in.”

Ron looked impressed. “You’re kidding?”

“You seventeen then?” Seamus asked.

Ron rolled his eyes. “Course she is. Can’t see a beard, can you?”

“I had my birthday last week.” Angelina elaborated.

“Well, I really hope you get it.” Hermione told her.

“Thanks, Hermione.”

“Better you than Pretty Boy Diggory.” Ron muttered, causing a couple of passing Hufflepuffs to scowl at him.

Hermione rolled her eyes and was about to berate Ron once more, when she realised that Harry hadn’t said anything since his dismissal of a Slytherin champion. He was staring at his plate, pushing his scrambled eggs around with his fork.

Hermione hesitated, glancing at her own breakfast. She loved Harry dearly, and there was no way she was going to let him wallow in misery for the whole day, but she was incredibly hungry.

Compromising, Hermione grabbed some bacon and wrapped it in a napkin, before nudging Harry. “Want to go for a walk?”

Harry dropped his fork instantly. “Yes please.”

The two friends made their way out of the Great Hall, pausing only to let the Beauxbatons students pass them. They rounded the lake in comfortable silence and, once they were on the opposite side, their view of the castle blocked by the Durmstrang ship, Harry stopped, dropping to sit on the floor.

Hermione followed suit, wiping her fingers on the now empty napkin and tucking it inside her robes. “I swear, bacon is the reason I could never be vegetarian.”

Harry managed a small smile, but said nothing.

Stifling a sigh, Hermione shifted to face him and held her arms out. “Come here.”

Normally, Harry tended to avoid hugs, unless she instigated them, but today, he welcomed it, wrapping his own arms around her waist and burying his face in her shoulder.

Hermione rubbed his back comfortingly, pretending that she couldn’t feel him shaking slightly. When he pulled away, his eyes were bright and red-rimmed, but she made no comment on it. “Bad
Harry chuckled weakly, rubbing his face with his hand. “Something like that.” He gazed across the lake. “It’s different this year. Halloween, I mean. I always knew that’s when they … died. At least, I did once Hagrid told me.”

Hermione bit back a scathing remark about his aunt. *Honestly, who doesn’t tell a little boy about his parents?*

“But it seems … worse this year.” Harry sighed.

“Maybe it’s because you’ve got more of a connection this year,” Hermione suggested. “What did you have last year – a few photos and a physical resemblance? Now you’ve got people who knew them personally. They’re people now, not just people who died for you.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, I guess.”

Hedwig fluttered down beside them with a letter tied to her leg.

“You’re late.” Harry murmured, taking the letter from her. Hedwig let out an indignant squawk and flapped to Hermione’s shoulder.

“I don’t think she likes what you’re insinuating.” Hermione smiled slightly. “Isn’t that Arabella’s handwriting? Hedwig’s a smart owl, maybe she knew you shouldn’t get a letter like this in public.”

Harry frowned. “A letter like what?” He opened the letter and ran his gaze over it, a soft smile appearing on his face. “Never mind.”

Hermione stroked Hedwig’s feathers and looked the other way, while Harry wiped his eyes again. “Alright?”

“Fine.” Harry rolled the letter up and tucked it inside his robes. “They just wanted to tell me that they miss them too and that they’re thinking of me.”

Harry sighed again. “It’s just weird, you know? I don’t remember them, but I miss them so much it hurts sometimes.”

Hermione pulled a face. “Harry … I don’t know what to say. Nothing sounds quite right in my head.”

“I hate when that happens.” A soft female voice sympathised from beside her.

Hermione jumped, but Harry made no sign that he’d even heard the voice, let alone been surprised by it. She glanced round, to see the redhead she’d seen earlier sitting on her other side, watching the Durmstrang students returning to their ship. Giving her little more than a cursory glance, although that was enough to recognise her, she turned back to Harry. “Hey, Gin.”

“Ginny?” Harry glanced over her head at what – to him, at least – appeared to be empty grass. “Nothing sounds quite right in my head.”

“Hey, Gin.”

“Ginny?” Harry glanced over her head at what – to him, at least – appeared to be empty grass. “Nothing sounds quite right in my head.”

“Hermione, there’s nobody there.”

“No, her spirit.” Hermione corrected with a smile. “Remember, I told you how I could see them …”

“Actually, Hermione,” the spirit interrupted, “Harry’s right. I’m not Ginny.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I just …” Hermione turned back to the woman to apologise, but froze almost immediately.
Looking at the woman properly, it was obvious that she wasn’t Ginny – she was older, for one, and her hair was a slightly darker shade of red.

But the most glaring difference was in her eyes, and it was these which caught Hermione’s attention.

“No …” She whispered. “No, that’s impossible.”

“Hermione?” Harry questioned, sounding worried. “Hermione, what’s wrong?”

Hermione heard his query, but it didn’t quite seem to register in her mind what he’d said, even as she turned back to him. “Would you excuse me for one second? Empath thing.”

Without waiting for a reply, Hermione jumped to her feet and jogged down the shore, leaving Harry utterly confused. Once they were out of earshot, she turned to face the woman, who was still smiling kindly at her.

“You can’t be Lily Potter.”
Addie and Leona belong to me, the name McKinnon doesn't - they're the daughters of Marlene McKinnon.

Chapter Six - Confrontations

The woman looked at her calmly, with eyes exactly the same shape and colour as Harry’s. “Why not?”

“Because Lily Potter is dead.” Hermione stated, well aware that her voice was shaking. “She has been dead for thirteen years. So unless I’ve somehow developed necromancy as well as empathy or this is some kind of sick joke, then you can’t be Lily Potter.”

“But I am.” ‘Lily’ told her.

“But you’re dead!” Hermione argued.

“Prove it.” ‘Lily’ responded serenely. “Show me the proof that I’m dead and I’ll believe you.”

Hermione opened her mouth, paused, and closed it again, thinking back about everything she’d read about that Halloween night. She knew that Harry had never heard the Killing Curse around the Dementors – although he’d heard everything else – because he hadn’t known about it in DADA when Moody taught them the Unforgivables.

But then …

“Well, your bodies were never found …” Hermione said slowly. “But everyone knows that you were killed.”

“You mean, like everyone ‘knows’ Sirius killed thirteen people?” ‘Lily’ asked with a smirk. “Come on, Hermione, use your logic. You’re a smart girl. You know you’re not crazy. Think it through.”

It was sound advice, Hermione had to admit, and she began to pace. “Okay, let me talk it out. I’m an empath. As an empath, I can only talk to spirits attached to living people, or living spirits.”

“That’s right.” ‘Lily’ agreed.

“And since I can only talk to living spirits, then you must be a living spirit.” Hermione continued.

“Uh-huh.”

Hermione slowed to a standstill. “And if you’re a living spirit, then you must be alive.” She pinched her arm, wincing at the sharp pain. “And I’m not dreaming. And people who imagine things like this when they’re crazy either see people they know very well or people they don’t know at all, and I only know you through Harry. You really are Mrs Potter. And you’re alive.”

Lily’s smile widened. “By Jove, I think she’s got it!”
“You’re having one of those Muggle-born moments again, aren’t you?” A man’s voice asked, sounding partly amused, partly disgruntled.

He appeared beside Lily and Hermione’s eyes widened involuntarily, her gaze darting to Harry, still sitting on the bank of the lake, gazing in her direction concernedly. She gave him a reassuring smile and turned back to the man in front of her. “Mr Potter, I presume?”

“Call me James.” He told her with an easy smile, a smile she’d seen on Harry’s face a thousand times.

Hermione leaned against the nearest tree, her head spinning. “Okay … so you two are alive. Where are you then?”

“We don’t know.” Lily admitted. “We were both hit with some sort of transportation spell. It gave off the same green light as the Killing Curse, but it was non-verbal. Whatever it was, I’ve never read about it.”

Hermione nodded absently. Now I KNOW I’m not making this up. If I’d gone crazy, I’d come up with a better answer than ‘we don’t know’. And that fits with what Harry remembers.

“We’ll explain more when you’ve told Harry.” Lily added.

“Excuse me?” Hermione asked incredulously. “You want me to go and tell Harry that I can speak to the spirits of his supposedly-dead parents?!”

“When you put it like that, it sounds ridiculous.” James said dryly, surprising a laugh out of her.

“It is ridiculous!” Hermione protested. “Today, of all days? It’s not like he knows enough to let me prove that it’s you!”

“Hermione, relax.” Lily soothed. “You think too much. We can’t affect our bodies, you know that, so we – the real us, I mean – we don’t know Harry’s alright. We’re just an imprint.” She took a deep breath. “Do you trust me, Hermione?”


“Because you’re an empath, I can …” Lily paused, searching for the right word “… temporarily inhabit your body and tell Harry myself. But I can only do it with your permission.”

“You want to possess me?” Hermione asked, her voice higher than normal.

“Temporarily inhabit.” Lily repeated insistently. “Just to talk to him. Please?”

Hermione was about to refuse, but the pleading note in Lily’s voice made her hesitate. Lily wasn’t just offering so that Hermione had proof to back up her story.

“Please?” Lily whispered.

Hermione sighed, glancing back at Harry. “Alright. But let me lay the groundwork first.” At Lily’s nod, she returned to where Harry was sitting. “Sorry about that.”

“Who was it?” Harry asked immediately.

Hermione hesitated, steeling herself, both for what she was about to say and Harry’s possible reaction. “Would you believe your mother?”
Harry’s expression of concern didn’t change, but he did give her a hard glance. “That’s not funny.”

“I’m not kidding.” Hermione responded flatly. “She … er … She wants to talk to you.”

At Hermione’s nod, Lily stepped forwards, as though she was planning to walk right through Hermione, but stopped and vanished.

For a moment, Hermione didn’t think anything had happened, but Harry’s jaw dropped. “Hermione, your eyes …” he whispered. “They’re the same colour as mine …”

Before Hermione could ask, her mouth began to move of its own accord, but it was Lily’s voice that escaped her lips, soft and soothing. “Harry, Hermione’s telling the truth … It really is me, sweetheart …”

“Mum …?” Harry shook his head slowly. “You have no idea how weird this is.”

Hermione felt herself smile. “It’s going to be weird, pumpkin; I’m inhabiting your best friend’s body at the moment.” Her hand reached out without her volition and touched his face. “We’re so proud of you, Harry. Your dad and I … we love you so much …”

A sharp pain stabbed through her head and Hermione grimaced, suddenly regaining control of her body as Lily reappeared beside her.

Harry blinked at the sudden change in her eyes. “What …?”

“Mrs Potter, what just happened?” Hermione asked, slightly shakily.

“Lily, dear.” She corrected, eyeing Hermione speculatively. “You’re a natural Occlumens – even though you let me in, your subconscious was pushing me out.”

“Oh, sorry.” Hermione sighed. “Sorry, Harry, apparently, I’m a natural Occlumens and accidentally knocked her out of my head.”

“It’s okay, Hermione.” Harry said with a smile. “I guessed you didn’t do it on purpose. Er … what’s an Occlumens?”

“Occlumency is the art of magically defending the mind against external penetration, sealing it against magical intrusion and influence.” Lily answered. “It’s the defensive counter to Legilimency, which is the ability to extract emotions, memories and thoughts from another person’s mind. Someone who practices Occlumency is known as an Occlumens and someone who practices Legilimency is known as a Legilimens. They’re very advanced branches of magic, which usually take years to master.”

Hermione’s eyebrows rose into her hairline. “Wow …” she murmured.

“What’s an Occlumens?” Harry repeated.

Hermione chuckled. “Sorry, Harry. Basically …” She repeated what Lily had told her, word for word, just to make sure she didn’t miss anything.

Harry smirked. “No one told me I was best friends with my mother.”

Hermione swatted his arm good-naturedly. “Oh, shut up. So what does it mean that I’m a ‘natural’ Occlumens?”

“It means that you don’t need to learn it.” Lily explained. “Legilimency and Occlumency won’t
work against you; it’s a gift that very few people are born with, only those who won’t abuse it, and even then, it’s rare.”

“So, does that mean what we just tried will never work?” Hermione questioned, glancing at Harry.

Lily looked thoughtful. “I don’t know. Possibly eventually … you do still need to work to control it. That should give you better access to your long-term memory as well. One of my best friends was a natural Legilimens as well – try looking for *Improving Mind Magics* in the library … I don’t think it’s in the restricted section.”

Hermione rummaged in her bag for some parchment and a quill. “And that will help?”

“The exercises will.” Lily assured her. “At least they should.”

Hermione jotted down the name of the book, and then paused, gazing at her quill. “You know, this conversation would be easier if Harry could hear you.”

Lily raised an eyebrow. “But Harry’s not an empath. And we’ve just established that I can’t borrow your voice.”

Hermione just stared at the quill. “Or see you.”

“Again, Hermione, Harry’s not an empath.” Lily groaned. “Uh oh.”

Now Hermione looked at her. “What?”

“You’ve got a glint in your eye …” Lily sighed. “And that glint reminds me too much of Padfoot for me to be altogether comfortable with it.”

“Okay …” Hermione decided to just ignore that. “Do you know the Dicta-Charm?”

“The what?” Harry asked blankly, as Lily made a soft noise of understanding.

“Hermione tried to ask your mum.” Hermione teased.

Lily laughed. “Good idea, Hermione. The incantation is *Dicteria* and the wand movement is a sharp, anti-clockwise, quarter-twist.”

Hermione aimed her wand at the quill and followed Lily’s instructions. “*Dicteria.*” The quill twitched slightly and she loaded it with ink, setting it point down on the parchment. “This is Hermione Granger, on October 31st 1995.”

As she spoke, the quill skated across the parchment, transcribing her words.

“Excellent.” Hermione tore away the top of the parchment and repositioned the quill. “Will it work on you, Lily?”

“You cast the spell so I don’t see why not.” Lily answered. “My name is Lily Potter – Harry, you’ll have to give it your name as well.”

Harry’s eyes widened as he glanced at the parchment to see the words *Lily Potter: You cast the spell so I don’t see why not. My name is Lily Potter – Harry, you’ll have to give it your name as well.*

“My name is Harry Potter, and this may be the most amazing thing that ever happened to me.”

Hermione smiled as the quill danced across the parchment, noting down Harry’s name and words as
well. “Very good. Now first question, Lily, where are you?”

“We’re not sure of the exact location.” Lily began heavily. “We know that it’s an island, but it’s small – very small. Big enough to house a tower and a house, as well as a crowd of Death Eaters, but not much else.”

Harry stiffened as the words appeared. “Mum, are you …?”

“I’m fine, dear.” Lily assured him. “We both are. We haven’t seen the Death Eaters ourselves, but Addie and Leona say they were there just before we arrived. They haven’t been back since that Halloween.”

“Addie and Leona?” Hermione repeated. The second name was unfamiliar, but she could have sworn she’d heard the first name before, even though she didn’t know anyone by that name.

“They were two of our year-mates.” Lily explained. “Addison and Leona McKinnon – they’re twins, as different in personality as they are alike in appearance. We thought that they’d both been killed in March 1979.”

“The McKinnon Massacre.” Hermione murmured. That would explain where she’d heard the name before.

“The what?” Harry asked.

Hermione smiled sadly. “I read about it in The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts. The McKinnons were a big pureblood family – it was the first attack on purebloods.”

“He hadn’t killed purebloods before?” Harry frowned.

“Oh, he had.” James said darkly.

“James, the quill.” Lily reminded him in a soft voice.

“Right. My name is James Potter.” James directed at the quill. “Hi, Harry. Yes, Voldemort had killed purebloods before, but only when they were in the way or collateral damage. The McKinnons were the first real attack. They were wiped out in under a day.”

Harry muttered a curse under his breath and Hermione nudged him. “Language, Harry.” She frowned. “Wait a second … I thought that one of the girls was seen in an Inferi army later on.”

“Addie was.” Lily nodded, with a heavy sigh.

“What’s an Inferi?” Harry asked quietly.

Hermione swallowed, feeling slightly sick. “An Inferius, Harry, is a dead body enchanted to do a Dark Wizard’s bidding.”

Harry shuddered. “Oh Merlin …”

“Exactly.” Lily closed her eyes and James put an arm around her shoulders. “Voldemort created a pseudo-Killing Curse, so called because the incantation is the more or less same, but it separates the spirit from the body and solidifies it. That doesn’t cause any harm to the person as a whole and they’re sent to the island that we’re on, but there’s what appears to be a body.”

“It was usually used when Voldemort wanted information from someone.” James added. “After all, the Ministry isn’t going to search for someone who’s dead.”
“Apparently it wasn’t needed.” Hermione scowled. “I notice that no one’s searching for you two.”

“That’s because no one bothered investigating.” Lily sighed. “They all ‘knew’ we were dead.”

Hermione huffed. “Honestly!”

Harry was reading the parchment over again. “Wait a second … Addie wouldn’t be Shadow, would she?”

Lily chuckled. “Yes, Harry, we called her Shadow.”

“Did Arabella and Mandy have Marauder names?” Hermione asked.

“Arabella was Bastet, Mandy was Talon.” James answered.

“Where’d the names come from?” Harry questioned eagerly. “Mum’s, I get. It was because of your eyes, right?”

Lily laughed. “Exactly. Our names came from the same place the boys’ did. We were all Animagi.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “Well, they certainly kept that quiet last June. Were you there?”

“We were.” James confirmed. “You need more ink, Hermione.”

Hermione glanced at the page and reloaded the quill. “Thank you. I bet that was difficult. Last June, I mean.”

James closed his eyes, but not before she saw the pain that shot across his face. “We already knew, Hermione. Well, we knew that Peter had betrayed us, but …”

“We thought that Sirius had killed him.” Lily finished. “We’d stayed with Harry after … after it happened. So we thought … At least until Harry got to Hogwarts and met Ron and we saw Scabbers and … that was the hardest part. Knowing that our son was in the same room as that … that …”

“Scumbag?” Hermione supplied.

Lily smiled wryly. “I was thinking something worse, but that’ll do.”

“Did you hear the prophecy?” Harry whispered.

“We heard it.” Lily answered. “And we heard your little guilt-trip in Moony’s office as well.”

“Whatever happens next, Harry, it is not your fault.” James said forcefully, “Whatever happens next, I am so incredibly proud of you for how you acted in the Shack.”

Somehow the quill managed to portray at least some of the emotion in James’s voice and Hermione looked out across the lake to give Harry time to gather his composure.

“Hermione?” He asked after a few minutes. “How are we going to tell Sirius? We can’t tell him something like this in a letter.”

“No, you can’t.” Lily agreed. “Wait until you see him in person. And when you do, Hermione, show him this. He and Addie were dating when she was attacked – if she knew I was doing this, she’d never forgive me if I didn’t find some way of telling him that she still loves him.”

“Do you know what’s happening with You-Know-Who?” Hermione asked, feeling a bit guilty for
sweeping Sirius aside like that, but needing to ask.

“As much as we’d love to go spy,” James sighed, “he’s an empath too – that’s how he created the pseudo-Killing Curse in the first place. Since we don’t really want to draw attention to our continued existence …”

“I wouldn’t ask you to.” Hermione said hastily. “Did you … Did you happen to see where Wormtail went last June?”

Lily smiled wryly. “No. We were more worried about you lot, to be honest. Especially with all those Dementors …” She shuddered, and Hermione felt a pang of sympathy for couple, for everything they had watched Harry go through, helpless to intervene.

And they still don’t even really know he’s alive.

Hermione cast around for some way to change the subject, desperate for some way to distract Lily from the memory. “What was your Animagus form, Lily?”

James chuckled weakly. “That was about as subtle as a …”

“Train wreck.” Lily finished, wiping her eyes. “But thank you. I was a doe …” she exchanged a smile with her husband “… reddish-brown in colour, but still with green eyes. That’s why they called me Jade. Arabella was a cat …”

“That doesn’t surprise me.” Hermione smiled, as Harry nodded in agreement. “And you called her Bastet because of the Egyptian goddess, right?”

“Right in one.” Lily nodded. “As for Mandy, her form was a falcon, so her nick-name speaks for itself.”

“And Addie?” Harry asked. “What could she turn into?”

“Well, you’ve seen Sirius’s Animagus form, right?” James smirked. “It’s that, but blonde.”

Hermione and Harry exchanged a slightly confused glance. “So … why Shadow?” Hermione queried.

“Because she had the ability to blend into them.” Lily answered. “Alice came up with it. Neville’s mum.” She explained, seeing their questioning expressions. “Now not that we wouldn’t love to stand here and chat all day, don’t you two have work to do?”

Hermione glanced at her watch and jumped. “Harry! It’s nearly lunch-time and we haven’t done our potions homework yet!”

“Mum …?” Harry asked pleadingly.

Lily laughed. “Sorry, sweetheart, you do need to do that homework. I promise I’ll have a word with Snape when we get back though.”

Hermione reached for the quill. “Can I stop this now?”

“Not yet.” James told her seriously. “Sirius Black, if you don’t stop blaming yourself for what happened, so help me Merlin, I will find a way to hex you into the next century, even if I have to do it from here.”

“He means that in the nicest way, Padfoot.” Lily said sweetly. “But I’ll be joining him.”
For a moment when she woke up on Sunday morning, Hermione couldn’t remember why she felt so sick. Then the previous night’s events came rushing back to her.

The Goblet … the selections of the champions … Harry’s name …

How could Harry be a champion? He didn’t put his name in that Goblet; he can’t have done … the look on his face …

Hermione groaned into her pillow. Jess’s prophecy was coming true – the Goblet of Fire had been tampered with. It was the only solution that made sense.

“Hermione!” Lavender called through the curtains. “Are you awake!!”

“Well, if I wasn’t, I am now.” Hermione grumbled, sitting up. “Yeah, I’m awake.”

The curtains were ripped back and Lavender and Parvati, practically shaking with excitement, appeared, almost bouncing to sit on her bed.

“Well?” Parvati asked impatiently, after they had stared at her for a few minutes.

“Well what?” Hermione asked tiredly, running a hand through her hair and wincing at the tangles she encountered.

“Harry!” Lavender squealed. “How did he get his name in the Goblet?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “He didn’t.”

Parvati sighed. “Hermione, his name came out, didn’t it? That must mean …”

“That an incredibly powerful wizard hoodwinked an incredibly powerful object into thinking there were four schools, not three.” Hermione finished, slightly coldly. “Why would Harry want to be in the tournament?”

“Same reason as anyone, duh.” Lavender said, rolling her eyes. “A thousand galleons and eternal glory.”

Hermione rolled her eyes again. “Lavender,” she began, in a tone one would usually employ with a five-year-old, “the Potter family is one of the wealthiest in the country. A thousand galleons is pocket money considering what’s he’s set to inherit when he turns seventeen, as you two have mentioned about a million times since first year. And he’s already got eternal glory – you name me one former champion.”

Lavender looked set to argue, but Parvati, proving that her sister didn’t get all the brains, nudged her. “She’s right. Besides, you saw the look on his face last night.”

Lavender nodded, looking almost disappointed at the lack of gossip. “So who did put his name in? And why?”

“I dread to think.” Hermione muttered. “The tournament’s dangerous – there’s a reason we weren’t allowed to enter under seventeen. It’s a very good opportunity to make something look like an accident …”

She trailed off, a cold rush of dread flooding her as she imagined all the awful things that could happen. Images of Harry’s mangled and broken body flashed before her eyes – and, unfortunately,
he’d ended up in the hospital wing enough times for her to have a very extensive, very realistic bank of them.

She jumped out of bed, letting her bedclothes flutter to the floor. “Excuse me.” She changed quickly, almost sprinting from Gryffindor tower and down into the Great Hall, skidding to a halt beside the Gryffindor table, her eyes scanning the students present for any sign of messy black hair.

She couldn’t find any, so made her way to the red hair bent over his breakfast. “Morning, Ron. Where’s Harry?”

“How should I know?” Ron snapped.

Hermione took an unconscious step back, taken aback by the venom in his voice. “Who shoved a bug up your arse this morning?”

“Potter.” Ron growled.

“Since when is he ‘Potter’?” Hermione frowned. “Wait … you don’t think he entered his name in this tournament, do you?”

Even as she spoke, her own voice echoed in her head. Betrayal …

“I knew you’d take his side!” Ron hissed.

“Of course I’m taking his side!” Hermione protested. “He hasn’t done anything wrong! You, of all people, know how much Harry hates his fame! You, of all people, know how much that ‘fame’ cost him! You, of all people, know what he hears around the Dementors!”

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that Lavender and Parvati had joined the other end of the table and were talking with a group of fifth year girls.

The girls in question looked quite sheepish, and Hermione could only hope that her room-mates were repeating her earlier logic. *If they are, and they manage to convince people, I will never complain about their gossiping ever again.*

“Fine!” Ron yelled. “Gang up on me, just like always!”

“Just like always?!” Hermione repeated incredulously, somehow managing to keep her voice quiet. “It’s normally you two ganging up on me – even when Harry knows I’m right. But go ahead! Turn your back on him and act like a jealous prat instead of being the friend he needs!”

Fred and George were at her side in an instant, before she even registered their arrival, the latter gripping Ron’s right wrist tightly. His hand was still tight around his wand, which was aimed in her direction.

“You were about to curse me.” Hermione whispered, her voice slightly shaky. She stepped back hastily, feeling Fred wrap an arm around her and guide her back out to the Entrance Hall, sending his brother a scathing look over his shoulder.

“Ignore him, Mya.” He murmured, sitting her down on one of the benches beside the marble staircase.

“He tried to curse me.” She repeated in disbelief.

“I know.” Fred said soothingly, rubbing her shoulder. “He’s a prat, Mya. He’s jealous and you know
“We won’t tell.” George assured her, joining them with a stack of buttered toast. “Marauders’ honour.”

Hermione didn’t need the oath; she trusted the twins to treat the information confidentially. It was her empathy that convinced her to answer the question – they had already guessed what she would say and were simply seeking confirmation.

“His parents.” She whispered. “The night they … That night.”

The twins paled, so that every freckle stood out in stark relief against their skin, but the look they exchanged was one of dark significance, as they silently acknowledged the accuracy of their suspicions.

George handed her the toast. “Go and find Harry; take him for a walk or something. He doesn’t need all that in there.” He jerked his head back to the Great Hall, where people were lingering longer than was usual on a Sunday morning. “Tell him we believe in him – if he says he didn’t do it …”

“… that’s good enough for us.” Fred finished. “And tell him we’re sorry for not really listening last night. The adrenaline got to us.”

“I get it. I’ll tell him.” Hermione said with a smile, and she headed back up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower. She had barely opened her mouth to give the Fat Lady the password, when the portrait swung open to reveal her best friend, hair messier than ever and dark circles beneath his eyes.

Pasting a smile over her concerned expression, Hermione held up the toast. “Fancy a walk?”

Harry’s face lit up with a relieved smile. “Thanks.”

Together, they hurried back downstairs and passed the Great Hall without even glancing through the doors. They slowed down once they were outside and, like the day before, rounded the lake almost completely before they settled under a beech tree.

Hermione handed half of the toast to Harry and let him eat in silence, pulling her own apart in her lap. She wasn’t really hungry, but, knowing Harry’s propensity to worry, forced herself to eat a few slices.

They had barely been there five minutes, when James and Lily appeared out of thin air, bickering.

“How was hexing Snape into the ground a good idea?” Lily was asking incredulously.

“Into the air, actually.” James corrected. “And Snivellus had it coming, you know he did.” He winced at the look she was giving him. “Still mad at me for that, huh?”

“Yes.” Lily said, slightly icily. “Believe it or not, I am. Maybe, if you’d been a bit nicer to him, he’d be a bit nicer to our son! It’s hardly Harry’s fault your head was …”

“… so big you were surprised my broom could take off?” James finished, with a charming smile.

Lily sighed, shaking her head. “James David Potter, you are unbelievable.”

Seeing the smile she was trying to hide, Hermione chuckled, making her best friend jump a little.
“You’re both unbelievable.”

“My parents?” Harry guessed through a mouthful of toast.

“Who else?” Hermione responded. She caught sight of Lily’s expression and smirked, beating her to it. “And don’t talk with your mouth full.”

Harry swallowed his toast and gave her an incredulous look. “Tell me that was my mother speaking.”

“It was.” Hermione assured him. “More or less. Harry, about last night …” She held up a hand as Harry began to speak. “Let me finish. I know you didn’t enter your name. Ginny knows you didn’t enter your name. The twins know you didn’t enter your name – you’ve got them to thank for the toast – and they apologise for not really listening to you last night.” She sighed heavily. “The question is: Who tampered with the Goblet?”

“Tampered with?” Harry asked, but there was a glint in his eye that told her he already knew what she meant.

“Like I told the girls, the Goblet of Fire is bewitched to select one champion from each of the schools.” Hermione said matter-of-factly. “So whoever entered your name must have made it think there were four schools competing instead of just three. But who?”

“Moody thinks someone’s trying to off me.” Harry commented casually, but he was methodically tearing the crusts off his toast as he spoke.

“Hermione,” Lily said quietly, “could you tell Harry that he needs to eat his crusts; they’re good for him.”

Hermione smiled, hearing the feigned casualness in her voice, and reached out to still Harry’s hands. “Eat your crusts, Harry, they’re good for you. And Moody’s right – no student …”

“Have you talked to Ron this morning?” Harry interrupted, apparently not listening to her.

Hermione hesitated, unwilling to open this can of worms just yet. “Er … yes. Yes, he was in the Great Hall at breakfast.” She wasn’t going to elaborate any further unless he made her.

“Does he still think I entered myself?” Harry asked in a small voice.

_Damn, he’s going to make me._ Hermione sighed. “Well … I don’t think so … maybe … I don’t … not really.” The obvious answer was ‘yes’ but she was reluctant to give it.

Harry looked up, finally meeting her eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean? ‘Not really’?”

Hermione sighed. “Look, if he just thought it through, he’d know you didn’t enter your name – Jess saw this coming, for Merlin’s sake, and the look on your face …” She shook her head. “He’s blinded.”

“Blinded?” Harry repeated. “Blinded by what?”

“Oh, Harry, isn’t it obvious?” Hermione asked, feeling slightly exasperated. “It doesn’t take an empath to see that he’s jealous!”

“Jealous?” James repeated incredulously, even as Lily nodded.

“I thought it’d be something like that.” She said sadly.
“Jealous?!” Harry repeated incredulously, and Hermione bit back a smile at the similarity between father and son. “Jealous?! Of what?! He wants to make a prat of himself in front of the entire school, does he?”

“Look,” Hermione said, trying to be patient, which wasn’t easy, because James was loudly agreeing with Harry, and she wasn’t all that inclined to disagree with him herself. “It’s always been you who gets the attention, you know it has. I know it’s not your fault!” She added hastily, seeing Harry open his mouth to argue. “And I know you don’t like it. We know you don’t ask for it, but Ron’s got all those brothers and they all have something that makes them stand out and Ginny’s the only girl and he’s got them to compete against at home, and you’re his best friend and you’re really famous – he’s always shunted to one side when people see you and he puts up with it and never mentions it. This is just one time too many.”

“Great.” Harry said bitterly. “Really great. Tell him from me I’ll swap any time he wants. Tell him he’s welcome to it … people gawping at my forehead everywhere I go …”

“I’m not telling him anything.” Hermione told him flatly. “I’m not a bloody owl. Tell him yourself; it’s the only way to fix this.”

“I’m not running around trying to make him grow up!” Harry snapped, causing an owl in a nearby tree to take off in alarm.

“Well, neither am I!” Hermione said sharply. “I’ve seen this coming for a while; it had to happen sooner or later. Besides, he nearly cursed me this morning.”

Belatedly, as Lily let out a shocked gasp, she realised that she shouldn’t have told him that.

“He did what?” Harry asked in a low whisper. His eyes seemed to glow with fury and she almost flinched at the wave of anger that rolled towards her – it was only the knowledge that it wasn’t aimed at her that stopped her. “I swear …”

“Harry, no!” Hermione grabbed his arm as he threatened to get to his feet. “Come on, you know he never thinks before he acts – I can handle this myself!”

Harry narrowed his eyes at her. “On one condition.”

“Anything.” Hermione was quick to agree – Harry was the only person whose emotions she couldn’t read without searching for them. Even when his name came from the Goblet, surprise only flared in the air for a second before it was gone and buried.

“If he ever, and I mean ever, does or says anything to hurt you in any way, shape or form ever again, you’ll tell me immediately and let me handle it.” Harry stated.

Hermione was taken aback by the coldness in his voice. Concerned, she tested the air, but found nothing – now the shock had worn off, his previous anger was buried once again, with his other emotions, deep below the surface.

*Thank Merlin he’s easy to read.*

“Okay, Harry, I promise.”

Harry sighed and his whole body seemed to relax at once. “Thanks, Hermione. You’re my best friend; I can’t just stand back and let him …” He sighed again. “And yes, I know you can take care of yourself …”
Hermione bit back her protest. *Since when can he read minds? Maybe we’ve just known each other too long.*

“… but humour me, okay?” Harry stared out at the lake for a few minutes. “Maybe he’ll believe I’m not enjoying myself when I’ve got my neck broken or …”

Lily moaned quietly and hid her face in James’s chest. Hermione didn’t blame her – she had the sudden urge to reach out and do the same thing.

“That’s not funny.” She said quietly, her voice shaking. “That’s not funny at all.” She looked back at James and Lily, wishing that she could sort out whatever was happening in her head so that they could comfort Harry themselves, but there was always … “You know what you need to do, don’t you? The moment we get up to the castle?”

“Yes.” Harry answered grimly. “Give Ron a good kick up the …”

“Write to Sirius!” Hermione cut him off hastily. “You’ve got to tell him what happened. He asked you to keep him posted on everything that happened at Hogwarts, remember? It’s almost like he expected something like this to happen. I’ve got my bag with me; there’s parchment and a quill in there …”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Hermione, he came back into the country because I told him my scar hurt; if I tell him I’ve somehow been entered into the Triwizard Tournament, he’s going to come bursting into the bloody castle!”

“Harry James Sirius Potter, write to your godfather!” Lily chided sharply.

James winced. “I’d pass that message on as soon as possible, Hermione. When she uses both middle names, she means business.”

“I didn’t know you had two middle names.” Hermione commented, half to Harry, half to Lily.

“I do?” Harry asked, sounding surprised.

Lily let out a growl that sounded like it should have come from Padfoot. “My damn sister …”

“She’ll get hers, Lily.” Hermione said darkly.

“So my middle name isn’t James?” Harry asked.

“One of them is.” Hermione assured him. “The other one’s Sirius, apparently.”

Harry’s face lit up in a smile. “Really?”

“Well, it wasn’t.” Lily admitted. “It was just Harry James, but someone managed to slip it on to the birth certificate without asking me.”

James shrugged, looking thoroughly unrepentant. “I did promise.”

Hermione chuckled and turned back to Harry. “I’ll explain later, Harry. Now write to your godfather – your mother used both middle names. Besides, he’s going to find out anyway.”

Distracted from the name issue, Harry frowned. “How?”

Hermione groaned and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Think, Harry!” She held up her left hand. “First Triwizard Tournament in over a century.” She held up her right hand. “Boy-Who-Lived
somehow participating.” She brought her hands together. “Front page of the *Daily Prophet*. It’ll be all over the Wizarding World in days, if it isn’t already.” Dropping her hands to her sides, she met his eyes openly. “He’d rather hear it from you, Harry.”

Harry sighed. “Why is it that you always know just what to say to convince me to do something?”

Hermione smirked. “I’m your best friend, Harry. I can read you like a book – and that’s without my empathy.”

Harry stood up and threw the last slice of toast to the Giant Squid. “Okay, I’ll write.” Grinning, he extended an arm to her. “May I escort you to the library, my lady?”

Hermione fought back a laugh and took on a haughty air. “You may, good sir.” As they both fell into giggles, she looped her arm through his and they set off back into the castle. And, for the first time in a long time, Hermione felt that they could survive whatever was coming.
Miss Jessica Brown, of Number Six Privet Drive, was proud to say she was perfectly abnormal, thank you very much. She had as much to do with anything strange or peculiar as she possibly could, because the Dursleys, who lived next door, just couldn’t stand that sort of thing.

One cold November morning, Jessica was hanging out her washing, resolutely ignoring Mrs Dursley as she chattered away about her son.

“… and I do worry about him so, I really don’t like the sound of that school food – and did I tell you they told us to put him on a diet!”

“Good.” Jessica responded, shaking out a pair of jeans. “I was starting to worry you’d have to rush him to hospital for a heart bypass.”

Mrs Dursley seemed to swell with indignation. “My Dudders is a perfectly healthy normal child!”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “If you say so, Mrs Dursley.” Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of a flash of white in a nearby tree and fought the urge to go and investigate. “But no child who is wider than he is tall can possibly be considered healthy. Face it, he’s a spoilt, overweight bully and you’re going to be the one dealing with the fallout.”

“How dare you?!” Mrs Dursley shrieked, storming back into the house.

Jessica allowed herself a smirk, as her neighbour on the other side poked his head over the fence. “’Bout time someone told her that.” He grunted.

Jessica shrugged. “I have no patience with her anymore, quite frankly. All those lies about her nephew.”

He nodded in agreement, rubbing his hands together to keep them warm in the cold November air. “Where is it she says he goes?”

“St Brutus’s Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys.” Jessica answered, her tone dripping with disgust.

“Not likely.” Her neighbour snorted. “I’ve seen him helping you in the garden. Never met a more polite young man. Now Dudley … You seen the damage to the bus stop down the road?”

Jessica shook her head. “Broken glass all over the floor, spray paint over anything they couldn’t tear down. That boy could have done with being turned over her knee.”

“Don’t think you could turn him over anything.” He quipped. “Makes you wonder what else they’re lying about. You know where the other boy does go?”

“Harry?” Jessica hesitated. “Don’t know the name of it. It’s his parents’ old school apparently, his name’s been down since he was born.”
“His parents?” His interest was peaked now, and he leaned on the fence, abandoning whatever gardening task had previously held most of his attention. “The way she harped on about it when he first arrived …”

“I know.” Jessica agreed, stepping closer. She never held much stock in gossip, personally, but the drivel that Petunia Dursley spread around Privet Drive when Harry first appeared was awful, even if his parents had been like that.

Now she knew they weren’t …

“A friend of his parents gave him a photo album his first year.” She smiled slightly. “And I can tell you right now that that couple adored their son and each other. As for a car crash …” She sighed. “Well, I’m still not sure of all the details. From what I can gather, it was a home invasion.”

“You mean they were …” He trailed off, looking horror-struck. “Oh, the poor kid. Was he there?”

Jessica nodded, a throat tightening. “He was. You’ll have to excuse me.” She heard him respond, but the words didn’t register, as she picked up the laundry basket and hurried into the house.

The snowy owl in the tree would have to wait for a few minutes, at least until Mr-Next-Door had gone inside for lunch. Whatever letter she carried must have been important though, because Hedwig usually timed her arrival for after-dark, so no one in the Muggle neighbourhood would see her.

Once inside, Jessica allowed herself to relax, paying no attention to the few tears that fell. Over the summer, Harry had confided in her the details of that horrible night.

It seemed to pain her on two levels.

First, of course, was her sympathy for Harry. To witness something so awful and so young and yet still emerge as the well-adjusted kind-hearted young man he was today was nothing short of amazing. But she couldn’t help but remember a time when a baby Harry had woken screaming for his parents when she first started looking after him. This new knowledge gave the nightmares a whole new perspective.

Secondly, despite not knowing the woman, her heart went out to Harry’s mother. She had already had a very high opinion of the woman before Harry started Hogwarts – anyone the Dursleys considered ‘abnormal’ instantly went to the top of Jess’s ‘people to invite for dinner’ list. She only wished she’d had a chance to, just to see the look on the Dursleys’ faces when the Potters’ arrived in the street.

She doubted they’d look like anything other than ‘normal’ Muggles, but she did so enjoy watching Mrs Dursley lose her composure and make a fool of herself.

Harry’s story only increased her respect for Lily Potter. She didn’t want to imagine how terrifying that must have been, forced to listen as her husband was murdered and knowing that her son had just minutes left to live.

*Any mother would make the same decision. But that wouldn’t make it easy.*

It had been altogether easier, Jessica decided, when she couldn’t put a name to a face. Now she couldn’t help feeling a little guilty, as though she was replacing Lily in Harry’s life.

Whenever this feeling of guilt occurred, however, it vanished as soon as she had to deal with the Dursleys again.
Now if I was a mother, what would I prefer. A young woman who loves my son like I do or those people?

Jessica peered out of the kitchen window and saw that her neighbour had retreated back inside the house. She opened the back door and whistled quietly, whereupon the snowy owl took off from the tree and swooped down into the kitchen, landing on the back of a chair.

“Hello Hedwig.” Jess greeted, glancing at the clock. “You’re early, you know.”

Hedwig let out an impatient hoot and held her leg out.

“Alright, alright.” Jess removed the letter and Hedwig took off again, flying into the living room.

Earlier that summer, before Harry had gone to stay with the Weasleys, Jess had taken him to London and he, in turn, had taken her to Diagon Alley.

While they were there, they had purchased an owl perch, and it now sat in her front room, where Hedwig, she assumed, had just gone to take a nice nap.

Jess chuckled quietly at the rather typical Hedwig-behaviour and opened the letter, sitting down at the kitchen table to read it.

Dear Jess

Hermione’s making me write this, just so you know – I didn’t want to worry you. But she guilt-tripped me into it. Plus, I can’t use Hedwig to write to Sirius because she stands out too much and she’ll get mad at me if I try to use another owl.

Hogwarts is hosting the Triwizard Tournament this year. It’s an ancient competition between the three main European magical schools – Hogwarts, Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. A champion is selected from each school and they compete in three tasks, but we don’t know what yet.

The champion for Durmstrang is Victor Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker. The champion for Beauxbatons is Fleur Delacour. And the champion for Hogwarts is Cedric Diggory.

Thing is, Jess, my name came out as well, and now I have to compete. I still don’t know what the first task is, but I promise that I’ll be careful and I’ll write again as soon as it’s over.

Love, Harry

By the end of the letter, Jess was shaking, though she wasn’t entirely sure why she was so scared. She’d never even heard of the ‘Triwizard Tournament’ before now – for all she knew the ‘tasks’ were a Quidditch game, a chess match and some form of written exam.

She doubted it though, especially looking back at the first line. I didn’t want to worry you.

Folding the letter up, Jess made her way to her living room and stopped beside Hedwig’s perch, stroking the owl’s feathers softly.

“What now, Hedwig?” She asked softly.

Hedwig hooted softly, tucking her head under her wing.

Jess smiled, recognising the dismissal and wandering over to the sofa, where she collapsed with a sigh. Now what?
She ran a hand through her curly blonde hair, closing her eyes. Without magic, the only thing she could do was be there when Harry needed someone.

And, with any luck, that would be enough.

***

There weren’t many people Hermione could say she genuinely hated, but Rita Skeeter was well on the way to becoming one of them.

Her article in the *Daily Prophet* – supposedly covering the Triwizard Tournament and the ‘Weighing of the Wands’ – was nothing more than an exposé on Harry’s life, and not a very accurate one at that.

Much to Harry’s annoyance, Cedric had been overlooked completely and Fleur and Victor’s names had been misspelled.

Harry was annoyed, Hermione was furious. Not only did it give the two visiting schools a horrible image of wizarding Britain, it gave the rest of the school even more of a reason to dislike her best friend.

What really grated at Hermione, though, was the part of the article that talked about Harry’s parents. Skeeter may have ‘interviewed’ Harry, but she was willing to bet anything she owned that he never said what the article said he did, if for no other reason that he was a teenage boy:

“I suppose I get my strength from my parents. I know they’d be very proud of me if they could see me now … Yes, sometimes at night I still cry about them; I’m not ashamed to admit it … I know nothing in this Tournament will hurt me, because they’re watching over me …”

Hermione had read the article with mounting disbelief, hearing the sniggers erupting from all over the Great Hall. Just like second year, Dumbledore was doing nothing to squash the rumour mill, but Neville and Dean had had a very loud conversation at breakfast the next day about how they’d never seen Harry cry and that only an idiot would believe that Harry would ever say something like that.

Even Cedric – who seemed to have recovered from the shock of being one of two Hogwarts champions – had told everyone who’d listen that Harry hadn’t talked to Skeeter for long enough to provide an interview as detailed as the one in the paper.

Hermione could have kissed him when he approached the Gryffindor table that morning, as she tossed the *Daily Prophet* back at Lavender, and loudly told Harry that he believed him about not entering his name – it was obvious from the way Harry had practically disappeared under the table that he didn’t want the attention.

After that, the Hufflepuffs in her year hurried over in Herbology to wring his hand and apologise for not believing him before – Ernie Macmillan looked particularly guilty as he had been rather vocal about Harry in second year as well, and felt he should have known better.

The rest of the school, however, remained convinced.

Someone in Slytherin – Harry blamed Malfoy, Hermione had other suspicions – had created badges with the words “Support Cedric Diggory – the REAL Hogwarts champion”.

When pressed, the badges – which had travelled around the school – changed to the message “Potter Stinks”.

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Hermione had resisted her original reaction to the badges when she first saw them – knowing that Harry wouldn’t take her bursting into fits of laughter in any positive way.

But really, Potter Stinks?

She’d met five-year-olds who could come up with better insults.

Harry’s reaction, fuelled, she was sure, by Malfoy – problems or not, he still seemed determined to cause trouble – and both boys ended up with wands drawn.

Unfortunately for Hermione, their curses met in mid-air and she and Crabbe ended up in the cross-fire. Trying to get to the hospital wing with front teeth that reached the floor was not easy.

On the bright side, it did give her the chance to get her teeth shrunk to a normal, and more flattering, size, something she’d been begging her mother to let her do for months to no avail.

Far too soon, it was the Saturday before the first task, which would take place the following Tuesday. Hermione and Harry had ventured into Hogsmeade together (the latter under his Invisibility Cloak), but not before she had run into Ron and been given a very odd message – the brunt of which was that Hagrid wanted to talk to Harry that night.

So it was, late that evening or, more accurately, very early the next morning, that Hermione found herself curled up in an armchair, reading a Muggle fantasy novel, waiting for Harry to get back from Hagrid’s.

Thankfully, she had not had to resort to dropping dungbombs to clear the room, or the weight would have been much more unpleasant.

There was, of course, a reason why Hermione waiting for Harry to get back, and that reason soon appeared in the flickering flames in the fireplace.

“Hermione?”

Hermione closed her book, alerted by the change in glow from orange to green before she heard his voice, and vacated the chair, kneeling in front of Sirius’s floating head. “Evening, Sirius. Harry should be back soon, but he had to do something. Ron told me this morning that Seamus told him that Parvati told Dean that Hagrid needed to talk to him.

Sirius looked bewildered. “You what?”

“Don’t make me say it again.” Hermione said with a groan. “He’s talking to Hagrid; he’ll be back soon. Whatever it was, Ron said, it sounded important.” She paused, contemplating whether to tell Sirius now about James and Lily.

“Hermione?” Sirius called. “Are you alright? You spaced out for a minute.”

“I’m fine.” Hermione assured him with a smile. “I was just thinking about whether to tell you something …”

“Not now.” James whispered, his eyes fixed on the fire. “You can’t tell him like this, Hermione.”

Hermione shook her head in agreement. “No, it’s really something I should tell you in person … it’ll have to wait. It’s good news, I promise.”

“Okay.” Sirius didn’t look convinced, but he dropped the matter anyway. “How’s everything
Hermione sat back against the sofa, drawing her knees up to her chest. “Something awful’s going to happen.” She whispered. “I can feel it.”

“You too?” Sirius asked knowingly.

Hermione nodded, her gaze falling to the Marauders’ Map, which was lying beside her. A dot was moving rapidly towards the Common Room and she smiled. “Harry’s coming.”

The portrait hole opened almost as soon as the words left her mouth, and Harry stumbled in, pulling the Invisibility Cloak off as he did. His face was paler than she’d ever seen it and she leapt to her feet, hurrying to his side. “Harry, what happened?”

Harry didn’t answer. He moved to the rug and fell to his knees, greeting Sirius almost automatically.

“How’s he doing?” Hermione asked worriedly.

“Pup, what’s wrong?” Sirius prompted, sounding just as concerned. “You alright?”

“I’m …” Harry began.

“Don’t you dare say ‘fine’!” Hermione snapped at the same time as Lily, much to the latter’s amusement.

Harry blinked at her for a second. “I wasn’t going to say that.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“No.” Harry insisted. When her expression didn’t change, he sighed. “Fine.”

Sirius chuckled. “We need to induct you into the Marauders, Hermione; that was flawless. Miss Jade couldn’t have done any better.”

“Why, thank you, Mr Padfoot.” Hermione smirked, bowing slightly the fireplace. “Now be a good boy, Harry, and tell your godfather what’s bothering you.”

Harry opened his mouth to protest again, but she narrowed her eyes at him and the events of the last few weeks came pouring out.

Satisfied, Hermione sat back, giving Harry some privacy. She already knew all of this, after all, and it was good he was finally getting it off his chest.

But she was focusing on something else, the way Sirius had spoken of Lily as another Marauder. That in and of itself wasn’t too surprising, considering that Harry had referred to ‘Jade’ as a ‘Marauder name’ and Lily hadn’t corrected him – but she couldn’t help remembering her earlier thoughts about Lily not being an angel at Hogwarts.

_How did I know? Or was it just a lucky guess? After all, if the Marauders were anything like the twins, you couldn’t be too rule-abiding to marry one of them – it would drive you mental!_

Hermione was satisfied with this logic, but whether she would have pursued it further she would never know, because her thought process was lost as soon as Harry’s voice cut into it.

“… and Hagrid just showed me the first task – it’s dragons, Sirius, and I’m a goner!”

“Dragons?!” Hermione repeated incredulously, trying to keep from shrieking the word. Within
seconds, she had pulled Harry to his feet and drawn her wand, aiming it threateningly. “Harry James Potter, I swear to Merlin that if you don’t start laughing and tell me you’re joking in the next thirty seconds, I will hex you into the next century!”

Harry sighed wearily, fought of her arm and drew his own wand. “Expelliarmus!”

Caught off-guard, Hermione’s wand flew into Harry’s hand. “What the …?”

“I’m not joking.” Harry whispered, looking old beyond his years.

“See, Hermione, this is where the second wand comes in handy.” Sirius joked.

Harry sank back to the rug, tossing Hermione’s wand back. “I’m sure Hermione wouldn’t want me in the hospital wing on Tuesday.”

“If it stops you facing a dragon.” Hermione muttered, slipping her wand away again and letting her eyes drift back to the fireplace.

Sirius was watching the exchange with a smile on his face, but it was a smile that didn’t reach his eyes, which still held the deadened, haunted look that Azkaban had given them. “Dragons we can deal with, Harry, but we’ll get to that in a minute …”

Hermione couldn’t help interrupting. “You what? There’s something more important that dragons?! Are you serious?!”

Sirius’s smile widened slightly. “Yes, actually. You’d think you’d know my name by now.” He cleared his throat. “As I was saying, I haven’t got long to be here; I’ve broken into a wizarding house to use the fire, but they could be back any minute. There are things I need to warn you about.”

“What now?!” Harry groaned.

“Karkaroff.” Sirius stated. “He’s a Death Eater. He was caught; he was put in Azkaban a month or so before me, but got released. I’d bet everything that’s why Dumbledore wanted an auror at Hogwarts this year – to keep an eye on him. Moody caught Karkaroff. He and James put him in Azkaban in the first place.”

The words took a few seconds to sink into Hermione, but when they did she leapt to her feet once again, pacing up and down. “I knew it! I knew it! That’s why … that son of a … I could just … when I … no wonder she’s so …” Thoroughly frustrated with her own ability to articulate her anger, she whirled around to face the fireplace again. “Why the fuck isn’t he still there?!”

“Hermione!” Harry cried, sounding impressed. “Language!”

“Calm down, Hermione.” Sirius said quietly. “He did a deal with the Ministry of Magic. Said he’d seen the error of his ways and then he named names …”

“Dammit!” James snarled. “I was wondering how he got out.”

Hermione let out an uncharacteristic growl that sounded more like Padfoot than her own lioness. “That’s ridiculous! He practically admits to being a Death Eater so they let him go?! What the hell’s wrong with these people?!”

“Down, Catwoman.” Harry muttered with a smirk.

“He put a lot of other people in Azkaban.” Sirius allowed himself a triumphant smirk that made him
look years younger. “He’s not very popular in there, I can tell you. And since he got out, from what I
can tell, he’s been teaching the Dark Arts to every student who passes through that school of his. So
watch out for the Durmstrang champion as well.”

“My empathy hasn’t picked anything up.” Hermione commented, beginning to calm down. “Just
annoyance with all the girls that follow him into the library.”

Harry’s attention was focused elsewhere. “Are you saying that Karkaroff put my name in the
Goblet? Because if he did, he’s a really good actor. He seemed furious. He wanted to stop me
competing.”

Hermione rolled her eyes impatiently, but she couldn’t help glancing at James and Lily, who
shrugged. “Harry, if he wasn’t a good actor, he’d never have been released.”

“Exactly.” Sirius smiled proudly at her. “You should be an auror. Now I’ve been keeping an eye on
the Daily Prophet, Harry…”

“You and the rest of the world.” Harry muttered bitterly.

“… and, reading between the lines of that Skeeter woman’s article last month, Moody was attacked
the night before he started at Hogwarts.” Sirius finished flawlessly.

Hermione opened her mouth to correct him, but he pushed on hastily. “And, yes, I know they said it
was a false alarm. But it all seems far too convenient to me, for it to happen the night before he
started at Hogwarts. Mad-Eye’s heard intruders a bit too often. But that doesn’t mean he can’t still
spot the real thing. Moody was one of the best aurors the Ministry ever had.”

One of? Hermione questioned in her head. She would have asked, but Sirius’s expression had held
grief for a second and she assumed the other was James.

“So … what are you saying?” Harry asked, dragging her from her thoughts. “Karkaroff’s trying to
kill me? But … why?”

Sirius paused, as if wording what he wanted to say in his head. “I’ve been hearing some very strange
things.” He said carefully and Hermione sat forward eagerly, hoping for some sort of answers for her
never-ending curiosity. “The Death Eaters seem to be a bit more active than usual lately. Someone
set of the Dark Mark … and there’s that Ministry of Magic witch who’s gone missing.”

“Bertha Jorkins?” Hermione asked.

“Exactly.” Sirius confirmed. “She disappeared in Albania, and that’s definitely where Voldemort
was rumoured to be last … and she would have known the Triwizard Tournament was coming up,
wouldn’t she?”

“Yeah, but …” Harry seemed desperate to discount this as a theory. “It’s not very likely she’d have
walked straight into Voldemort, is it?”

Sirius sighed. “Listen; I knew Bertha Jorkins. She was at Hogwarts when I was, a few years below
me. And she was an idiot. Very nosy, but no brains, none at all. It’s not a good combination, Harry.
I’d say she’d be very easy to lure into a trap.”

Hermione couldn’t help feeling that he spoke from Marauder-experience, but focused on the problem
at hand. “So He-Who-Must-Be-Hyphenated could have found out about the Tournament?”

Harry sniggered. “Where’d you get that?”
“Well, calling him You-Know-Who all the time gets a bit tiring, but I can’t seem to be able to call him by his proper name yet, so I thought I’d stick with this one.” Hermione admitted. “Do you think that Wormtail could have had something to do with it?”

“Wormtail?” Sirius asked, his face darkening. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, if you were very nosy, as you say, and you ran into someone who was supposed to be dead, wouldn’t you want to know what they were up to more than you wanted to alert the Ministry?” Hermione asked logically.

“Wormtail doesn’t worry me.” Harry admitted. “He’s miles away. Do you think that Karkaroff is here on Voldemort’s orders?”

Again, Sirius hesitated before answering. “I don’t know. I just don’t know … Karkaroff doesn’t strike me as the type who’d go back to Voldemort unless he knew Voldemort was powerful enough to protect him. But whoever put your name in that Goblet did it for a reason and I can’t help thinking the Tournament would be a very good way to attack you and make it look like an accident.”

“Looks like a really good plan from where I’m standing.” Harry whispered. “They’ll just have to stand back and let the dragons do their stuff.”

Hermione winced at the reminder of the first task and put an arm around Harry’s shoulders.

“Right – these dragons.” Sirius began speaking quickly. “There’s a way, Harry. Don’t be tempted to try a Stunning Spell – dragons are too strong and too powerfully magical to be knocked out by single stunner. You need about half-a-dozen wizards at a time to overcome a dragon …”

“Yeah, I know. I just saw.” Harry shuddered and Hermione tightened her arm.

“But you can do it alone.” Sirius told him. “There is a way and a simple spell’s all you need. Just …”

“Ssh!” Hermione hissed suddenly.

Footsteps were coming down the stairs.

A glance at Harry’s pale face told her that he had heard them as well. In seconds, Hermione had sprung to her feet, hiding the fireplace from view.

“Go!” Harry whispered. “Someone’s coming!”

“Take care!” Hermione added, just before a tiny ‘pop’ signalled Sirius’s departure.

The two Gryffindors stared at the staircase, wondering just who was wandering about at one o’clock in the morning.

“What’s our excuse?” Harry muttered.

Hermione shrugged helplessly. There were several reasons why they might still be awake and in the common room, and each seemed as unbelievable as the one before. As she tried to think of something plausible, her gaze fell on the Marauders’ Map, still lying on the sofa, and she cursed herself for not looking at it earlier. Too late now. She waved her wand over it. “Mischief managed.”

Seconds later, the interrupter emerged from the girls’ staircase.

It was Ginny, her face white as snow and tears trickling down her cheeks. She didn’t seem to see them, moving towards them like a ghost.
The two fourth years exchanged a glance, wondering if, perhaps, she was sleep-walking, before Harry stepped forwards. “Ginny? You okay?”

Ginny blinked several times, as though only just focussing on him. She shook her head slowly, her body beginning to shake with the force of her sobs, and as her knees buckled, Harry caught her and half-led, half-carried her to the sofa.

Hermione sat beside them, rubbing her back as she cried into Harry’s robes. He caught her eye over Ginny’s head, silently asking the question.

Should they get Ron?

After a few minutes, Hermione was just about to venture up the boys’ staircase – more inclined to fetch one of the twins than Ron – when Ginny sat up, wiping her eyes. “Sorry.” She muttered.

“Don’t worry about it.” Harry squeezed her hand and Hermione couldn’t help noticing the resemblance between them and James and Lily, who were standing by the fireplace, looking concerned.

*One more reason why I doubt they’d ever date. He’d have to have a serious Oedipus complex to fall for someone who looks so much like his mother.*

Amazingly, Ginny didn’t seem that bothered by the fact that she’d just been crying in Harry Potter’s arms, and she managed a wry smile when he asked what was wrong.

“Nightmare.” She explained. “Back in the Chamber. Haven’t had one for a while … it took me by surprise.”

“I still have nightmares about it sometimes too, sis.” Harry said in a low voice. “If you want to talk …”

“I’m fine.” Ginny accepted the tissue Hermione handed her and blew her nose, before giving Harry a questioning look. “Sis?”

Harry turned slightly pink. “It’s a nick-name I have for you in my head. Do you mind?”

To Hermione’s surprise, Ginny beamed at him. “Of course not. I can always do with another big brother. What are you two doing up anyway?”

“We’ll tell you tomorrow.” Hermione said, checking her watch. “Later today, I suppose.” She put an arm around Ginny’s shoulder. “Do you want to sleep in the extra bed in our dorm tonight?”

Ginny thought for a second, then nodded. “Thanks. Goodnight Harry.”

“Night Harry.” Hermione echoed.

“Night ladies.” Harry gathered up his Cloak, bag and the Map and made his way up the boys’ staircase.

Hermione and Ginny jogged up the girls’ staircase until they reached the fourth year dorm. Tiptoeing past Lavender and Parvati’s beds, they slipped into bed, leaving the curtains between them open, and bid each other goodnight.

This wasn’t the first time this had happened; during her second year, Ginny had been plagued with nightmares and had spent most nights in Hermione’s dorm, so Lavender and Parvati wouldn’t be
surprised when they awoke.

Hermione couldn’t get to sleep, unable to close her eyes without thinking of dragons and Harry and Death Eaters. Finally, exhausted, her eyes closed of their own accord and she slipped into a fitful sleep.
It was less than a few hours later when Hermione finally awoke, determined to find some way to get Harry through the First Task alive.

She sat up, her brain flitting from asleep to awake in a nanosecond, and saw that only Ginny remained in the dorm room, already dressed and waiting for her.

“Harry’s waiting for us in the Common Room.” Ginny told her quietly. “He says we need some place to talk privately.”

“He’s right.” Hermione grimaced. The lake was far too open for this conversation, and even the Map only helped when you found the hidden rooms. Without knowing where they were, they could wander around all day and not find anything. “Where’s Lily when you need her?”

“Lily?” Ginny questioned, and Hermione realised that she’d never told Ginny about the Potters.

“It’s long story.” She said as she ducked into the bathroom to shower.

When she emerged, Ginny hadn’t moved. “We’ve got time.”

“It’s my empathy.” Hermione said, dressing quickly. “I can speak to James and Lily – you know, Harry’s parents.”

“They’re alive?” Ginny whispered.

“Yep. Don’t ask me where they are though, because I have no bloody idea.” Hermione admitted, pulling her cloak from her trunk. “But I bet Lily would know somewhere we could talk privately.”

“The Room of Requirement.” Lily provided, appearing out of nowhere.

Ginny must have seen Hermione jump, because she asked, “She’s here, isn’t she? What did she say?”

Hermione didn’t answer, frowning at Lily in confusion. “Where’s that?”

“Seventh floor.” Lily answered with a smile. “Find the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy – you know, the one trying teach the trolls ballet. Walk up and down three times in front of the wall and ask it for what you need.”

“Won’t need this then.” Hermione tossed her cloak on her bed. “C’mon, Gin; I’ve got somewhere.”

The two girls jogged down to the Common Room, where Harry was waiting, holding a bundle of toast. “Lake?”

“No.” Hermione couldn’t help laughing. “The roles have reversed.”

“Well, you claimed panic last night.” Harry reminded her. “So I had to take the calm and logical one. Not my best role, admittedly, but someone has to do it. Where are we going then?”

“Somewhere more private.” Hermione told him, taking a slice of toast. “Follow me.” She led them out of the Common Room and through the corridors until she found the tapestry Lily had identified.
The corridor was empty, but for a cool breeze emanating from one of the windows. The footsteps echoed off the cold stone and Hermione ran a hand along the wall, frowning. *How odd ... Maybe the room’s been removed since Lily was here.*

“Hermione?” Harry whispered. “It may be deserted, but the corridor’s not the best place to talk.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Thank you, Harry.” Remembering Lily’s instructions, she began to pace up and down. *We need a place to talk privately.*

Ginny gasped suddenly and Hermione spun on her heel to see a door appear in the wall. She pushed it open to find a room not unlike the Gryffindor Common Room.

“This’ll do.” Harry remarked, pulling the Marauders’ Map from his pocket as the door closed.

“Tell him not to bother, Hermione.” James advised, appearing on one of the sofas. “It’s not on there.”

“Your dad says don’t bother – it’s not on there.” Hermione repeated, not looking at Harry, but smirking at James instead. “You do realise you’re a spirit, don’t you? Therefore sitting down has no affect on you.”

“Yeah, but it gets a bit boring just standing around all the time.” James responded. “This is the Room of Requirement; turns itself into anything you need.”

“If the Marauders knew about it, why isn’t it on the Map?” Ginny asked.

“My guess is that it’s Unplottable.” Hermione said, glancing at James, who nodded. “But we can talk privately here.”

“What happened last night?” Ginny asked immediately, when Harry looked at her. “Did I interrupt something?”

“Nothing like you’re thinking.” Hermione said quickly, seeing the smirk beginning to form on her face. “Sirius managed to get to a fire and flooed us.”

The smirk and the colour promptly disappeared from Ginny’s face. “Oh, Harry, I’m sorry! You must hate me!”

“Gin, don’t be ridiculous!” Harry said, rolling his eyes with a fond smile. “It’s not like you knew what we were doing down there. But we found out a few things last night and we think you should know.”

“First of all,” Hermione continued flawlessly, “Karkaroff was a Death Eater.”

Ginny looked stunned. “What?”

“He was a Death Eater.” Hermione repeated. “He was in Azkaban, gave the Ministry a load of names and was released.”

“That...That...That...git!” Ginny hissed finally, unable to vocalise her anger any better.

Harry sniggered. “Well, you’re taking it better than Hermione.”

Ginny glared at him. “Do you have any idea what this means? Sirius was charged with the murder of thirteen people. Do you think that Karkaroff killed less than that? If Sirius had ‘confessed’, he would have had more chance of getting out; it’s crazy!”
“Focus please, Ginny.” Hermione sighed. “I’m with you all the way on this, believe me, but we’ve got bigger things to worry about. Hagrid showed Harry the first task last night.”

“It’s dragons.” Harry told her.

Ginny’s face, which had regained some colour in her anger, promptly turned white again, and the slice of toast she was holding slipped from her numb fingers. “Dragons? You can’t fight a dragon!”

“No, I think I just have to get past one.” Harry corrected. “I assume to retrieve something.”

Ginny laughed humourlessly. “Harry, getting past it will probably mean fighting it, whether you like it or not.”

“Damn.” Harry muttered. “I was worried about that. I need help, girls.”

Ginny frowned in thought. “What did Sirius say?” She asked finally, taking another piece of toast from the pile, ignoring the piece that was now butter-side-down on the floor.

“Don’t try stunning it.” Harry recited. “And a simple spell’s all I need.” He winced. “And that’s when you came in.”

“Sorry.” Ginny murmured absently, staring into the fire. “Charlie never talks about how to knock dragons out; he loves them too much.”

Hermione stretched out on the sofa so she was staring at the ceiling. “James, what do you think?”

“I think you just put your feet through my legs.” James answered moving to the arm of the sofa.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Again, you’re a spirit. You can’t actually feel it.”

“It’s the principle of the thing.” James said sniffily; she lifted her head to glare at him. “A dragon’s eyes are its weakest point, but I’ve got nothing aside from that. COMC was never my strong point; Lily was pretty good at it, but even she has a problem when it comes to dragons.”

“Eyes are the weakest point …” Hermione repeated thoughtfully.

“Oh yeah …” Ginny whispered. “I remember Charlie saying that now.”

“How’s that going to help?” Harry asked blankly. “Is there a simple spell I can use to blind her?”

“Her?” Hermione questioned.

Harry nodded. “They’re nesting mothers, Charlie said.”

“Charlie’s here?” Ginny asked, looking hurt. “Why hasn’t he …? Hang on, back up a second! Nesting mothers?! Are they crazy?!”

“Probably.” Hermione said, turning her head to look at her. As she did, she spotted a book on the coffee table that certainly hadn’t been there two minutes ago. “Where’d that come from?”

Ginny picked it up and flicked through it. “They’re all spells related to sight. It must have appeared when Harry asked.”

Hermione grinned. “I love this Room!”

James snorted. “Funny – that’s was Lily’s response as well.”
Ginny turned to the table of contents and grimaced. “It’s no good – the simplest spells in here are NEWT level – Harry’s only got two days.”

“Okay.” Hermione ran a hand over her face, thinking hard. “Okay.” She sat up. “Let’s look at this logically for a minute. Aside from the size and the strength, what can the dragon do that Harry can’t?”

“Breathe fire.” Harry answered immediately. “And fly.” He added as an afterthought. “Oh, and one them has these great big spikes on her tail that could …”

“Stop.” Hermione cut in, cringing at the very thought. “So there’s only two things a dragon can do that Harry can’t …” She trailed off, realising that the exercise had done nothing but make the task seem even more impossible.

“Really, it’s only one thing.” Ginny observed. “Because Harry’s a damn good flier himself.”

“Yeah, on my Firebolt.” Harry snorted.

Ginny suddenly made a noise that was halfway between a yelp and a squeal. “Firebolt! Harry, you could fly past the dragon!”

Hermione stared at her, intending to shoot the idea down, but the more she thought about it, the more she realised … “That might actually work.”

Harry, on the other hand, stared at Ginny like she’d suddenly grown another head. “Ginny, I’m not allowed a broom, remember? I’m only allowed my wand, so …” He broke off abruptly, gaped at her for a few more seconds, then turned to Hermione. “I need you to help me.”

“Harry!” Hermione sighed irritably. “What in Merlin’s name do you think I’ve been trying to do?”

“No!” A smile slowly spread across Harry’s face. “I need you to teach me how to do a Summoning Charm by Tuesday!”

***

“Dragons!” Ginny whimpered for what felt like the thousandth time in an hour as Viktor Krum left the arena, golden egg safely under one arm. “What were they thinking?!?”

Hermione winced as the redhead’s nails dug into her arm. “Gin, could you loosen your grip a bit?” She hissed, as ten dragon-keepers led in a very large, very angry Hungarian Horntail. “I have a feeling things are about to heat up and I’d rather you didn’t cut off my blood supply in the progress.”

“Let’s just hope that ‘heat up’ is just a term of phrase in this instance.” Ginny muttered, loosening her grip nonetheless.

“Hermione …” A sheepish voice said from behind her.

Both girls turned to glare at their ‘brother’. “What?!”

Ron blinked at the word, hissed in unison with no small amount of venom. “I wanted to apologise …”

“It’s not me you have to apologise to.” Hermione told him coldly. “It’s Harry. Weren’t you the one who said that none of us would betray him?”

Ron flinched as though he’d been struck. “I was …”

“Jealous, I know.” Hermione turned her gaze back to the arena, where Harry had just appeared, looking ridiculously small. “Doesn’t seem like such fun now, does it?”
“No.” Ron whispered. “He’ll be alright though, won’t he?”

“I hope so.” Hermione said quietly. “Now ssh!”

Harry had raised his wand and was mouthing something - *Accio Firebolt*, she assumed – and then there was nothing.

Sniggers started to erupt from around her. The Slytherins down the row, smirking, pressed the buttons on their robes so they flashed *Potter Stinks* at her.

“Come on …” Hermione whispered.

Suddenly, she heard an odd noise, like that of a wand swiping through the air, but this was continuous and she squinted in the direction of the castle to see Harry’s broom speeding towards him.

Hermione could hear Ludo Bagman shouting something from the commentators’ box, but she paid him no heed, solely focused on Harry, who seized his Firebolt and swung his leg over it.

He kicked off hard, soaring into the air, high above the Horntail. He hovered there for a second, and Hermione could almost see the Quidditch moves ticking over in his mind. His face was more serene than it had been for weeks and, despite her worry, she couldn’t help smiling fondly – trust Harry to use flying to relax, even under these circumstances.

Then he dived, faster than he ever had before, and the Horntail’s head followed him. She unleashed a great ball of fire and he pulled out of the dive just in time.

With a scream, Hermione’s hands flew to her mouth. Her nails were digging into her cheeks hard enough to leave marks, but she didn’t care.

“Great Scott, he can fly!” Bagman cried. “Are you watching this, Mr. Krum?”

Later, Hermione would endure hours of discussion between Harry and Ron about how Harry had been compared with The Viktor Krum, but right now, the words seemed to wash over him as he soared higher in a wide circle, like a bird of prey coasting the thermals.

“Take it easy, Harry.” Hermione murmured through her fingers. “Don’t worry about being the fastest. Just take it slow and steady.”

In some ways, she envied James and Lily who, as spirits, could soar alongside him, but their words of comfort did nothing to soothe him.

The Horntail’s head swivelled round, watching Harry’s every move, keeping a very close eye on this threat to her nest. He plummeted again, just as another fireball erupted. He missed the flames, but the spiked tail flew up to meet him and Hermione screamed again as the spikes caught Harry’s shoulder, ripping his robes.

“He’ll be fine!” Ron grabbed her waist as she momentarily lost her control over her empathy, and staggered at the wave of emotion that hit her. “He’ll be fine. And I’m sorry.”

Hermione shook her head as she gratefully accepted his hug. “Forget about it, alright? Just concentrate.”

Ron nodded in agreement and they turned their eyes back to the sky. Harry’s face was twisted in pain, but he was flying steady, which was a good sign, and his face soon cleared.
Harry flew around the Horntail again, this time staying just high enough to prevent her from throwing another fireball, although close enough to remain a threat.

Yellow eyes remained fixed on his tiny form as he edged slowly higher, weaving this way and that, until she finally snapped, rising up from her nest, her wings unfurling, each the size of a small aircraft.

And then Harry dived, before anyone could realise he’d moved. He dived faster than his first dive, faster, even, than Viktor Krum had at the World Cup, and he was closer to the ground. Even if he could manage to get his hands on the egg, he was going to crash.

The crowd roared, their shouts escalating to screams, as Harry scooped the egg into his arms, pulled out of the dive millimetres from the ground, and sped towards the exit to the arena, landing safely outside the blast zone.

Heart thudding in her chest and trying desperately to steady her breathing before she started hyperventilating, Hermione lowered her hands, barely flinching as Ginny threw her arms around her in relief.

“Thank Merlin …” Ron whispered, embracing both of them. “Come on!”

The three Gryffindors raced along the row, down the steps, around the chain-link fence – pausing for a few seconds to greet Charlie, who looked as relieved as they did – and into the medical tent.

Harry was sitting on one of the cots, his robes torn where the Horntail had struck, but the skin beneath was mercifully undamaged.

Lily was standing at his side, berating him in a voice so high-pitched that James, who seemed to be speechless with shock and relief, frequently winced.

“Harry, you were brilliant!” Hermione cried. Her voice was squeaky, but she ignored it, hugging him with trembling arms, and whispered, “You mum would like to request that you never do something like that again.”

“Done.” Harry grinned. “Thanks for the message.”

“That was amazing!” Ginny hugged him as well, her movements just as shaky.

Hermione saw James narrow his eyes and followed his gaze to where Ron was standing awkwardly in the entrance of the tent. She cleared her throat and nudged him forwards.

“Harry,” Ron began seriously, “whoever put your name in that Goblet … I recon they’re trying to do you in.”

“Caught on, have you?” Harry asked coolly. “Took you long enough.”

Hermione and Ginny both stepped back, exchanging a nervous glance.

“Look, mate, I’m sorry.” Ron sighed. “I’ve been a complete and utter prat, alright? I know that. I should have known you wouldn’t have entered your name, and I’ll understand if you never talk to me again.”

“Forget it.” Harry told him.

“But …” Ron began.

“Brothers fight.” Harry interrupted. “Don’t they?”
Ron nodded with a faint smile. “But they’re still brothers.”
“Right.” Harry agreed. “Just trust me in future, alright?”
“I will.” Ron vowed. “I knew I was being irrational … and when Charlie told me about the dragons …”

“He told you?!” Ginny demanded. “Why didn’t you say anything?!”
“I did!” Ron protested. “Remember? I told Hermione that Seamus had told me that Parvati told Dean that Hagrid wanted to see you. Well, Seamus never told me anything, so it was me all along. I thought we’d be alright once you’d figured that out.”

Harry stared at him. “Who could possibly figure all that out?”

Ron sighed. “It was a bit mental, wasn’t it?” He shrugged. “I guess I was a bit distraught.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Boys.”

***

By the middle of December, things had mostly returned to normal for the ‘Golden Trio’, with the only noticeable difference being that Harry was more inclined to listen to Hermione when she urged them to do their homework.

Unfortunately, the same couldn’t be said for the golden egg.

The prize from the first task turned out to contain a clue leading to the second, but opening it at the Gryffindor after-party had done nothing but release a high-pitched wail that had Seamus guessing at a banshee, Neville worried about the Cruciatux Curse, and Fred and George warning Harry that he’d have to attack Percy in the shower, because it sounded like him singing.

Satisfied by Harry’s insistences that he was working on it, Hermione found herself in the library, a week from the end of term, trying to finish her Transfiguration essay. She still had a bad feeling, but Harry’s outstanding performance in the first task had provided her with a boost of confidence, and the only things worrying her now were Rita Skeeter, Hagrid’s Skrewts, Karkaroff, Hogwarts’ apparent problem with Dumbledore and, of course, the Yule Ball.

Professor McGonagall had announced the Yule Ball at the end of their Transfiguration lesson, although Hermione wasn’t altogether sure Ron and Harry heard her, because they were having a sword fight with Fred and George’s fake wands, which had turned into a tin parrot and a rubber haddock respectively.

Everyone else had certainly heard though; nothing else was talked about anymore, especially among the female population.

Everywhere Hermione looked, the Yule Ball seemed to have taken over, especially in her dorm room as gossip about dresses, make-up, hair and boys (of course) seemed to reverberate through the walls.

There was nowhere she could escape from it, even here in the library, she realised as giggles arose from the table behind her. She glanced up, exchanging a small consolatory smile with Madam Pince, who was glaring at the girls in question, and sighed, trying to focus on her work. She couldn’t care less about who had just asked whom to the Ball, but she couldn’t help but feel slightly envious. She doubted anyone was about to line up to ask her out.

Hermione’s empathy picked up a hint of irritation, and she looked up again, raising a questioning eyebrow as Harry collapsed into the seat opposite her.
“This is hopeless!” He proclaimed loudly, causing Madam Pince to look over and hiss a warning at him.

Hermione sighed. “What’s wrong?”

“This bloody Yule Ball, that’s what’s wrong!” Harry told her heatedly, but in a quieter voice.

Hermione heaved another sigh as Madam Pince glared in their direction again. This was hardly the place for this conversation – the table behind her had suddenly gone quiet as the girls began to eavesdrop. Yet another annoyed sigh slipped past her lips as another group of girls filed in, one of them with a Bulgarian scarf tied around her waist.

*Great. Just what I need.*

Viktor Krum spent a lot of time in the library. Normally, Hermione wouldn’t have minded – he was quiet and didn’t disturb her, so why should she? Unfortunately, he also had a self-proclaimed ‘fan club’ that followed him everywhere and it was impossible to concentrate with them around.

“Come on.” She muttered to Harry, closing her book. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

Apparently, she wasn’t the only one trying to avoid them. The two Gryffindors reached the doors just as Viktor Krum did. He held the door for them, acknowledging his fellow champion with a nod. It was Hermione he spoke to, though.

“Excuse me, may I haff a vord?”

Hermione glanced at Harry, who shrugged at her. “Alright,” she said slowly. “I’ll meet you under the beech tree, Harry.” Adjusting her Transfiguration book in her arms, she followed him to an alcove, where he turned to face her, his smile making him look far less surly than he had at the World Cup.

“Ve met at the Vorld Cup.” He said unnecessarily. “Herm-own-ninny?”

“Hermione.” She corrected, shaking his offered hand. “Yes, we did.” Out of the corner of her eye, she could see James and Lily unashamedly eavesdropping and resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“I vas vondering,” Viktor continued, “if you vould accompany me to the Yule Ball.”

Hermione’s eyes widened with shock and she only just caught her book before it fell to the floor. “Wh-what? Out of all the girls in this castle, you’re asking a fourth year who barely glances in the mirror before she leaves the dorm?”

“You haff a best friend who is famous also.” Viktor pointed out. “You do not get … vot is the vord?”

“Star-struck?” Hermione suggested, knowing that it was true. “Look, I’m flattered – really, I am – but …”

“I do not mean this to be a date.” He interrupted. “I haff a girlfriend in Bulgarvia I love very much, but as a champion I need somevon to accompany me. I vould rather it be somevon I can talk to and is not using me for my fame.”

“Just as friends?” Hermione clarified.

“Just as friends.” He repeated.
Hermione hesitated, her eyes flickering towards James and Lily. Unable to ask aloud, she casually lifted her left hand and scratched her temple.

**What do you think?**

At the end of third year, after Sirius had escaped with Buckbeak, the trio had decided that it might be a good idea if they had some form of sign language that they could use, just in case something like what happened in the Shack happened again.

(“Yeah, but Sirius and Professor Lupin are the good guys,” Ron had argued. “But they might not have been,” Harry had retorted.)

Harry had admitted to them that there were a few gestures that he seemed to associate with different messages or phrases. When he had mentioned this in his letters to Arabella and Mandy, they had told him that the Marauders had also used a form of sign language that used those very movements.

Hermione guessed that he had picked it up subconsciously around his parents, the same way he had begun learning to talk.

“Go for it.” Lily said with a smile.

“Don’t trust him.” James disagreed instantly.

With a barely audible sigh, Hermione extended her empathy, finding nothing that would suggest Viktor was a threat to her. “Okay then.” She agreed. “Where should I meet you?”

“Outside our ship.” Viktor told her. “I haff to valk in vith my school.”

Hermione nodded understandingly. “That makes sense. Alright, I’ll see you then.” She departed with a wave and headed outside, to where Harry was lounging under the beech tree.

“What did he want?” Harry asked as she approached, obviously trying not to sound suspicious and failing miserably.

Hermione shrugged, her expression blank. “To hex me until I was unconscious and stuff me in a broom cupboard – I only just got away.”

“What?!” Harry jumped to his feet, drawing his wand. “Where is he?!”

“I was being sarcastic, Harry!” Hermione sighed, settling down on the grass and tugging him down beside her. “Flattered though I am that you’re willing to curse someone older and with more training just to defend me.”

Harry scowled at her. “Don’t do that.”

“What’s bothering you, Harry?” Hermione asked, ignoring him.

Harry sighed. “The dance thing. And the date thing. I can’t dance. And how are you supposed to ask a girl out if they move in packs all the time?!”

“I’ve failed my son!” James wailed. “How could this have happened?!”

“Oh, shut up!” Lily said, rolling her eyes. “It’s not like you were a Casanova yourself!”

“Excuse me?” James looked affronted. “I’ll have you know, Lily, that women threw themselves at my feet.”

Lily raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”
“I ignored them, of course.” James amended instantly, with a charming smile. “How could I not with you around? But they were there, all the same.”

“Nice save.” Lily remarked, her lips twitching. “But that doesn’t change the fact that it took you a year and a half to get me to go out with you, whereupon you told me you were in love with me and ran away.”

Hermione burst out laughing. “You’re kidding me?!”

“Hey!” Harry protested, looking hurt. “It’s a valid question!”

“Sorry, Harry!” Hermione said, still giggling. “I’m not laughing at you, I promise. Now,” she turned to him, giving herself a moment to order her thoughts, “let’s take the dating thing first. If you were Ron, I’d ask you who you want to ask, but you’re not Ron, you’re you.”

“And that changes things?” Harry asked blankly.

Hermione smiled at him. “Not usually. But you have to open the Ball, Harry. Everyone is going to be watching you – do you really want the added pressure of a first date? You’re better off asking someone you know quite well, who you can have a laugh with. Plus, you’re guaranteed that they’re not there with the Boy-Who-Lived.” She glanced at Lily, who was nodding emphatically. “Your mum agrees with me, if that means anything.”

Harry considered this for a few minutes, staring out across the still surface of the lake. A large tentacle lifted lazily into the air, snagged a passing bird, and sank below the water again, leaving only ripples in its wake.

“You’re right.” He said eventually. “As always.” Turning to face her, he gave her a charming smile that made her stomach seem to vanish. “Mione, you know you love me …”

The sentence trailed off, and Hermione fought to catch up with his implied question. _Good Lord, I’m his best friend and he can throw me off-guard with a smile. If he ever figures this out, no girl in Hogwarts would be able to resist._

“Er, yes, Harry, I do, and if we were having this conversation yesterday, I’d have said yes in a second, but … I already have a date. I’m sorry.”

“You …” Harry broke off, his face a palate of emotions. “Krum?”

“Yes.” Hermione confirmed cautiously. “I’m a big girl, Harry; we’re just going as friends.” Dimly, she wondered why she had told Harry that, then remembered what he’d said about Ron when he’d nearly cursed her.

“Hermione, what you do is up to you.” Harry told her. “As long as he treats you well, I don’t have a problem with it. It’s not like he could lie to you, is it? Not with your … gift.” He grinned suddenly. “Do you want to tell Ron or shall I?”

“I’m not saying anything until the Yule Ball.” Hermione smirked. “Hopefully, he won’t kick up as much of a fuss with that many witnesses.”

“Don’t count on it.” Harry muttered, shifting slightly. “Hermione … you don’t think … I mean … he doesn’t … you know … like you, does he?”

Hermione frowned. “Harry, I know he’s been a bit horrible to me in the past sometimes, but we’re still friends.”

“No,” Harry sighed, his face rather red, “I mean _like_ you, like you.”

“Oh.” Hermione was silent for a few seconds. “No.” She said finally. “At least I don’t _think_ so. I
Harry dropped his gaze, pulling at the grass by his side. “Just that … Ginny mentioned something the other day about you two bickering like an old married couple.”

Hermione pulled a face. “When we *bicker* we might sound like a married couple, Harry, but then we could also sound just like Ron and Ginny do – like brother and sister. Most of our arguments are just that – arguments. Far too damaging and far too long to be healthy in a romantic relationship. Hell, it’s a miracle a platonic relationship has lasted, if it weren’t for you, I really don’t think it would have done.”

Harry nodded, looking slightly relieved. “That’s good. I was worried that you two would hook up, break up and then I’d have to take sides.”

Hermione smiled softly. “Even if he did have feelings for me, Harry, he put me through too much over the last few years for me to be able to think of him that way. He’s like my brother, and I love him despite every single one of his flaws, but that’s all.” Her smile shifted into a smirk. “Not a word about Viktor, understood?”

“My lips are sealed.” Harry assured her. “So who do you think I should ask?”

Hermione thought about it for a few seconds, running through all of the girls in their year. It was probably best if it was someone their age.

*Let’s see … Can’t be a Slytherin. Daphne Greengrass is the only decent one that I can think of, but it would be social suicide for her and he’d never hear the end of it.*

*Ravenclaw … Let’s see, that’s Mandy Brocklehurst, Su Li, Padma Patil and Lisa Turpin. Well, Lisa’s got nothing in common with him at all – they’d have nothing to talk about even if he did know her. Mandy and Su are both too shy, they’d never handle the attention … or the gossip. Padma could work, but … No, she might be the smarter sister, but she’s still far too shallow.*

*Hufflepuff then … Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott and Megan Jones. Megan’s too shy, so she’s out. I think Susan’s got a thing for Neville and Hannah’s dating Ernie Macmillan, so it can’t be either of those. Pity, really, because they’d both have been a good choice.*

*As for Gryffindor, I’ve got a date, Lavender’s going with Seamus and Parvati’s worse than her sister. Plus, I think Dean’s got his eye on her. Last thing we need is another fight in the boys’ dorm.*

Hermione sighed, shaking her head. “I can’t think of anyone right …” She trailed off, catching sight of Neville and Ginny making their way towards her, laughing about something. “What about your sister?”

“I don’t have a …” Harry stopped, following her gaze. “There’s an idea.”

“Hi.” Hermione greeted as their classmates reached them. “You two have dates for the Yule Ball yet?”

“No.” Ginny answered, as Neville blushed and shook his head. “Boys have asked me, and I’d love to go, but I don’t feel comfortable dating yet, so …”

Harry cleared his throat. “In that case, Miss Weasley, care to solve two problems at once?”

Ginny sat down on the grass beside him. “That depends entirely, Mr Potter, on what you have in mind.”

“Would you go to the Ball with me?” Harry elaborated. “As friends, obviously. That way, you can go to the Ball, without having to start dating before you feel ready, and I can open the Ball without
Ginny smiled. “Thanks Harry. That sounds great. Who are you going with, Hermione?”
Hermione grinned and leaned over to whisper in her ear. “Viktor Krum.”

Ginny gasped. “No way!”

“Who?” Neville asked.

“Don’t ask.” Harry warned. “First of all, you won’t believe it. Second of all, you want plausible
deniability for when Ron blows up at her.”

Neville winced at the thought. “Fair enough.”

“What about you, mate?” Harry asked. “You got your eye on anyone?”

Neville flushed slightly. “Not really. I was going to ask Hermione, you know, as friends, but …”
Hermione smiled apologetically. “If I didn’t have a date, I’d have said yes, Neville.”

“Really?” Neville asked, sounding surprised.

“Of course.” Hermione said truthfully. “Why wouldn’t I? You’re a great guy, Nev; stop selling
yourself short. What about Susan Bones?”

Neville looked thoughtful. “I suppose I could ask her … Might look a bit weird though …”

“Why’s that?” Hermione asked with a frown. “You spend a lot of time together.”

Ginny chuckled. “They’re cousins, Mione. At least I think they are.”

*Okay, so she doesn’t have a thing for him. But Harry knows Ginny better anyway.*

“My mum and her dad were brother and sister.” Neville confirmed. “But we could just go together
like Harry and Ginny are. Means she’s not being taken advantage of, I suppose.”

“Good on you, mate!” Harry called as Neville jogged away.

Ginny and Hermione exchanged an exasperated glance, but didn’t comment on the male mind-set.
Instead, Hermione prompted, “Harry, I think you had another problem, didn’t you?”

Harry looked confused for a second. “Oh yeah. I can’t dance.”
Ginny rolled her eyes and got to her feet. “Come on. Get up.”

“Are you going to teach me?” Harry asked, scrambling up after her.

“No, I’m going to make you hop on one leg and sing the national anthem.” Ginny said briskly.
“Give me your hand.”
As she began to teach Harry a basic waltz, Hermione leaned back against the tree and chatted to
Lily, who was reminiscing about the Christmas Ball in her seventh year.

After half an hour, Ginny called for a halt. “My feet are killing me.”
“Sorry.” Harry muttered sheepishly.

Ginny smiled at him. “It’s not your fault; you’re actually pretty good. I’m just not wearing the proper
shoes to dance in.”
“What are you doing?” Ron’s voice asked. He was standing on the path leading down to the lake, watching Harry and Ginny with a bewildered expression.”

“Teaching Harry to dance.” Ginny answered, spinning out to face him. “Harry has to open the Ball, remember?”

“Oh yeah.” Ron sank down next to Hermione, squinting up at them. “Got a date then?”
“A friend.” Harry corrected, exchanging a smile with Ginny.

“Alright for some.” Ron grumbled.

Ginny smiled sweetly. “Still reeling from the Fleur disaster?”

“Fleur disaster?” Hermione repeated.

“He asked Fleur Delacour to the Yule Ball.” Ginny elaborated.

Ron glared at her. “Thanks a lot.”

Harry gaped at him. “You what?”
“I don’t know what came over me!” Ron groaned. “She was standing there, talking to Diggory, and I just blurted it out!”
“What did she say?” Hermione asked sympathetically.

“Nothing!” Ron cried. “She just looked at me like I’d crawled out from under a stone or something! Then I came to my senses and ran for it!”

“Oh, she is part-Veela.” Harry told him. “You were right; her grandmother’s one. She told Ollivander during the Weighing of the Wands – one of ‘grand-mere’s’ hairs is her wand core.”

Hermione flinched. “Harry, remind me to teach you French – you’ll probably need it one day.”

“He will.” James confirmed. “One of our villas is in France.”

While Hermione was sufficiently distracted by staring at James, Ginny patted Ron’s arm sympathetically. “See? She was probably turning on the charm for Cedric and you got a blast of it. She’s wasting her time anyway – he’s going with Cho Chang.”

Harry looked up. “Is he?”

“Yeah.” Ginny’s expression cleared and she winced slightly. “Sorry, Harry. You like her, don’t you?”
Harry shrugged, making a non-committal noise in the back of his throat.

Ron hesitated, clearing his throat awkwardly, then cracked a smile. “Hey, you’ll never guess who Neville’s going to ask!”

“Susan Bones.” Ginny answered. “He just left.”
Ron frowned. “No, Hermione.”
“Yeah, he said he’d thought about it.” Hermione agreed. “But I told him I already had a date and …”
Ron snickered. “I don’t blame you.”

Hermione glared at him. “Ron …”

“Hey!” Ron interrupted. “Neville’s right, Hermione – you are a girl!”
“Thanks for noticing.” Hermione said coolly.

“Well, then you can go with one of us!” Ron said, gesturing to himself and Harry. “Leave me out of it, mate!” Harry said hurriedly. “I’m taking your sister!”

Momentarily distracted, Ron narrowed his eyes at them. “Oh are you?”

“Harry needs someone who’s not using him and I can’t go unless a fourth year or above asks me.” Ginny said, in the same tone as Hermione.

“Fine.” Ron shrugged, turning back to Hermione, either misreading or ignoring the murderous look on her face. “Me then. Come on, Hermione! We’re going to look really stupid if we don’t have dates!”

“We?” Hermione asked acidly. “I have a date!”

Ron laughed, though not unkindly. “Come on, Hermione! You and I both know you just said that to get rid of Neville!”

“Actually, I mentioned that before he even brought it up!” Hermione snapped. “And if I didn’t have a date, I would have said yes …”

“No you wouldn’t.” Ron disagreed. “Who would? So are you going with me?”

Hermione jumped to her feet, shaking with both anger and suppressed tears. “Just because it’s taken you four years to realise I’m a girl, Ronald, doesn’t mean it’s taken the rest of the world that long!” She turned on her heel and ran for it.

It wasn’t the dramatic exit she’d have preferred, but anything was better than staying and crying. She rounded the greenhouses and let herself collapse on the lawn, burying her face in her arms, too emotionally drained to run any further.

Lily crouched next to her. “Are you alright, hun?”

“Of course.” Hermione lied, wiping her eyes. “It’s not like Ron means to be like that.”

“But that’s the way it sounded.” Lily sympathised, patting her arm pointlessly.

“Is everyone else going to think like that?” Hermione whispered. “How on earth could she get a date?” She fell silent abruptly, partly due to the sobs that overtook her voice and partly due to the footsteps that approached.

She could only hope it wasn’t someone who would carry this image to the rest of the school or a Slytherin who might not say anything to anyone else, but would never let her live it down either.

So it came as a relief when a gently arm wrapped around her shoulder, pulling her into a comforting hug. She leaned into it gratefully, feeling someone else rub her arm softly.

The tears dried after a few minutes and Hermione pulled away, accepting the tissue that was handed to her.

“Do you want me to get Harry?” Neville asked in concern, his hand resting on her arm.

“I don’t need anyone else to see this.” Hermione whispered, drying her eyes. “I’m being silly, that’s all.”

“If you’re sure …” Susan said uncertainly from her other side, her arm still around her shoulders.

“I am.” Hermione smiled weakly. “Silly.”
“What happened?” Neville prompted.

Chapter Nine - The Yule Ball

“Hermione, you look stunning.” Lavender sighed.

Hermione twirled around in front of the mirror, self-consciously. “You think so?”

Her mother had bought her some dress robes on a whim at the beginning of the summer, when they had stopped at Diagon Alley on the way back from King’s Cross, but only after they had passed her father’s inspection.

Thankfully, Lily had taught Hermione a dress-alteration spell, and she had managed to transfigure the chocolate-brown robes with long sleeves ("They match your eyes,” her mother had said. “Not even my sister would wear that colour.” Lily had informed her) into sleeveless periwinkle blue robes with a scalloped neckline.

Parvati, upon seeing her robes, had insisted on doing her hair – which involved a good deal of Sleekeazy’s Hair Potion – and Lavender her make-up, and both were now watching Hermione tearfully, looking rather like proud parents at their daughter’s graduation.

Hermione smiled at the thought, and found that she didn’t disagree with Lavender’s assessment. She had never considered herself attractive, although maybe that was because her two best friends were male and she had always been ‘one of the lads’.

Until Harry had sort-of asked her to the Ball, she wasn’t even sure he knew she was a girl.

But tonight, she barely recognised herself.

“Your date’s going to pass out.” Parvati said with a smile.

“I hope not.” Hermione remarked dryly, grabbing her cloak. *Not least because he’s not technically a date,* she added silently, as the other two giggled. “Have a good time, ladies. I’ll see you there.” She slipped the cloak around her and fastened it, before lifting her hood.

The castle was abuzz with excitement and Hermione slipped through the crowd in the Entrance Hall and out into the dark grounds, skirting around the rose garden that had sprung up overnight at the beginning of the Christmas holidays, fairy lights twinkling amidst the bushes that lined the twisting pathways.

The Durmstrang ship loomed out of the darkness, making her shiver slightly at the sight; it was one of the creepier sights she’d seen, and that included Ron’s table manners.

As she reached it, the gang-plank fell with a heavy thud and students began to disembark, many of them paired off.
“Ah, Viktor!” Karkaroff boomed, his voice echoing through the night. “This must be your date for the evening.”

Nervously, knowing full well how Karkaroff felt about people like her and, more importantly, what he’d once done to people like her, Hermione removed her hood, letting the light from the ship illuminate her face. She couldn’t help wondering whether the sharp intakes of breath were down to most of the students knowing, by now, that she was Muggle-born, or something else.

Viktor approached her with a smile, bending to kiss her hand before turning to his headmaster. “This is Hermione Granger, Professor.”

“Charmed, my dear.” Karkaroff said, following his student’s example. “I don’t think I recognise the name Granger.”

“You wouldn’t, sir.” Hermione responded politely. “I’m Muggle-born.”

For a second, Karkaroff’s smile faltered, but it was hastily restored and he turned back to the students, organising them into a line.

Hermione slipped her cloak off, shivering slightly in the cold air, and folded it up, storing in her bag, which she had managed to charm to hold more than usual.

“You look beautiful.” Viktor told her in a quiet voice.

Hermione glanced up, surprise evident on her face. “Oh … thank you.”

Viktor offered her his arm and they led the way back up to Hogwarts, through the fairy-lit rose garden, and into the Entrance Hall.

No sooner had they arrived in the warmth than they heard Professor McGonagall’s voice, amplified over the crowd. “Champions over here, please!”

She and Viktor split from the Durmstrang students and made their way to stand just to the side of the doors into the Great Hall – they were to wait there while everyone else took their seats and then enter in procession.

Cedric looked startled when he recognised her, but greeted her with a smile, which was than could be said for Cho, who was wearing traditional Chinese robes, and was gaping at Hermione in unflattering disbelief.

Fleur, who – upon conversation in the library – Hermione had learned to be both an intelligent and a compassionate young woman, greeted her more freely, seizing her shoulders and kissing her on each cheek in a customary French greeting. “Hermione, tu es magnifique!”

“Venant de toi c’est un compliment.” Hermione responded easily, blushing slightly – thanks to her empathy, she knew Fleur to be completely sincere, which was incredibly flattering, given that the Beauxbatons champion looked even more stunning than usual.

She wearing silver-grey dress-robets and standing with Roger Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain, who kept staring at her as though he couldn’t believe his luck. As much as Hermione liked Fleur, she had a feeling that her Veela heritage had more than a little to do with this – everyone in Hogwarts knew were Davies’ admirations lay normally, and they weren’t with the fairer sex.

“Close your mouth, Harry.” Ginny said quietly, drawing Hermione’s attention to them.
She and Harry looked very festive – he was wearing bottle-green robes that – as Molly had quite rightly guessed – offset his eyes beautifully, and she was wearing a shade of red that, somehow, didn’t clash with her hair.

Harry was practically gaping at her. “Hermione … you look … stunning.” As she blushed, he turned to Viktor with a stern expression. “Don’t hurt her.”


Before any more could be said, the doors to the Great Hall opened and the other students filed past them, most Hogwarts students doing double-takes when they saw Hermione.

She wasn’t sure whether to be flattered or insulted, especially when Ron walked right past them without even glancing at her.

On the other hand, not even the Slytherins seemed to be able to find an insult for her as they passed.

Once everyone inside was seated, McGonagall directed the champions and their dates into pairs and instructed them to follow her.

They entered the Great Hall to loud applause and Hermione couldn’t help smiling. She knew that the attention would annoy her tomorrow, but for the moment, it was quite satisfying watching eat their words.

Self-conscious she may still be, but even if she doubted Viktor and Fleur, Harry would never lie to her, and his reaction was enough to make her feel a hundred times better.

The Great Hall was always stunning at Christmas, but like with the food and the grounds, Hogwarts had outdone herself and it took her breath away.

The house tables had been replaced with circular ones, leaving a large dance floor in the middle of the room. In one corner of the room, a small stage had been set up for the band – the Weird Sisters, Hermione seemed to remember someone saying. The walls were covered in silver frost and hundreds of garlands of holly and mistletoe were strewn from the starry ceiling, which had somehow been enchanted to snow softly, although the flakes never actually reached them and the floor was perfectly dry.

Four of the judges – Bagman resplendent in bright robes that rivalled Dumbledore’s – were already seated at the large rounded head table, but Barty Crouch was conspicuous in his absence, and his seat was occupied by Percy Weasley.

As the champions reached the table, Percy pulled out the seat beside him and looked pointedly at Harry, who pulled out the next chair for Ginny (once she had cleared her throat significantly) before sitting himself.

During dinner, Viktor told her about Durmstrang – under the watchful eye of his headmaster – and what it was like, playing professional Quidditch.

“It is very … how would you say …” Viktor seemed to be searching for the right English word “… annoying to be recognised only for your flying skills and nothing else.”

“It must be.” Hermione sympathised. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Ron, sitting with Neville and Susan, Seamus and Lavender, and Dean and Parvati. Parvati had, at Hermione’s request, talked her sister, Padma, into accompanying Ron, but he seemed to be ignoring her, in favour of glaring at Hermione.
Viktor followed her line of sight. “He is not your boyfriend, is he?”

“No.” Hermione narrowed her eyes at Ron, dimly wondering why everyone seemed to think they were together. First Harry, now Viktor – even Parvati had mentioned it when Hermione had asked her to talk to her sister.

Well, his behaviour at the moment could certainly pass for jealousy, if it weren’t for the fact that Hermione couldn’t detect any in the air – although trying to isolate one emotion from one person was almost impossible in this crowd.

Catching Ron’s eye, she nodded pointedly towards the girl sitting next to him, and he – reluctantly, it seemed – turned to talk to her.

“We’ve been best friends since first year.” She continued, turning back to Viktor. “But he seems to have hit the emotional level of a teaspoon and just stayed there.”

Viktor laughed. “Unfortunately, Hermione, many boys do at that age.”

Once everyone had eaten, Dumbledore asked everyone to stand and, with a wave of his wand, the tables moved back against the wall, making the dance space even bigger.

The Weird Sisters trooped onstage to wild applause and Hermione resisted the urge to wrinkle her nose – they were all extremely hairy.

At the judges’ cue, the champions and their dates stood and made their way on to the dance floor as a slow, mournful waltz began playing.

As Viktor spun her round, Hermione noticed that Ginny’s lessons had paid off and that Harry was managing … not amazingly, but then he was only fourteen and had the eyes of the room on him, so given the circumstances, Hermione felt, he was doing quite well.

Better than Roger Davies, at least, who was still staring at Fleur (as he had been throughout dinner, to the extent that he kept missing his mouth), and needed to be physically steered around the dance floor.

Soon other dancers took to the floor as well; she could see Susan wincing frequently as Neville stood on her feet, Dumbledore waltzing with Madam Maxime (his hat barely reaching her chin), and Professors Moody and Sinistra engaged in an awkward two-step.

After several dances, Viktor offered to go and get them something to drink. Hermione agreed, and headed over to where Ron, Ginny and Harry were chatting.

Or rather, as it seemed, where Ginny and Harry were chatting, and Ron was ignoring them.

“Hey,” Hermione greeted, a little breathlessly. “Where’s Padma?”

Ron shrugged.

“She went off with some boy from Beauxbatons.” Ginny answered for him. “Ron wasn’t being a very good date.”

Hermione couldn’t be bothered to berate him. “It’s hot, isn’t it?” She commented, fanning her face with her hand. It may have been snowing outside, but the crowded hall was warmer than usual.

“Viktor’s just gone to get us some drinks.”

“Hasn’t he asked you to call him Vicky yet?” Ron asked waspishly.

Hermione frowned at him. “What’s the matter with you?”
“If you can’t tell, then I’m not going to tell you.” Ron snapped.

Hermione rolled her eyes, lowering her voice. “I can’t tell what you’re feeling over this many people, Ron, so just what are you …?”

“He’s from Durmstrang!” Ron snarled. “He’s competing against Harry! You’re fraternizing with the enemy!”

“Ron, that’s enough!” Harry cut him off sharply. “I know where your train of thought is going and I strongly suggest you don’t pull in at this station. I’ve got no problem that Hermione’s here with him, and I’m the one competing against him. So just drop it. Besides, isn’t there something else you’d like to comment on?”

“Like what?” Ron asked, looking lost.

Harry sighed. “I’ll do it then.” He turned to Hermione. “You really do look amazing tonight.”

Hermione flushed. “Thank you.”

At that moment, Viktor appeared next to her and handed her a bottle of butterbeer. Before Ron could make any comment, Ginny leapt to her feet and seized his hand. “Come on, big brother! You’re going to dance at least once tonight.”

“Why would I want to dance with you?” Ron muttered as Ginny dragged him away.

Her retort was lost as they vanished into the crowd, and Harry grinned. “Thank Merlin for that. Ginevra Weasley saves the day.”

“Don’t let her catch you calling her that.” Hermione warned, as Susan dropped into Ginny’s empty seat. “How are your feet, Susan?”

“Killing me.” Susan said with a wide smile.


“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Blushing, Susan turned to Harry. “Neville’s just popped to the toilet. Care to dance, since we both seem to be dateless?”

“Why not?” Harry asked lightly, draining his butterbeer. Giving Hermione a smile, he took Susan’s hand and led her out on to the dance floor.

As if his departure had opened a door, which it may well have done, Draco Malfoy suddenly appeared, shaking Viktor’s hand and just generally sucking up.

Hermione paid no attention to the conversation, watching Ginny attempt to reason with Ron, before giving up and forcefully leading him out of the hall, presumably to yell at him in private.

“I was wondering if I could borrow your date for a dance.”

Hermione choked on her butterbeer, brought back to the two boys beside her with a sharp jolt of reality.

There was no way Malfoy had just said that.

But Viktor was shrugging. “I haff no problem vith it. Hermione?”

Faintly, Hermione agreed, taking Draco’s offered hand and allowing him to lead her out into the crowd of people.

“You’re wondering why I’m doing this.” He commented, as his hand rested on her waist.
“Wondering doesn’t begin to cover it.” Hermione responded carefully. “Won’t Pansy and the others be a little suspicious?” She caught sight of Harry’s face over his head and gave him a reassuring smile.

At least Ron wasn’t in the hall for this.

“As far as they’re aware, I’m doing this to impress Krum.” Draco told her. “He’s made it abundantly clear he’s got no problem with you being Muggle-born, if it appears I do …” He stopped suddenly, as though he’d divulged too much. “I’ve been getting odd notes.”

Hermione smiled slightly. “Have you really?”

“None of them sent by owl,” Draco continued, “all of which seem to end up on my person shortly after you’ve been around.”

Hermione didn’t say anything. He knew it was her – it had only been a matter of time, after all.

“How did you know?” Draco asked in a low voice. “I’ve never told anyone. Ever. And don’t say they’re not from you, because we both know they are.”

“I have my ways.” Hermione answered slowly. “You, of all people, should know how prudent it is to keep your cards close to your chest.”

“What exactly do you know?” Draco asked, as though dreading the answer.

Hermione hesitated. It would be easy – too easy – to just look into his head and find the answer, but she would never do it.

She remembered what Lily had said about natural Legilimency being a gift given only to those who wouldn’t abuse it, and guessed that was what she meant.

“I know you dislike your father.” She said softly, just loud enough for him to hear over the music. “I know that you were trying to warn me in the woods at the World Cup, not threaten me. I know that for the last term, at least, you’ve just been going through the motions when you insult us; there’s no real heat behind it. I know you don’t care about blood as much as you pretend to, because you only ever call me a Mudblood when you feel like you have to – and don’t think I can’t see the look in your eyes when you do – and you’ve said nothing about me undermining your father in the Top Box.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” Draco pressed, looking paler than usual.

“You don’t.” Hermione answered simply, not missing a step as he spun her. “Look, I can’t get into it here. One day, I’ll tell you the full story. But you have my word that this will not spread further than this. Harry and Ron know my suspicions, but that’s all. The question is, how can I help?”

Draco sighed, the first sign of outward emotion she’d seen. “I don’t think you can. At the moment, I just need to finish school and get away from him.”

“Okay.” Hermione wasn’t convinced, but she let it go anyway. “If there’s anything I can do, just owl me.”

“Why do you care?” Draco asked.

“Gryffindor.” Hermione responded as the song came to an end. “Why does it matter?”

Draco smirked at her. “Slytherin.”

As Viktor joined them, Draco released her, squeezing her hand almost imperceptibly as he nodded to
Viktor and left them.

“I take, by the expression on your face, that was not a common occurrence.” Viktor commented lightly, spinning her into another waltz.

“Quite the opposite actually.” Hermione agreed.

The song passed quietly. Hermione was considering the implications of what had just happened.

She hadn’t expected Draco to accept her knowledge so readily and could only assume it was due to desperation. Her thoughts spun and twirled through her mind, like the dancers surrounding them, and Viktor was courteous enough to let her follow them to try to unpick what they were telling her.

In fact, Hermione was so deep in her thoughts that she didn’t notice the song end, nor Harry’s approach, until he tapped her on the shoulder.

“Mind if I cut in?”

Viktor glanced down at Hermione, and she nodded with a smile. “Of course not.”

“Oh, and this is Ginny.” Harry added, wincing when his date elbowed him in the ribs. “Ginny Weasley. Gin, this is Viktor Krum.”

Viktor kissed her hand, as he had Hermione’s earlier that evening. “May I have this dance?”

Ginny smiled, managing to keep a star-struck expression from crossing her face. “Of course.”

Harry held out his hand to Hermione, who took it as another song struck up, one she vaguely recognised this time, although she couldn’t put a title or an artist to it. She placed her other hand on his shoulder, as his settled on her waist.

“Isn’t this a Muggle song?” Hermione asked, vaguely recognising it from the summer.

Harry listened for a few seconds. “Yeah, I think so. What did …?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow,” Hermione said, anticipating the question. “I’m not getting into it here.”

Harry nodded, and his hand moved to the small of her back, steering her around another couple.

Dancing with Harry was different to dancing with Draco. Maybe it was because they weren’t talking, so she could focus on other things, like the warmth spreading emanating through her from the place where his hand rested.

But then, she and Viktor hadn’t talked the whole time, and it was different to that as well, although she couldn’t understand why.

“I know we’ve been friends forever,
But now I think I’m feeling something totally new.
And after all this time, I’ve opened up my eyes,
Now I see; you were always with me.”

After all, she and Viktor hadn’t known each other very long; surely it should feel weirder to dance with him than with Harry.
But then … it didn’t feel weird to dance with Harry; she was just very, very aware that she was doing it.

“Could it be, you and I never imagined?
Could it be, suddenly I’m falling for you?
Could it be, you were right here beside me and I never knew?
Could it be, that it’s true and it’s you?
Could it be that it’s you?”

His dancing had improved greatly since Ginny had started teaching him by the lake, but there was a definite difference now than when she had watched them earlier in the evening. Gone were the constant glances down at his feet to make sure they were in the same place, and as soon as she realised that, Hermione realised that she hadn’t been doing it either.

“It’s kinda funny you were always near,
But who would ever thought that we would end up here,
And every time I’ve needed you, you’ve been there for me,
Now it’s clear, I’ve been waiting for you.”

Their feet moved almost instinctively, their movements fluid and practiced, even though this was the first time they had ever danced together.

“Could it be you and I never imagined?
Could it be, suddenly I’m falling for you?
Could it be, you were right here beside me and I never knew?
Could it be, that it’s true and it’s you?
Could it be that it’s you?”

The music slowed, and so did the two dancers, still saying nothing, letting their eyes do the talking.

Ginny and Viktor appeared in her line of vision, and she flicked her eyes towards them, silently asking about Ron.

Harry rolled his eyes in response, his lips quirking into a smirk.

“Cause today is the start of the rest of our lives,
I can see it in your eyes and it’s real and it’s true …”

As they turned, Hermione caught sight of James and Lily across the hall, barely moving, wrapped up in each other, and she smiled, her gaze sliding back to Harry’s, who looked questioningly at her.

“Your parents.” She mouthed, and he smiled, pulling her slightly closer with the next movement.

“And it’s just me and you,
Could it be, that it's true and it's you?
Could it be you and I never imagined?
Could it be, suddenly I'm falling for you?
Could it be, you were right here beside me and I never knew?
Could it be, that it's true and it's you?

The song came to a close, and Harry and Hermione stopped moving, although didn’t part. For a split-second, something rose between them, and Hermione fought to identify it, but just as she thought she might know what it was, it was extinguished, as Ginny and Viktor approached them.

Without dropping her gaze, Harry lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to the back of it, before handing her back to Viktor and rejoining Ginny.

“What is going between you two?” Viktor asked curiously,

Ten minutes ago, Hermione had a simple, basic answer for that.

Now, she just stared after him. “I actually have no idea.”

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Less than an hour later, Viktor and Hermione parted ways in the Entrance Hall, and she made her way up to the Gryffindor common room, letting her hair out of its top-knot as she went.

She fully intended on trying to figure out what, exactly, that feeling had been and – more importantly – whether it had come from Harry or herself, or even both of them, but her path was interrupted, when she climbed through the portrait hole and came face-to-face with a very angry Ron.

“What the hell did you think you were doing?”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “What?” She was playing stupid on purpose, of course, but she had no intentions of playing along.

Ron glared at her. “That! Viktor Krum, Hermione! Harry’s opponent! How could you?!”

Hermione sighed. “Harry already knew who I was going with.” She said flatly. “He had no problem with it.”

“You’re fraternising with the enemy!” Ron repeated heatedly.

Hermione laughed humourlessly. “Oh, play a new record, Ron. This one’s scratched.” She pushed past him and started up the stairs to the dormitories.

“He’s going to hurt you!” Ron called after her.

Heaving another sigh, Hermione turned around to face him. “No, he won’t because we’re not dating. He has a girlfriend and he asked me to keep him company so he wouldn’t have to put up with a giggling fan-girl all night.”

“A-ha!” Ron cried triumphantly. “See?! He is using you!”
“It’s not being used if it’s with my consent!” Hermione yelled, finally snapping, ignoring the other Gryffindors. “Harry did the exact same thing by asking Ginny – you don’t seem to have a problem with that one, did you?!”

“Hermione, he’s trying to get information on Harry!” Ron argued. “Why else would he have asked you?!”

Hermione put a hand on the stair-rail, steadying herself. “Right, because he wouldn’t look twice at me otherwise, would he? Even if that is why he asked me, Harry has always had my full support in this Tournament, unlike some people.” She couldn’t help the satisfaction she felt when Ron’s ears turned red in embarrassment. “And you can say he’ll hurt me all you like; he’s treated me a damn sight better than you have over the last few months.”

“Damn it, Hermione, you’re not listening to me!” Ron yelled.

“I am listening – you’re just not making any sense!” Hermione yelled back. “If you don’t like it, you know what the solution is, don’t you?”

“Oh yeah?!” Ron asked. “And what’s that?”

“Next time there’s a ball, ask me before someone else does and not as a last resort!” Hermione snapped, turning and fleeing up the stairs.

She ducked into the nearest toilet and barricaded the door, feeling tears begin to cascade down her cheeks. The rational side of her mind told her that Ron was just trying to protect her, but it didn’t make her feel any better.

Lily appeared beside her and leaned against the wall. “I’d hug you, but I can’t.” Hermione managed a laugh, hiccupping slightly through her tears. “It’s fine.”

“James is yelling at Ron.” Lily told her.

“But Ron can’t hear him.” Hermione pointed out.

Lily smiled. “I know. But it’s making James feel better.”

“What’s he saying?” Hermione asked curiously.

Lily chuckled. “I wouldn’t dare repeat it. He’s giving Sirius a run for his money.”

“Hermione?” A knock sounded at the door and she unlocked it to see Ginny standing outside, a concerned expression on her face. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” Hermione sniffed as Ginny hugged her. “Ron just really got to me for some reason.”

“Ron’s a prat.” Ginny said flatly. “You don’t need me to tell you that.”

Hermione laughed shakily. “No. No I don’t.”

“Harry wants to talk to you.” Ginny whispered. “Ron’s already gone up to the dorm. Harry gave him That Look.”

Hermione nodded, knowing the look she meant – even Ron had some sense of preservation, and he wouldn’t leave the dorm again tonight if he knew what was good for him.

Harry stood immediately when Hermione entered the common room, her face wet and her eyes red. “Hermione, you’ve been crying.”

It was a statement of the obvious, but Hermione tried to reassure him nonetheless. The words stuck
in her throat, though, a sob escaped her, and she found herself in Harry’s arms, crying into his dress robes.

Ginny must have signalled something over her head, because he let out an angry hiss and tightened his arms around her. “Ron’s a prat, Mione.”

Hermione smiled into his robes. “That’s what Ginny said.”

“Are you sure you’re not my brother instead of Ron?” Ginny teased.

Harry grinned at her. “With this hair? Doubt it.” He focused on Hermione again. “What’s really bothering you, ‘Mione?”

Hermione dried her eyes and looked up at him. “Not wanting to back you into a corner or anything …”

“Uh oh!” Ginny joked. “Run for it, Harry!”

Hermione swatted her arm, still looking at Harry. “Harry, do you think I’m pretty?”

“Yes.” Harry answered instantly, guiding her to sit on the sofa. “Anyone could tell you that. And you knocked everyone dead tonight.”

Ginny nodded in agreement. “I had to close Harry’s mouth for him. He was gawping.”

Hermione couldn’t help blushing. “You were?”

Harry chuckled. “Hell, yeah. You’ve always been pretty, Mione; tonight was just a wake-up call, that’s all. Not just for me, either. Half the boys in that hall couldn’t keep their eyes off you.”

Hermione’s blush deepened even further. “Really?”


“Oh, what’s he done now?” Fred’s voice asked from behind them, laden with annoyance.

“Did he …?” George rounded the sofa and stopped, seeing the tear-streaks on Hermione’s face. He paused, his jaw hardening, and knelt in front of her, taking her hands. “How many times do you want us to punch him, sis?”

A warm glow filled her and she smiled softly. “Don’t punch him.”

Fred sighed. “Well, alright. But you’d better have a good place to get rid of the body.”

Hermione gave him a stern look, although it lacked heat. “Don’t kill him either. Just let it go.”

The twins exchanged a look over her head, before sighing in unison.

“Alright, we won’t …”

“… do anything …”

“… if you’re sure.”

“I am sure.” Hermione insisted, too tired to work out who had said what. “He doesn’t even know what he did. Now …” She stood up, stretching. “I’m tired. I’m going to bed.”

“Alright. Goodnight …”

… and sweet dreams.” Fred and George enveloped her in a hug, and disappeared up the stairs to the
sixth year dorms.

Ginny followed their example and made her way up the girls’ staircase, carrying her shoes in one hand.

Hermione didn’t blame her – her own feet were aching – and she slipped her shoes off too, promptly losing a good few inches in height and sighing softly as her bare feet came into contact with soft carpet. “That’s better.” She stooped to pick up her shoes and hugged Harry once more. “Night, Harry.”

“Night, Hermione.” Harry caught her arm as she pulled away. “I meant what I said, you know.”

“I know.” Hermione assured him, sliding out of his grip to squeeze his hand. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” With that, she went back up to her dorm, staving off Lavender and Parvati’s questions, at least until the next day.

It was good to have family, she thought, even if it wasn’t by blood.
It took nearly a month for all the excitement caused by the Yule Ball to fade away completely.

Ron apologised profusely after a week and, despite being fairly sure that he still didn’t know what he was apologising for, Hermione had forgiven him.

Reluctantly.

After telling Harry and Ginny numerous times that he was on his last chance and having them agree that, if he acted like that again, it would be the last time she ever spoke to him, friendship be damned.

However, Ron seemed to have undergone a personality transplant during that week. His emotional range was still about the size of the average teaspoon, but he seemed more tactful now.

Ginny said it was because he’d only just realised he saw Hermione like a sister, so it had confused him why he felt so angry about her ‘dating’ Viktor.

This made no sense to Hermione at all, but then Ginny had known Ron for longer than she had, so maybe it did make sense to her.

In any case, she had other things to worry about.

Ron and Ginny, while walking through the rose garden during the Yule Ball, had accidentally overheard Hagrid confessing to Madam Maxime that he was half-giant, through his mother.

Unfortunately, Rita Skeeter had caught wind of it and released a scathing article entitled ‘Dumbledore’s Giant Mistake’, which led to Hagrid taking a temporary leave from teaching, and Hermione lashing out at Rita in Hogsmeade.

She maintained that the woman had it coming – she’d been banned from Hogwarts grounds for months, so she had to be using illegal methods to get her information, especially since some of it was coming from students – Buckbeak’s ‘attack’ on Draco had been dragged up again, although curiously enough, not by him, and Crabbe had told a tragic tale of being bitten by a Flobberworm.

Harry, however, was worried about something else. “You want to be careful, Hermione.” He warned one evening, as they tried to figure out the secret behind the golden egg.

Hermione glanced up from her text book. “Why’s that?”

“Rita Skeeter.” Harry elaborated. “You’ll be next.”

“Oh, she doesn’t scare me.” Hermione scoffed. “I can’t think of a single piece of dirt she could drag up, aside from my you-know what, and we haven’t mentioned that since she appeared on the scene – and that’s the way it’s going to stay.” She added sternly, receiving nods from her companions.

“Besides, my parents are Muggles – they don’t get the *Daily Prophet*.”

Ginny sighed, closing her own book and glaring at the egg as though it had offended her. “Harry, I don’t suppose Jess had another dream telling you what the second task is, did she?”

Harry chuckled. “No, I’d have told you if she …”
Hermione cut him off with a gasp. “Harry! Did you write to Mandy and Arabella and tell them about the dream? You promised them you would when we ran into them at the Quidditch World Cup, remember?”

“Bugger.” Harry muttered, under his breath. The meeting had completely slipped his mind, driven out by the terror of the Death Eater’s march later that night. “No, I completely forgot.” Hermione sighed, pulling a piece of parchment towards her. “Honestly, Harry…” Loading her quill, she jotted down a quick explanation about Jess, just in case they’d forgotten since August, before copying out the words from her dream and their guesses.

Lily, who was reading Ron’s text book over his shoulder, chuckled. “I’d love to say he gets that absent-mindedness from his father, but he doesn’t. Has he at least been remembering to write to Jess?”

“Have you been writing to Jess?” Hermione asked dutifully.

“Twice a week.” Harry assured her, before sighing heavily. “Maybe I should just take Cedric’s advice.”

The other three ceased all activity, staring at him.

“Harry,” Ginny said slowly, “did Cedric tell you something?”

Harry nodded. “After the Yule Ball. He suggested I take a bath with my egg and to use the prefects’ bathroom – gave me the password and everything.”

“A bath?” Hermione repeated, her mind racing.

“A bath.” Harry confirmed with another nod. “Do you think he was lying?”

“No,” Ginny answered, as Ron said, “yes.”

“He’s fair.” She pointed out, when her brother rolled his eyes. “He wouldn’t do something like that.”

“Why not?” Ron retorted.

“You just don’t like him because he beat Gryffindor at Quidditch.” Hermione muttered, still thinking hard.

“It makes sense.” Ginny insisted. “Harry tipped him off about the dragons, remember? Hufflepuffs hate owing anyone anything, so he tipped Harry off to even the score.”

“But how’s taking a bath going to help?” Harry asked in bewilderment.

“Because some creatures can only communicate underwater.” Hermione whispered. “What sounds like wailing out of water may well make sense under it.”

“So you think I should go for it?” Harry checked; she nodded. “In the prefects’ bathroom?”

“It’s probably easiest.” Hermione agreed. “There’s a bath in there apparently. It’s either that, or you go and stick your head in the lake.”

Harry looked out the window at the grey skies and howling winds, and shuddered. “No thanks.”

“You’ve got the Cloak and the Map,” Ron added, warming up to the idea. “You shouldn’t get caught. Best do it after-hours as well, so you definitely have privacy.”

“Good idea.” Hermione agreed.
Ginny gasped theatrically, clutching her heart. “Are my ears deceiving me?! Did Hermione Granger just agree with Ron Weasley that rule-breaking is the best course of action?”

Harry caught her as she pretended to faint from the armchair. “Fear not, fair maiden! The world may be ending, but I have a Transfiguration essay and the sword of Gryffindor!”

A Herbology textbook landed on the rug beside them, followed shortly by Neville. “Do I want to know?”

“No.” Harry informed him, ducking the pillow Hermione threw at him so it hit Ginny in the face.

“Hey!” Ginny protested. “So you’ll slay a basilisk for me, but leave me to face a pillow?”

“It’s a pillow, Gin!” Harry exclaimed. “Do you have any idea what it would do to me?!”

“Now who’s acting like an old married couple?” Hermione asked sweetly.


“Hermione!” Harry protested, in the same tone. “That’s me and my sister.”

Hermione smirked at them. “And?”

Ron and Harry exchanged a glance, the latter getting up from the carpet. “Get her.”

Before Hermione could protest, the two boys had dived in unison and were tickling her mercilessly.

Her shrieks of laughter echoed around the common room, momentarily distracting everyone else, who glanced over, realised it was just the Golden Trio have one of their ‘moments’, and turned back to what they were doing.

For her part, Ginny, ignoring Hermione’s pleas for help, simply turned to Neville, as he asked, “So how’s third year going?”

“Pretty good.” Ginny answered, raising her voice to match his, so they could both be heard.

“Although DADA’s a bit of a let-down. Don’t get me wrong, Moody’s interesting, but he’s not …”

“Professor Lupin.” Neville finished with a nod. “I’d definitely rather have him back. There’s something about Moody … I just don’t … I don’t trust it. Whatever ‘it’ is.”

“I don’t know …” Ginny said slowly. “I mean, like I said, I miss Professor Lupin as well. Werewolf or not, he was the best teacher I’ve ever had …”

“You’re not alone there.” Harry threw in, without pausing.

“… but I think Moody’s paranoia’s rubbing off on you.” Ginny finished. “Moody and Dumbledore are old friends – he’d know if there was something wrong.”

A sudden flash alerted them and the three on the sofa stopped abruptly, Harry’s hand flying to his pocket, where his wand was.

One of the twins was standing in front of the fire, smirking at them, a camera in his hand. “Photo op!” He chirruped with a grin. “I’ll get you a copy.”

“Don’t let Rita Skeeter get hold of that.” Ginny warned with a smirk. “I dread to think what she’d make of it.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, caught her breath, and turned to Harry, smacking Ron’s hand away as he threatened to start tickling her again. “So are you going tonight?”

Harry let out a steady breath, and nodded. “Tonight.”
The next evening, Hermione, Ron and Ginny gathered around Harry in front of the fire in the Gryffindor Common Room, eager to hear what he’d found out.

He had spent the day avoiding their questions, but now, as the Common Room began emptying, he didn’t look like he was about to put it off any longer.

“First,” Harry said quietly, “we have a mystery on our hands.”

Ron and Ginny’s eyes lit up, but Hermione, as intrigued as she was, groaned quietly. “Harry, you’ve got to compete in the bloody Triwizard Tournament – don’t tell me you went looking for more trouble.”

“I don’t go looking for trouble, Hermione – trouble finds me.” Harry said patiently. “Anyway, I was coming back from the prefect’s bathroom – it’s amazing in there, by the way – when I saw Crouch’s name on the Map.”

“Crouch?” Hermione repeated, despite her silent promise not to get involved. “As in the judge?”

Harry nodded. “He was in Snape’s office.”

“So he’s too sick to come up for the Tournament, but he’s fine to visit Snape?” Ginny asked sceptically.

“That’s just it.” Harry said. “Snape wasn’t in his office.”

“So why was Crouch there?” Ron asked.

“That’s what I thought.” Harry agreed. “So I went to have a look …”

“Of course you did.” Hermione muttered.

Harry blushed. “But I got stuck in the trick stair.”

“I know.” Harry groaned. “I dropped the Egg, and the Map – it was too far away to wipe it, the Egg was wailing, Filch, Snape and Moody turned up …”

Hermione sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose as she felt the onset of a headache. “How many nights of detention?”

“None.” Harry smirked. “None of them noticed the Map to start with, and I was under the Cloak. Crouch must have left by then, because Snape was saying that he noticed that someone had been in his office – Moody’s searched it in the past, apparently.”

“Ha!” Ron muttered.

“That doesn’t surprise me.” Hermione said thoughtfully. “Moody’s so paranoid, I wouldn’t be surprised if he searched all their offices.”

“But then Moody said something about spots that don’t come off, and Snape grabbed his left forearm, like he was in pain.” Harry continued, looking at Ron and Ginny.

Both looked perplexed. “Sorry,” Ginny sighed, “I’ve never heard of that.”

Hermione shook her head as well. “Don’t know. You said to start with – did they see the Map?”
“Well, Moody can see through Invisibility Cloaks,” Harry reminded her. “So he knew I was there. He pointed out the Map – thought Snape had dropped it, so I signalled that it was mine and he summoned it before Snape could see it.”

“But Snape’s seen the Map before.” Ron frowned. “He must have guessed …”

“He did.” Harry confirmed. “Moody told him there was no one there, got the Egg back from Filch and sent them on their way.”

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank Merlin.”

“But that’s not all.” Harry lowered his voice. “I asked Moody why Crouch would want to poke around Snape’s office, and you know what he said?”

“What?” Ron asked eagerly.

“He said that Crouch is even more obsessed with catching Dark wizards than he is.” Harry answered, his eyes glinting. “And then he said that if there was one thing he hated, it was a Death Eater that walked free.”

Ron’s mouth fell open. “So Snape is a Death Eater!” He hissed. “I knew it!”

“Ron!” Hermione chided. “Even if Snape was a Death Eater, do you really think Dumbledore would let him work here if he wished us any harm? If anything, he’d have let Harry fall off his broom in first year, remember?”

Ron rolled his eyes, but Ginny cut him off before he could argue. “It’s Crouch I’m interested in. What’s he doing at the school if he’s too sick to work?”

“Maybe he’s just too sick to put up with Percy,” Ron sniggered. “He’s enough to give anyone indigestion.”

Hermione frowned, thinking hard. “I know!” She said after a few seconds. “Why don’t we keep an eye on the Map, and if Crouch appears again, James and Lily can go and …”

“No can do.” Harry interrupted. “I don’t have the Map. Moody borrowed it.”

“You gave the Marauder’s Map to a teacher?!” Ron and James exclaimed.

“I gave it to an auror.” Harry corrected. “Someone’s trying to off me, remember?”

“Where was this sense of self-preservation last year?” Hermione muttered.

“Besides, I was just glad he didn’t ask where I got it.” Harry admitted. “And he had just covered for me.”

“That’s true.” Ginny conceded, glaring at her brother. “Hermione, couldn’t James or Lily go and check on Crouch – you know, see if he’s really sick?”

Hermione looked at the two spirits, and Lily shrugged. “I don’t see why not. Hang on.”

As she faded from sight, Hermione turned back to Harry. “What about the Egg, Harry?”

Harry cleared his throat. “Come seek us where our voices sound

We cannot swim above the ground

And while you’re searching, ponder this:

We’ve taken what you’ll sorely miss
An hour long you’ll have to look
And to recover what we took
But past an hour – the prospect’s black
Too late, it’s gone, it won’t come back.”

“Great, another riddle.” Ron muttered.

Harry smirked. “But I’ve already solved it. Merpeople. They’re going to take something, and I have to swim down and rescue it.”

Ginny stared at him. “Can you swim? And how are you supposed to breathe?”

“Not really, no.” Harry shrugged. “I’ll wing it. As for the second, that’s where you three come in.”

Hermione took the text-book he offered her, as Lily reappeared. “Anything?”

“Nothing.” Lily sighed. “The wards around his property are remarkable. They block us out.”

“Who puts up wards to block spirits?” Hermione asked suspiciously. “Most people don’t even know they exist.”

“Some people put up wards to stop ghosts and ghouls taking up residence.” James explained. “We would come under that. And there are other protective wards, as well, that can affect us. I know there was a ward around Hogwarts towards the end of the war that blocked spirits, because Dumbledore knew Voldemort was an empath and he wanted to be safe, rather than sorry. Spirits could be used to spy, after all, if they turned out to exist.”

Hermione nodded in understanding. “That makes sense. Wards.” She explained to the other three. “They can’t get in.”

“What about the …?” Ginny began, but Hermione waved her down, looking expectantly at the Potters.

“Breathing underwater?”

“Bubblehead Charm.” Lily supplied instantly. “But that’s a NEWT level spell, and I don’t know whether Harry can get it in a month.”

Hermione repeated this, and Harry grimaced. “Anything else?”

“Not that I can think of off the top of my head.” Lily frowned. “Unless you try human transfiguration, but I don’t want you trying that until you’ve had more training.”

“Definitely not.” James agreed. “I can’t think of anything either, but neither of us are walking encyclopaedias.”

“Well, you’re not.” Lily teased, before smiling apologetically at Hermione. “Sorry, dear. Looks like it’s good old-fashioned research.”

“I can do that.” Hermione reached over and tapped the textbook in front of Harry. “Get to it. And don’t even think about human transfiguration.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.” Harry muttered, opening the book.
The other three followed his example and they sat in silence for a few minutes, before Ron spoke up.

“I still think Snape’s a Death Eater.”

Ginny and Hermione sighed in annoyance.

“I think Mione’s right.” Harry answered, not looking up. “Besides, Dumbledore wouldn’t have hired him if he was. Maybe Moody’s just as suspicious of Snape as we are, with less trust in Dumbledore. I’m with Ginny; I want to know what Crouch was doing in his office. I wrote to Sirius this morning, but…”

“Harry, would you focus?!” Hermione interrupted. “We need to figure this out!”

Harry fell silent, but only for a second. “What happens when it happens?”

His voice was quiet, almost too quiet to hear, but the only noise in the Common Room now was that of the crackling fire, and the other three looked up, confusion painted in their expressions.

“When what happens?” Ginny asked.

Harry fidgeted slightly, keeping his gaze fixed on the book in front of him. “Someone put my name in that Goblet … they did it for a reason, probably to kill me, as everyone keeps reminding me. Voldemort has something to do with it, I know it. I can just feel it, you know, in my gut – he’s getting stronger … Something bad is coming … When it gets here … What happens then?”

Hermione pulled the book away from him and took his hands, forcing him to look up at her. “Exactly what has happened every other time. Ron and I will be right there, by your side, and we will face it head-on.”

“And don’t think you’re leaving me behind.” Ginny chimed in.

Harry looked pained. “Ron … Hermione … you don’t have to …”

“Harry,” Ron interrupted, in a surprisingly gentle voice. “Do you remember the end of first year? You told us, if we wanted to go back, you wouldn’t blame us.”

Harry frowned. “Yes, but…”

“You didn’t really think,” Hermione smiled, “that we were just talking about the Stone, did you?”

“But you don’t …” Harry protested.

“Don’t be stupid.” Ron interrupted with a smile.

“We’re coming.” Hermione agreed. “We’re not going anywhere, Harry.”

A ray of hope flickered on his face, and she waited patiently and knowingly, as a silent battle raged within his head, the emotions playing out, as they always did, clear and strong in his eyes; he knew he needed the support, but he didn’t want them to put themselves in danger.

Hermione waited, sure which side would win, but knowing that pushing the issue would do more harm than good.

Finally, Harry heaved a sigh, and she knew it was time.

“We’re not going anywhere.” She repeated in a whisper.

“Promise?” Harry asked softly.

Later, Hermione would swear that had not been planning what happened next – it just felt like the
right thing to do. Releasing his hands, she drew her wand. “I do so solemnly swear to stand beside you in all that is coming and to put forth all that I am to support you, no matter what.”

The tip of her wand glowed with a bright golden light, which spread into her hand and travelled up her arm and through her body.

Without prompting or hesitation, Ron and Ginny copied her actions and her oath word for word.

By the time they had finished, Harry’s eyes looked suspiciously bright. “Thank you …” He opened his mouth to say more, but couldn’t seem to find the words, so closed it again.

They knew what he meant, though, and Ron clapped his shoulder, Ginny squeezed his hand, and Hermione kissed his cheek, before handing him the book back. “You’re welcome. Now focus.”

Ron chuckled. “Honestly, Mione, the things you do to get us to study.”

The tension broke, Harry laughed, and Ginny smacked her brother upside the head. Hermione rolled her eyes. “Shut up, Ron; you know …”

“Look!” Ginny interrupted, pointing at the window.

A barn owl was perched outside the window, looking thoroughly miserable in the rain, and Harry dropped the book again to open the window. “That’s the owl I sent to Sirius.”

“Already?” Hermione asked with a frown. “That was quick.”

“Barn owls are the fastest post owls.” Ginny commented, as the owl landed on her chair, hooting dejectedly. “And the weather’s hardly encouraging for a leisurely flight, is it? He probably got here as fast as he could.”

*Or he didn’t have far to fly.* Hermione took the letter Ginny handed her, checked the name just to be sure, and handed it to Harry, who opened it.

Harry frowned. “I was expecting more advice, to be honest.”

“What does it say?” Ron asked impatiently.

“Send date of next Hogsmeade weekend.” Harry read, turning the letter over just in case something else was written on the other side.

“Weekend after next.” Ginny supplied, glancing at the notice board. “Do you think he’s planning on flooing again?”

Hermione frowned as well. “I don’t think so. Last time, it was just a coincidence, I think. It’s not like the Common Room’s empty on Hogsmeade weekends. It’s more likely that …” She trailed off.

No, just because the owl had taken such little time to respond … it was no reason to assume that Sirius was in Hogsmeade.

Surely he wouldn’t be so reckless as to return to Hogsmeade, a fully wizarding village, where there was a much higher chance of him being singled out for acting un-dog-like – Muggles, after all, would just assume they were seeing things.

*And to top it off, his form looks like the bloody Grim, so if someone decides he’s a death omen and pitches a fit …*

“Idiot.” Hermione muttered.
“What was that?” Harry asked, watching her keenly. He had come to the same conclusion, she knew, and the beginnings of panic were beginning to flicker in his eyes.

“Ron.” She lied smoothly. “He’s been staring at that same page for the last five minutes.”

Harry chuckled, relief flashing in his expression as he bought into the misdirection. “I don’t even know what we’re looking for.” He admitted.

“What’s going on?” A sleepy voice asked from the stairs.

“Unfortunately, Neville, nothing much.” Ginny answered, smiling in his direction. “We didn’t wake you, did we?”

“No, just woke up and noticed Ron and Harry weren’t there.” Neville yawned and turned to go upstairs again. “I’ll just …”

“Neville, wait!” Harry called, suddenly looking more alert than he had all evening. “I might need your help.”

“My help?” Neville repeated disbelievingly.

Harry nodded. “The second task – need to retrieve something from the lake. I don’t suppose you know any plants that could help me breathe underwater.”

Hermione slapped herself mentally. Charms and Transfiguration were all very well, but as the brightest Herbology student in their year, Neville was bound to think of something eventually.

Without even thinking about it, Neville’s face broke into a smile. “Gillyweed. It’s native to the Mediterranean and basically turns you into a human fish for about an hour.”

“An hour’s all I need.” Harry said with a grin. “Thanks, Nev – any idea where I can get some?”

Neville thought for a second. “I think Professor Sprout just got a batch in; you could ask her. If not, the apothecary in Hogsmeade does owl orders.”

“Neville, you’re a lifesaver.” Hermione said frankly, closing her book. “I would never have thought of that in a million years.”

Neville blushed. “I probably wouldn’t have done, but Professor Moody lent me that book, remember? Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean.”

Hermione did remember – Moody had given it to Neville with the explanation that Sprout had mentioned how good he was, after their lesson on the Unforgivables, which had shaken Neville more than everyone else.

Now it was Harry’s turn to yawn. “Time to turn in, I think.”

Hermione glanced at the clock and pulled a face. “Past time, I think.”

“Goodnight everyone.” Ginny called, jogging up the stairs.

“Night, Gin.” Harry returned, stretching. “Right, Ron, we’d better …”

“He’s already left.” Hermione told him with a smirk. “So’s Neville.”

“Right.” Harry rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, looking around the empty room. “Listen, Hermione …” He hesitated. “Thanks again. You know, for earlier.”

“Harry, I’m your best friend.” Hermione reminded him. “You don’t have to thank me for it.”
“I know.” As they stood from the sofa, Harry pulled her into a hug, startling her slightly – Harry never initiated hugs.

It had taken her until the end of second year to get him to just hug her back without flinching.

“You’re the best friend anyone could ask for, Mione.” He whispered. “Don’t ever change.”
“I don’t intend to.” Hermione whispered back.

There was that emotion again, too under control to be identified, and she decided not to even try, tightening her hold momentarily before releasing him. “You can’t get rid of me that easily.”
Harry grinned. “I would never want to. Goodnight, Hermione.”
“Goodnight, Harry.” Hermione murmured, as he gathered his things together and disappeared up the stairs. She had no idea what was going on with her best friend at the moment, and she wasn’t altogether sure she wanted to know.

Sighing heavily, she made her way up to the girls’ dorm, completely missing, or perhaps just choosing to ignore, the knowing expression on Lily Potter’s face.
Chapter Eleven - Don't Be a Hero

Over the next week, Hermione tried not to think about whether Sirius was in Hogsmeade or not – the worry associated with it was just too strong, and it left her lying awake at night, imagining all sorts of terrible things happening.

On Saturday morning, Hermione gave up even trying to concentrate on her homework, and left the others to fend for themselves for once. Ron and Harry insisted they didn’t need her help, and since her head felt like the Marauders had moved in and were throwing a party (once again, the analogy made her pause for thought), she headed for the quiet solidarity of the Room of Requirement, where she lay on a sofa with an icepack on her head, amusing herself by making the room provide different things.

The surprise came at mid-morning, when she was absently considering going down to the kitchens to get something to eat, and a steaming bowl of soup appeared beside her, with a spoon and bread roll.

She and Lily stared at it for a few seconds, before Hermione shrugged and tucked in. “How did that happen?” She asked. “I know we’re in the Room of Requirement, but I thought food was one of the exceptions to Gamp’s Laws of Elemental Transfiguration.”

“It is.” Lily said slowly. “We never managed to get food to appear – Merlin knows James and Sirius tried enough times. They could eat twice their body weight and still have room for more.”

Hermione chuckled. “Sounds like Ron and Harry … Well, most of the time.”

They shared a sad smile – with just four days to go until the Second Task, Harry had stopped eating again. Hermione spent most of her meals trying to convince him, in between bites, to eat just a little bit.

Thankfully, Professor Sprout had indeed had some Gillyweed in the greenhouses and, after giving them a long lecture about how she was unable to help Harry or Cedric, due to the rules of the Tournament, she gave Hermione a smile and a wink, and ‘accidentally’ left the door open.

Hermione had been friends with Harry for long enough to be able to read between the lines – she couldn’t help Harry, but there was nothing in the rules that said that Hermione couldn’t, or that Hermione couldn’t borrow some Gillyweed for an ‘experiment’.

Trying to keep her mind off the Second Task, Hermione decided to finally ask Lily something that had been bothering her for months. “Lily … I’ve been having some … strange thoughts.”

“Allright,” Lily perched on the sofa next to her. “Boy thoughts?”

“No.” Hermione frowned thoughtfully, thinking hard about how to word it. “I mean … thoughts that almost don’t belong to me, except they do.” She sighed. “It’s hard to explain. I keep thinking things about the Marauders – like this morning, I told Harry that my head felt like they’d moved in and were throwing a party … but why would I think that? I don’t know what the Marauders’ parties were like! I mean, I can assume they’re as bad – if not worse – than Fred and George’s, but it wasn’t like an assumption, it was like I know …”

“Hermione,” Lily called softly. “Calm down, dear. There’s a perfectly reasonable explanation.”

“There is?” Hermione asked, her mind racing.
Lily nodded, her face downcast. “What do you hear around the Dementors?”

The question pulled Hermione up short, because she didn’t actually know the answer. She had come into contact with the Dementors three times last year.

The first two times, on the train and at the Quidditch match, the fog of despair had been accompanied by a child screaming, flickering in and out of focus like a badly-tuned radio. But Harry’s reaction had been an effective distraction and kept her from focussing on her own bad memories.

The last time, on the bank of the lake, it was different. The sheer number had overpowered her and she had passed out before she could really focus on what she was hearing.

But maybe, if she used the meditation techniques she used to control her Occlumency … just maybe she might be able to remember.

Hermione closed her eyes, allowing herself to relax and her mind to go blank. Almost immediately, she transported back to a warm night in June, but it didn’t feel warm – not anymore. She could feel the foggy cold creeping into her skin, freezing her from the inside, travelling up her body into her throat until it closed, making her gasp for air. She could hear her own feeble voice, whispering the Patronus Charm, trying desperately to produce something, but she had never learnt it, and it was hopeless anyway.

The sofa beneath her seemed to disappear, replaced by the rocky shore of the lake, Sirius’s cold, clammy skin beneath her fingers as she grasped his arm, unable to do anything more than collapse beside him.

Then she heard it, a man’s voice, shouting – not panicked, but shouting, with the air of a man readying himself for a fight. “Lily, take Harry and go! It’s him! GO! Run! I’ll hold him off!”

Then the sounds of duelling filled her mind, distant, but close enough to send fear into her heart, followed by a woman giving one long, terrified scream.

In the next second, the screams had faded into words, slightly disjointed as thought parts of the memory were missing, but Hermione didn’t go looking for them, not yet. She knew what the words would be before she heard them.

“Not Harry! Please not Harry! I’ll do anything!”

A high, cold voice entered her mind next, an incantation she had hoped to never hear, and the fog seemed to shake around her with the force of an explosion.

And then she heard that child screaming, and with a shock she realised it was her, and tears were pouring down her face as she wrenched herself out of the memory, curling up into a ball and shaking with the force of her sobs.

A fireplace appeared in the opposite wall and came to life, the flames flickering comfortingly, as a mug of hot chocolate suddenly popped up in front of her.

Hermione picked it up with shaky hands and sipped at it, allowing the smooth, creamy liquid to slip down her throat, soothing her.

A glance at Lily told her that she was crying too, though not as much. “I was there.” Hermione whispered.

Lily nodded wordlessly, wiping her face.
“Why?” Hermione asked. “We live in Crawley now, but we used to live in Yorkshire. I thought Godric’s Hollow was in Wales. How would you even know my parents?”

“Your mother,” Lily corrected, “was married before your father, did you know that?”

“Yes.” Hermione answered, pulling a tissue from her pocket. “He was out shopping when there was a robbery and …” She stopped, staring at her. “He was killed by Death Eaters, wasn’t he? But … Mum wouldn’t have known … She’d have been Oblivated, wouldn’t she? So you wouldn’t have …”

“Hermione,” Lily interrupted softly, “your mum’s a witch.”

Hermione stared at her for a second. She must have misheard; there was no way Lily had just said that.

But she did.

Her mother – Jane Granger, dentist, who never quite understood what Hermione was going through – was a witch.

Everything she had ever known about herself was a lie.

“I’m not Muggle-born.” Hermione whispered.

“Hermione, you know as well as I do that doesn’t mean a thing.” Lily said. “Your blood hasn’t changed; you just know that you’re a half-blood now.”

“How did you know her?” Hermione asked, beginning to adjust to the idea. Her first thought was that maybe her mother had been at school with Lily, but that didn’t make sense – there wasn’t enough time between Lily’s graduation and her own birth for Jane to have married twice.

“Your half-sister was one of my dorm-mates.” Lily answered.

“I have a half-sister?” Hermione asked croakily.

“Two.” Lily corrected, before sighing. “Let me start from the beginning. Jane’s a pureblood, who married from the Thompson family into the Princeton family. She had two daughters, Annabelle, who was in my year, and Helena, who was about twelve years younger.”

“That’s quite an age gap.” Hermione commented, deciding that the best way to handle this information was to pretend that Lily was talking about complete strangers.

Lily nodded in agreement. “I never found out why either. You remind me of Annie sometimes – you’ve got the same passion about things you believe in – but you look nothing like her. Annie got her looks from her dad, and we hated her for it when the flu season came by. She always managed to look stunning …”

“What happened to her?” Hermione asked bluntly, sensing that Lily was avoiding the subject.

Lily heaved a heavy sigh. “She went home for Christmas in fifth year. As soon as she came back, we knew something was wrong. She was quiet, she was withdrawn, she was avoiding us … she was disappearing when Remus did …”

Hermione sucked in a breath, not needing Lily to finish her sentence. “She’d been bitten, hadn’t she?”
Lily nodded tearfully. “We never found out what happened. She didn’t transform in the Shack, and she never told us where she did – we never saw her on the full moons, even though we tried and tried to convince her otherwise. Over the summer, she seemed to shrink down to the size of a rake – she was pale and tired all the time, scrapes and scars all the way up and down her arms.” She took a shuddering breath. “And then in early October, her dad took Helena for a walk in a Muggle neighbourhood – we all thought Jane was with them – there was an attack … They were in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Oh no …” Hermione whispered, doing the maths. If Helena was twelve years younger than Annabelle, she would have only been four-years-old.

“When Annabelle got the news, she screamed and passed out right there in the Great Hall.” Lily sniffed. “She … She never woke up.”

Somehow, the news that both of her half-sisters were dead wasn’t as shocking as it should have been. “What … What did she die of?”

“Officially, it was complications arising from her lycanthropy – she never really recovered from the bite.” Lily answered thickly. “But … honestly, Hermione, I don’t think she wanted to live anymore.”

Hermione sniffed, unable to help the tear that rolled down her cheek. When she was younger, she had wished for a sister, someone who would be her friend, unlike the children at school. Eventually, she realised that having a sister would mean someone else enduring her father’s anger, something she would not wish upon anyone.

Now she found out she had two, but they had died long before she had a chance to meet them.

It wasn’t fair.

“And my mother?” She asked calmly.

“Like I said, we thought Jane was dead, until about a month before my wedding.” Lily smiled slightly. “We were in Muggle London, it was my final dress fitting, so we had lunch as well. It was a complete coincidence that we ran into her, but we were shocked – she was pretty far along by then.”

Hermione attempted a smile. “And?”

“I invited her and her new husband to the wedding.” A frown replaced Lily’s smile. “It was Sirius who realised something was wrong. Jane was a Healer; she dealt with … something when he was twelve, and he’d been quite shaken by her death. From what I’d gathered, he took her aside and told her that if she needed anything, his door was always open.”

Hermione’s heart began thudding in her chest, anticipation filling her, although she wasn’t entirely sure why.

“A week after you were born, your father hit her.” Lily scowled. “I don’t know whether it was the first time or not, but she dropped you off with Sirius while she went to her parents. They were quite traditional purebloods, if not supremacists – they would never risk the shame of a divorce by dissolving the marriage over domestic violence.”

“But if they knew I was there …” Hermione trailed off, anger filling her. “Why didn’t she take me?! He was hurting her! He’s hurt me!”

“I know.” Lily whispered. “I asked myself that every time, Hermione. My only answer is that she loved him too much to leave him.”
“Every time?” Hermione repeated sharply. “Exactly how often did she leave me with Sirius?”

“At least twice a week.” Lily said with a sad smile. “He doted on you, you know. Hell, we all did until Harry came along, no offence. But Sirius … you’d swear he was your father instead of that …” she pulled a face “… man.”

Hermione didn’t respond, thinking deeply. All those times, late at night, where she thought she might remember a ‘dad’ instead of a ‘father’ suddenly made sense.

She closed her eyes and dived back into her memories, trying to see how far back she could remember.

Images and pictures sped past her closed eyelids, until she was left with the mere soundtrack of her life, still slightly foggy.

It confused her, but she refused to let herself get side-tracked – at least not yet – and pushed until she could push no more.

Lily’s voice filled her mind. “James … I don’t feel comfortable with this.”

“Allright. Well, do you want to check the wards while I put the kids to bed?”

“No! I meant the whole ‘Secret Keeper’ thing.”

“Lily, I trust Peter …”

“I do too, James. Don’t think I don’t. But … he wasn’t exactly acting like himself when we cast the charm, was he? Plus … he said something to me just before Dumbledore arrived … he said, “Dumbledore’s explained the dangers, right?” I assumed he meant the dangers of switching Secret Keeper – you know it can carry a risk if it’s not done right, it could have left us unprotected for a whole 24 hours – but what if that wasn’t what he meant, what if something …?”

“Lily … Would you just calm down, alright? Dumbledore would have told us if it was anything else, and Peter was probably a bit nervous.”

“I just felt so much better when Sirius was the Secret Keeper. I know it was dangerous, but …”

“Well, I think the switch is a good idea, but if it makes you feel better, sweetheart, we’ll talk to Albus about switching back first thing tomorrow morning. Alright?”

Hermione paused the memory, relishing in the control she had over her own mind. So Lily had doubts about Peter. And, more importantly, it sounded as though Dumbledore had known about the switch.

But then, if that were true, why would he tell the Ministry that Sirius was the Secret Keeper?

In any case, it seemed that her memories before that Halloween were, as yet, unreachable, so she sighed inwardly and began to fast-forward again, trying to work out where the fog came from.

It can’t have been simply time, because there was no gradual change – images one minute, just sound the next.

The explosion from before caught her attention and she stopped, morbidly curious about what happened next. She assumed that what she’d heard was the Killing Curse backfiring, and wondered how the blast hadn’t just killed both of them.
Her own cries echoed around her head, echoing in the silence of the memory. She wondered how none of the neighbours had heard an explosion that loud, but maybe it was part of the wards around the house.

Then, she heard a noise under her wails, a deep rumbling sound, like an engine. It cut off abruptly, and then there were footsteps downstairs.

Her cries became quieter, though no less intense, until a familiar voice floated up the stairs, desperation lacing his tone.

“James! It’s Padfoot – answer me, mate!”

“DADDY!”

Hermione gasped her own terrified, blood-curdling scream and, too shocked even to pull herself out of her mind, listened as footsteps hurtled up a staircase, and the ice-cold fog changed to a warm, almost familiar cloud that enveloped her.

“It’s alright, baby-girl. It’s okay, Kitten. Daddy’s here, it’s alright.”

Finally pulling herself together, Hermione forced herself to fast-forward one more time. She already had an inkling about what had happened, and it somehow came as no surprise to her when she heard her mother’s voice.

“I’m sorry, darling. Obliviate!”

Hermione opened her eyes again, staring at the wall of the Room of Requirement. “I used to call him Daddy.”

“You did.” Lily confirmed, her eyes worried. “Never in front of your mother though. You called him Padfoot then.”

“And you?” Hermione asked.

Lily smiled slightly. “I was Aunt Lily.”

Hermione nodded once, trying to organise her thoughts. “Alright, Aunt Lily, I have some questions.”

“I might have some answers.” Lily said teasingly. “Go ahead.”

“My mother wiped my memory.” Hermione said. “But I could still vaguely remember … a dad … if I thought very hard …”

“A memory charm doesn’t affect the subconscious memory.” Lily explained. “Since very few people can access or, indeed, listen to the subconscious memory, it’s never been a problem.”

“That’s what the Dementors reached last June.” Hermione murmured, running a hand through her hair. “That’s why the sound flickered. But I can remember now.” She said aloud. “Why?”

Lily looked thoughtful. “Something must have happened over the summer.” She said finally. “All Memory Charms have a trigger to unlock them. Sirius’s visit maybe?”

“No, if he was the trigger, it would have unlocked in June.” Hermione said slowly, trying to remember when these flashes of thought first started.

*It was the day the Weasleys came to pick me up … I’d just finished packing … I found …*
“Sirius’s badge.” She finished aloud. “I found his auror badge.”

Lily looked startled for a second, then smiled. “He took you home.” She guessed. “Your father was on a business trip for the next week, so Sirius took you home while he went after Peter.”

“That must have been the trigger.” Hermione whispered. “And the Memory Charm explains why my empathy took so long to make itself known – without conscious knowledge of magic, I did less accidental magic, which meant that my body needed the time to readjust.”

“Not just your body.” Lily corrected. “Your magical core would have needed it as well.”

Hermione nodded slowly. “And Dumbledore? It sounded like he knew about the switch … I heard you talking to James …”

“He knew.” Lily said coolly. “He cast the charm. I don’t know what he’s playing at, Hermione, but can I ask that you keep this to yourself for the time being? Whatever game Dumbledore’s playing, I don’t want Harry – or Sirius – involved until they know all the rules, or until Remus is there to keep them from fouling. Please?”

Hermione sighed, nodding reluctantly. It seemed unfair, but she also knew it made sense. “Alright, I won’t say anything.”

“Thank you.” Lily looked at her with tears in her eyes. “I really am sorry you got mixed up in that, Hermione, but Sirius got called into work and he couldn’t just leave you alone. If I’d known …”

“If you’d known, you and Harry wouldn’t have been there either.” Hermione reminded her kindly. “It’s not your fault.” She was silent for a few seconds, thinking. If her father was on a business trip, why was she with Sirius? Why wouldn’t he just drop her home?

“Lily …”

But before she could finish, James materialised in front of them with a knowing smirk on his face. “Guess what I found!”


James sighed, looking put-out. “Alright, guess who I found then.”

Hermione groaned, her worries coming back full-force. “He’s in Hogsmeade, isn’t he?”

Lily gasped. “Sirius? Of all the … I mean, I’m glad he’s … But what if …?” She sighed, and sat down, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Hermione, can you go and make sure he’s alright? Please?”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “Let me get this straight. You’re encouraging me to sneak out?”

Lily smiled at her. “Oh, Hermione … I was a Marauder, remember?”

Hermione chuckled. “Alright, where is he?”

“I’ll show you.” James offered. “But don’t tell Harry. As hypocritical as it sounds, I don’t want him sneaking out, not while we don’t know who put his name in that Goblet or where they are now.”

“Neither do I.” Hermione agreed, stretching as she stood up. “Assuming I can get hold of his Invisibility Cloak without him finding out why.”
As it turned out, Harry was so busy with his Potions essay that procuring his Cloak was frighteningly easy, although giving it back might be a bit awkward, since Hermione wasn’t entirely sure he had heard her ask for it.

After a quick trip to the kitchens, in which she packed as much food into her bag as was magically possible – which was quite a lot – she snuck out through the humped witch on the third floor.

Getting into the Honeydukes cellar and out past the counter wasn’t easy, but she managed to keep the Cloak on, and slipped out of the door with another customer.

She followed James in silence as he reminisced about times in Hogsmeade, but her own thoughts were in turmoil. She hadn’t been expecting to tell Sirius about James and Lily this soon, and after this morning, the situation was even more complicated.

James led her right to the end of the road, past Dervish and Banges, to a stile that led to a rocky path up into the mountains.

Hermione climbed awkwardly over the stile and began to hike, all the while trying to keep the Cloak from slipping. Finally, she stopped and looked back.

The cottages – just losing their snowy rooftops – looked almost like doll’s houses now, and she decided she was far enough away to remove the Cloak, fold it carefully, and slip it into her bag.

“Is it much further?” She asked quietly.

“Not far.” James told her. “There’s a cave just up here.”

Wearily, Hermione continued her climb, muttering under her breath about reckless Marauders who took stupid risks. She was, of course, stubbornly ignoring the fact, that she’d sleep in a cave too if Harry was in danger …

“Up there.” James told her, pointing to a spot a good fifteen feet above her head.

Hermione stopped and tilted her head back, seeing an opening in the rock just big enough to hide a decent-sized cave. “Sirius?” She called softly. “It’s Hermione. I brought food.”

Footsteps sounded above her and Sirius peered over the edge. “Hermione, what the hell are you doing here?”

“A ‘hello’ would have been nice.” Hermione said dryly. “How am I supposed to get up there?”

Sirius smirked at her. “Well, I turn into Padfoot and jump. Hold on, I’ll come down and …”

“Don’t bother.” Hermione transformed, picked the bag up in her mouth, and jumped neatly up to stand beside him. She stretched, rather enjoying the look of stunned shock on his face, before dropping the bag again and turning human once more. “That was probably easier, right?”

Sirius gaped at her. “What … How … You …”

Hermione nodded. “Thanks, Padfoot; that made a lot of sense.” She slipped past him, her eyes travelling over the sleeping bag in the corner – at least he had the sense to transfigure something – to Buckbeak at the back of the cave.

She made eye-contact and bowed slowly, waiting for him to bow back before patting his feathery neck and stroking his beak. “Hey, Beaky. Are you looking after him for me?”
Buckbeak squawked in a reassuring sort of way and ruffled his feathers, and Hermione turned to
survey Sirius, who was still staring at her in shock. He didn’t look as gaunt as his had done in the
summer, but he was still painfully thin.

“Let’s start again, shall we?” She asked, smiling. “Hi Sirius!”

Sirius finally cracked a smile and moved forward to hug her. “Hello Hermione. When did you do
that?”

“It’s a long story.” Hermione murmured into his robes. “And one for another day. I can’t be out here
too long, so I need to focus on the important bits.”

“That’s not important?” Sirius asked incredulously, releasing her.

“Well, it is.” Hermione conceded. “But it’s not as important as the rest. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?” Sirius asked slowly.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Hermione said, rolling her eyes. “The fact that Mum’s a witch? The fact that
I’ve known Harry since he was born? The fact that I used to call you Dad? Any of those would have
been a good start.”

“Hermione,” James chided gently, “I know you’re upset, but watch the tone please.”

“I’m not upset.” Hermione disagreed, half to James, half to Sirius. “I just want to know why you
didn’t want me to know. One father thinking I’m not good enough is enough, thanks.” Her voice
broke on the last work and she found herself swept into his arms again.

just wasn’t sure you’d believe me. And you were far too upset over the summer to throw that in as
well.”

“It would have made me feel better.” Hermione said plaintively, aware that she sounded like a child.

Sirius stroked her hair softly. “I’m sorry. You and Harry kept me sane in there. I couldn’t stand the
thought of you hating me – it was just a little too soon after Harry …”

“Why would I hate you?” Hermione interrupted, bewildered. “It’s not your fault you weren’t there.
You didn’t ask to be arrested.”

But Sirius shook his head, looking pained, and she could practically taste his regret in the air.

“Hermione, I promised you wouldn’t have to go back there. And you did.”

“Right.” Hermione nodded. “Because you couldn’t take a baby on a rat-hunt.”

Sirius froze, and she didn’t need her infamous brains or her empathy to know that something had
startled him – and not in a good way. “What?”

“You took me back to Mum after Hagrid took Harry.” Hermione said slowly. “Because you couldn’t
take a baby on a rat-hunt. It makes sense.”

“Hermione … you weren’t there.” Sirius said, his eyes pleading with her to agree.

“I was.” Hermione stated reluctantly. “I could remember. Around the Dementors last summer. I only
just really remembered, because Mum put a Memory Charm on me and it’s been breaking since July.
But I was there – I’m a natural Occlumens; I know what I’m hearing.”
Sirius buried his face in his hands and Hermione propelled him to a rock where they could sit down. She glanced up at James, who was watching them sadly.

“Not much you can do,” he told her softly, as Lily appeared beside him. “Just wait it out.” Hermione rested her head on his shoulder, hearing his murmured apologies. “Sirius, I’m fine.” She whispered. “We both are. Yeah, my father’s a dick, but I made my peace with that a long time ago.”

Sirius raised his head, looking anguished. “Hermione, you shouldn’t have to accept that your dad’s a …”

“He’s not.” Hermione interrupted, briskly. “My father is. Now would you eat something?” Sirius smiled weakly, hearing her unspoken words, and took the food parcel she handed him. “Thanks, sweetheart; you’re a lifesaver. Have I told you that?”

“A few times, yes.” Hermione shifted so she was leaning against the wall of the cave, observing him serenely. “You want the other important conversation now?”

“Is it anything like the other one?” Sirius asked, gnawing at a chicken leg. “Because I don’t think I can handle two of those in one day.”

Hermione thought for a second. “It’s about as emotional, but it’s all good news. Ish.”

Sirius sighed. “Alright, hit me.”

Hermione pulled her bag onto her lap and rooted through it until she found the transcript of their conversation by the lake. “Okay,” she began, holding it to her chest. “You know I’m an empath. You know the theory about the spirits, right?” “I do.” Sirius looked at her quizzically. “Is it true?”

“Yeah, and there’s been a couple of spirits hanging around since just before Halloween.” Hermione said, glancing over to James and Lily. “They were the ones who told me you were up here.”

“Do their … bodies know?” Sirius asked worriedly.

“No.” Hermione smiled. “Even if they did, it wouldn’t be the end of the world – they know you’re innocent.” She took a deep breath, making sure her empathy was fully contained. “James and Lily Potter aren’t dead; they’re stuck.”

“Stuck.” Sirius repeated blankly.

Hermione nodded. “On an island. In an undetermined location.”

“Hold on.” Sirius rubbed his head. “How are they not dead, Hermione? I was the first to arrive, remember …” “And you never found their bodies.” Hermione finished. “So how do you know they are?”

“Because … Hermione, James and Lily would never have left Harry.” Sirius argued. “Or you.” “Not willingly.” Hermione agreed. “But Harry never hears the Killing Curse around the Dementors. I do, but only once, when it’s aimed at Harry. They were hit by a non-verbal transportation spell that gives off the same green light as the Killing Curse.”

Sirius was silent for a few minutes. “I want to believe you, Hermione; I do.” “I used a dicta-quill for the first conversation, so that Harry could follow it.” Hermione offered,
folding the parchment in her hands so just the first few lines were visible. “See?” She held it out, keeping a firm hold of it. “I’m not crazy and I’m not lying.”

“I didn’t say you were either.” Sirius pointed out.

“Well, I’m either telling the truth, or I’m lying, or I’m crazy.” Hermione smiled. “If I’m not the last two, by default, I’m telling the truth.”

Sirius grinned at her. “Excellent point. Beginning of sixth year, after they started dating, James had a quiet word with me. We never spoke of it to anyone else. What did he say?”

Hermione looked over at James, who grinned as well. “That I didn’t know whether to hug him or hit him, and that he should try funnelling some of those matchmaking skills into his own love-life.”

“It’s amazing how similar you two look when you smile.” Hermione commented. “Must be a Marauder thing. He told you he didn’t know whether to hug you or hit you and that you should try funnelling some of those matchmaking skills into your own love-life.”

Sirius stared at her for a second. “They’re alive.”

“Keep going, Hermione.” Lily said softly.

Hermione unfolded the parchment and flattened it. “Thing is, Padfoot, they’re not alone out there.”

Sirius looked up sharply. “Death Eaters?”

“No.” Hermione said with a smile. “Addie and Leona are with them.”

Instantly, she was hit with a barrage of emotion so strong that it took all of her efforts to keep a smile on her face.

Sirius had closed his eyes. “Is she … Are they alright?”

Hermione glanced at Lily, who nodded hurriedly. “They’re both fine.”

“They’re fine.” Hermione repeated.

Sirius opened his eyes, and Hermione didn’t need to be an empath to know what he was thinking. He looked like he had just been let off a death-sentence. “But … I saw their bodies…”

“It’s a …” Hermione sighed. “Here.” She handed him the parchment. “Lily and James explained everything.”

Sirius took the transcript with a shaking hand, and Hermione moved to talk to Buckbeak, giving him some privacy. She watched him out of the corner of her eye, an occasional smirk or grimace telling her where he was.

Finally, he chuckled, wiping his eyes. “I guess they want me to stop blaming myself.”

“Good guess.” Hermione said lightly, crossing the cave and hugging him again. “Are you alright?”

“Never better.” Sirius kissed her forehead. “Thank you.”

Hermione didn’t bother asking why he was thanking her, and she sat down on the rock again, giving him a stern look. “I thought I told you to eat.”

“And it’s good advice.” Sirius conceded, pulling some more chicken from the bag. “I’ve been living
off rats mostly.”

Hermione grimaced, wrinkling her nose. “Pretend they’re Wormtail.”

“Oh, believe me, I have been.” Sirius said with a vicious smirk. “You look like Annie when you do that. How was the Yule Ball? We had a Ball in seventh year, you know.”

“I know.” Hermione said. “Lily told me.”

“Of course she did.” Sirius rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “Who’d Harry end up going with?”

“Ginny.” Hermione answered. “You know, Ron’s little sister. Just as friends. I suggested that it would be easier to take someone he was familiar with, rather than add the pressure of a date.”

“That’s better advice than what I gave him.” Sirius admitted.

“What did you tell him?” Hermione asked curiously.

Sirius shrugged. “Not good advice, let’s put it that way.”

Lily narrowed her eyes. “Hermione, what did he mean by that?”

Hermione sighed. “Lily wants me to make sure that you’re not corrupting her son.”

“I didn’t say that.” Lily pointed out.

“No, but you meant it.”

Sirius chuckled. “You know how odd that is?” He looked over to where he thought Lily might be, about ten feet away from where she actually was. “Don’t worry, Lils; I told him that he wasn’t going near the opposite sex until he’s fifty.”

Lily sniggered. “Well, that’s alright then.”

“She’s happy with that.” Hermione concluded.

“So who did you go with?” Sirius asked.

Hermione smiled. “Viktor Krum.”

“The Durmstrang champion?” Sirius asked, sounding surprised.

Hermione nodded. “Just as friends. He’s got a girlfriend back in Bulgaria, and I know he’s Harry’s competition, and that I probably shouldn’t trust him, but …”

“Hermione,” Sirius interrupted, “you’re an empath. He couldn’t lie to you. And I have no right to just turn up and start pulling the overprotective act.”

Hermione smirked. “But you’re doing it anyway.”

Sirius winced. “Just be careful, that’s all I’m saying. I knew a few boys back when I was in Hogwarts who used the “I’ve got a girlfriend and I just want to be friends” line. You don’t worry as much, because you don’t think you need to. I’m not saying that that the only reason he would want to be with you is a sinister one. I’m just saying to be careful; he is, what, four years older than you.”

He paused. “Are Harry and Ron worried?”

“No.” Hermione sighed. “Well, Harry isn’t. Ron has been acting like a complete git since September.
To be honest, he’s got the emotional range of a teaspoon, so I’m not too worried, but he completely blew up in my face after the Ball.”

“Was it that bad?” Sirius asked cautiously.

Hermione shrugged. “I think he’s just looking out for me. But so was Harry and he didn’t manage to imply that no one would ever date me unless they wanted information on him.”

“Hermione …” Sirius sighed, threw an arm around her shoulder, and pulled her into a hug. “Don’t listen to him. You are an intelligent, attractive young woman and if those boys can’t see that then you don’t need them.”

Hermione smiled into his shoulder. “You’re enjoying the advice thing, aren’t you?”

Sirius grinned. “Well, I don’t often get to be the wise elder.”

“You’re still not.” Hermione quipped.

“Oi!” Sirius protested, but he was smiling. “There’s the Marauder sense of humour.”

“She’s got the smirk down as well.” Lily commented. “Just like yours.”

“Lily says I’ve got the smirk as well.” Hermione repeated.

“You do.” Sirius agreed. “Harry and Ron are a bad influence on you.”

Hermione shrugged. “They do try.”

***

On Monday evening, the Common Room was filled with an anticipatory buzz. Tomorrow morning, they would journey down to the lakeside for the Second Task.

Hermione couldn’t help feeling that the organisers hadn’t really thought this Task through, from a Tournament perspective.

The First Task was all very well, but what was the point of having spectators for this one? Unless they had found some way of recreating Muggle underwater video cameras, and set up a live-feed (given how clueless most wizards were of Muggle technology, it seemed unlikely), all they would be doing was staring at a lake for an hour.

“How are you feeling?” Ginny asked Harry quietly.

“Honestly?” Harry shrugged. “Like someone’s reached down my throat, grabbed my small intestines, pulled them out of my mouth and tied them around my neck.”

“Chocolate Frog?” Ron asked blandly, offering him the box.

“Ron, don’t be a prat.” Hermione said tiredly, not even bothering to glare at him. “You’ll be fine, Harry. You’ve got the Gillyweed, you know what you’re doing … Just keep focussing on Saturday.”

Upon returning the Cloak, she had told Harry about Sirius and that he knew about James and Lily now, and the four were planning to visit him whilst in Hogsmeade that weekend.

The one thing Hermione hadn’t mentioned was her other connection with the Marauders. She would tell Harry, once she had managed to get her head around it, and when his attention wasn’t solely
taken by the Second Task.

Harry nodded, attempting a smile, but failing miserably. “Any last words of advice?”

“Whatever the song says,” Ginny said quietly, “Dumbledore won’t let anything happen to whatever’s been taken. Don’t do anything stupid. Just get in, grab whatever it is, and get out.”

“Billy, don’t be a hero.” Hermione agreed with a smile.


Harry finally cracked a smile. “It’s a Muggle reference, Ron.”

No one paid any attention to the portrait hole swinging open, until the room went quiet, whereupon they looked up to see Professor McGonagall.

“Mr Weasley, Miss Granger,” she called over the students, “if you could come with me please. Mr Ron Weasley,” she corrected, when Fred and George made to stand as well.

“Is there a problem, Professor?” Hermione asked curiously.

“You won’t need your things, Miss Granger.” Professor McGonagall told her, causing her to drop her bag. “You’re not in any trouble. Come along, quickly.”

Ron and Hermione glanced at each other, said goodbye to the others, and followed Professor McGonagall out of the portrait hole.

They walked in silence, but the two Lions could tell that their Head of House was worried about something. Her movements were stiffer than usual, and when they reached the entrance to Professor Dumbledore’s office, she stopped and spoke to them in a low voice.

“Now I want you to remember that this is a request, not a demand. If either of you want to decline, I urge that you do so. Do you understand?”

For once, Hermione didn’t understand at all and, looking at Ron, it was clear he didn’t either. Nevertheless they nodded, and she gave the password to the gargoyle, who jumped aside.

“Go on.” Professor McGonagall told them, sounding more like herself again. “He’s waiting.”

Hermione stepped onto the spiral staircase, letting it carry her up to the big oak doors, Ron standing just behind her. Neither of them had been in Professor Dumbledore’s office before, but Harry had told them it was quite a sight to behold.

Hermione took a deep breath, and knocked sharply on the door, just above the gleaming gold plate reading Headmaster Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

“Come in.”

They pushed the door open to see Professor Dumbledore sitting behind his desk, talking to Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxime. Sitting on one of the sofas behind them were Cho Chang and a young girl of about eight, with silvery blonde hair and the same blue eyes as Fleur.

Both girls had very pale, yet very determined faces and, as all eyes in the room turned to fall on her and Ron, Hermione felt her heart stop.

We’ve taken what you’ll sorely miss …
Chapter Twelve - Cause for Concern

“Ah, Miss Granger, Mr Weasley,” Dumbledore greeted them. “I trust you know why you’re here.”

Ron shook his head, but Hermione nodded shakily. “We’re hostages, aren’t we?”

“Hostages?” Ron repeated blankly.

“While you’re searching, ponder this: we’ve taken what you’ll sorely miss.” Hermione recited. “Remember? We all thought it meant material possessions; it meant us, but …” She took another look around the room, frowning slightly. “Unless Viktor’s hostage hasn’t arrived yet, it seems a bit presumptuous to say that I’m what he’ll ‘sorely miss’ after a few weeks.”

Dumbledore inclined his head to her. “Very true, Miss Granger. However, with Mr Krum’s family in Bulgaria and any other important person unavailable, you are our only option.”

The twinkle in her headmaster’s eyes made Hermione think that he knew about Viktor’s absent girlfriend – she knew that they had managed to keep their relationship secret from everyone else but their immediate family so that she could avoid the media spotlight.

It still made her a rather odd choice, but then she was also, apparently, the only choice. “What exactly does this entail?”

“And how do you know Harry will take the right hostage?” Ron put in. “I mean,” he added, when the three head teachers exchanged a glance, “as much as I hate to admit it, Mione’s been more supportive of Harry than I have this year. Even if she hadn’t, he’s more likely to go to her first.”

Hermione shook her head. “He’d go to whoever he saw first.”

“Which is always you.” Ron added with a strange smile.

Hermione would have argued, but here and now was not the time to do so or to question exactly what he meant. “I’m sure the champions will be informed of their hostages, right, Professor?”

“Indeed, Miss Granger.” Dumbledore agreed. “As to your roles, I will, with your permission of course, put you in an enchanted sleep, from which you will only awaken after the task and once you have broken the surface.”

Hermione nodded slowly. “Will there be any lasting effects?”

“A good question, Miss Granger, but there is nothing to worry about.” Dumbledore told her kindly.

Hermione glanced at Ron, who was looking thoughtful. She couldn’t honestly say she was entirely comfortable with the situation, but she also knew Harry – even with their advice, there was no way Harry would leave anyone at the bottom of that lake. “Alright, I’m in.”

“Me too.” Ron agreed almost instantly.

“Wonderful.” Dumbledore beamed. “Just take a seat with Miss Chang and Miss Delacour while we wait for Professor Snape to arrive with the potion.”

Hermione took a seat next to Fleur’s sister (because she must have been her sister – Gabrielle, if she
remembered correctly), and felt the young girl shift closer to her slightly, shaking almost unnoticeably. “Tu va bien?” (Are you alright?)

The girl started, but smiled shakily. “Oui, Madame Maxime m’a assurée que je serais en sûreté. Mais la magie des velane est plutôt reliée au feu et a l’air – je ne me débrouille pas très bien sous l’eau.” (Yes, Madame Maxime has assured me that I will be safe. But a Veela’s magic relies on fire and air – we do not fare so well underwater.)

Hermione patted her hand. “Fleur ne laissera rien te faire du mal. Je ne pense pas que les autres champions vont laissez ça arriver de toute façon. Tu es Gabriel, n’est-ce pas ? La sœur de Fleur?” (Fleur will not let anything happen to you. I do not think the other champions will let that happen either. You are Gabrielle, aren’t you? Fleur’s sister?)

She looked startled. “Comment connais-tu mon nom?” (How did you know my name?)

“I'ai discutée avec ta soeur a la bibliothèque.” Hermione told her. “Elle parle de toi souvent. Je m’appelle Hermione.” (I have spoken with your sister in the library. She speaks of you often. My name is Hermione.)

Before Gabrielle could respond, there was a knock at the door and Snape entered steaming bottle, which he decanted into four glasses.

Dumbledore flicked his wand and they soared over to float in front of each of the four hostages.

Cho drank hers first, swiftly falling unconscious and sagging against the side of the sofa. Ron moved to sit on Hermione’s other side, bracing himself against the other arm, before lifting his glass to her in a toast. “So you’ve got a softer landing.” He said with a grin. “Cheers!”

As he gulped down the potion, with the same results, Hermione raised an eyebrow. “That was actually … sweet of him. Will wonders never cease?”

To her surprise, Madame Maxime chuckled, and she spared the woman a smile, before turning to Gabrielle. “Après toi.” (After you.)

“Est-ce que tu me verras après cela?” Gabrielle asked in a quiet voice. (Will you see me afterwards?)

Hermione smiled at her. “Bien sur.” (Of course.)

Gabrielle took a deep breath, and swallowed the potion in one gulp. As she sagged sideways, Hermione quickly slipped an arm around her shoulders, letting the girl settle into her side.

She lifted the potion to her lips, glancing into the corner as Lily appeared, nodding and smiling at her.

“It’s safe.” The redhead told her. “James took a look at the potion over Snape’s shoulder – he got an Exceeds Expectations in his NEWTs and he always had a flair for spotting poisons – he got extra marks in his auror exams.”

Hermione nodded every so slightly, and downed the potion, letting herself – and Gabrielle – fall against Ron’s chest. Good luck, Harry.

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When Hermione opened her eyes again, the first thing she became aware of was the piercing cold surrounding her body.

Interestingly, the cold hit her before the wet did. A pair of strong arms encircled her waist and, as her other senses returned, bringing the Black Lake and the cheering crowds on the bank into sharp relief, she half-expected to see Harry’s face when she looked round.

She wondered if Ron’s line of questioning the night before had somehow messed with her head.

When she glanced around though, she nearly screamed – apparently, Viktor had risen to the challenge by transfiguring himself into a shark, except only his head had changed.

Thankfully, her head was too fast for her, and she managed to fight it back and give him a small smile, waiting for him to pull his wand and undo the spell.

“Are you alright?” He asked, when his head was his own again.

“I think so.” Hermione answered, swimming back to shore beside him. He helped her up on to the bank, where they were promptly accosted by Madame Pomfrey, who wrapped them in blankets and gave them Pepper-Up Potion and hot chocolate.

“What happened down there?” Hermione asked urgently, drying her hair with a towel. She could see James and Lily hovering by the edge of the lake, glancing over at her every few seconds, both worried just as much about her, but unwilling to leave their current posts.

Percy – apparently still filling in for Barty Crouch – was pacing up and down a few metres away from him, and she realised with a jolt that Harry and Ron must still be in the lake.

“Vell, from what I saw, Potter used Gillyveed and Diggory used the Bubblehead Charm.” Viktor told her, glancing over her head. “It looks like he beat us back.”

Hermione followed his gaze to see Cedric with his arm around Cho. He caught her eye and grinned rather embarrassedly as his girlfriend tried to recapture his attention by attempting a tonsillectomy with the sole use of her tongue.

At least that’s what it looked like.

“Fleur used the Bubblehead Charm as well.” Viktor continued. “But her hostage was still there and she is back.”

Hermione looked towards the lake again, seeing Fleur being restrained by Madame Maxime and fighting tooth and nail to get back to the water. Her arms were covered in angry red scratches. “Poor girl. Judging by those scratches, I’d say she got caught by the Grindylows.”

“I only just escaped them.” Viktor commented. “How did Potter get past them so easily?”

Hermione smiled wryly. “Luckily, the only decent Defence teacher we’ve had covered every magical creature that could possibly be considered ‘dark’. And Harry happens to be the top of the class in that subject.” She cast another anxious glance at the lake. “Is he still down there?”

Viktor nodded. “He beat me to the hostages, and he had Veasley free, but it looked like he was waiting for something.”

Hermione groaned, her suspicions proven correct. “I told him! I told him not to be a hero!”

“My parents were wondering if you would like to visit Bulgaria this summer.” Viktor said, changing the subject. “My mother is good friends with the Transfiguration professor at Durmstrang, who is
good friends with your Professor McGonagall. Apparently she has many good things to say about you and Mother wants to offer you a summer apprenticeship. Katarina would like to meet you as well.”

“Really?” Hermione asked, surprised – she hadn’t known Professor McGonagall thought that highly of her. “Well, it would be an amazing experience … but I don’t know what I’m doing this summer yet. I don’t even know where I’m going to stay …”

She broke off abruptly as Lily screamed from the lakeside, and the crowd roared. Her head screamed in pain and she clutched at with a gasp, losing her balance, even though she was seated. As Viktor put a hand on her shoulder to steady her, she took deep, gulping breaths, trying to dim the pain in her head.

For once, her empathy refused to listen and she retreated deeper into the depths of her mind, catching glimpses of memory as she did so.

One voice floated above the others, and she paused to listen to it, even as the pain subsided. “Hermione, darling, I am so sorry. Harry, I love you. I love you so much, Pumpkin. Just close your eyes, sweetheart, and go to sleep.”

Hermione shook her head, the Hogwarts grounds coming back into view. Viktor was looking concernedly at her.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” Hermione smiled weakly. “Just a sudden headache, that’s all – I wasn’t expecting it.” She focused on the lake, where Harry, Ron and Gabrielle had resurfaced.

The two boys exchanged a few words, before they seized Gabrielle under the arms and swam with her towards the edge.

Percy, to Hermione’s surprise, waded out to meet them, his face pale against his red hair, and pulled Ron the rest of the way, much to his younger brother’s embarrassment.

Fleur had finally managed to break free and grabbed her younger sister in a hug, sobbing unashamedly, while Dumbledore and Bagman each grasped one of Harry’s arms to help him up onto the bank.

Hermione gasped when she saw how pale Harry looked, and his limp posture. “Oh sweet Merlin!”

“What is it?” Viktor asked.

“Harry only had enough Gillyweed for an hour.” Hermione whispered, glancing at the huge clock that had been conjured over the stands. Even if the champions had been delayed, Harry was at least ten minutes outside the time frame.

Madam Pomfrey dragged Harry, wrapped firmly in towel and blanket, over to them, then left to collect Fleur and Gabrielle, and to rescue Ron from Percy’s clutches. Dumbledore was kneeling by the lakeside, talking with one of the merpeople.

As soon as Harry was close enough, Hermione flung her arms around him, as well as she could while wrapped in a thick woollen blanket. “Harry, are you alright?”

“Are you alright?” Harry responded, shivering slightly.

“I was in a potion-induced sleep, Harry.” Hermione said, pushing the Pepper-Up Potion towards his
lips. “Drink it.”

“Thank you.” Lily whispered, as close to Harry as she could get.

Only once Harry had drained the glass – and his ears had stopped smoking – did Hermione speak again. “You took the song seriously, didn’t you?”

“You haff a vater-beetle in your hair, Hermione.” Viktor said quietly, explaining the soft tug on her hair as he pulled it out.

“Thanks.” Hermione said absently. “Harry, we would have been safe. Dumbledore wouldn’t have let us drown.”

“First of all, I’d like to see you think logically in that situation.” Harry paused. “Scratch that, you’d probably manage it. For those of us without super-human brains, it’s not so easy.”

Hermione smiled slightly. “Second of all?”

“Second of all, if you think that I’d leave a kid that young at the bottom of that lake,” Harry said, jerking a thumb towards the water, “you don’t know me as well as you should.”

Hermione chuckled. “No, I knew you’d do it. I was just hoping I was wrong for once. If that Gillyweed had worn off any earlier …”

“But it didn’t.” Harry interrupted. “So it’s fine.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but at that moment, Madam Pomfrey returned with Ron, Fleur and Gabrielle, who threw herself into Hermione’s arms.

“Ermione, zank you for comforting ‘er last night.” Fleur said sincerely. “She was just telling me about eet.”

“It was nothing.” Hermione assured her.

Fleur waved Madam Pomfrey away. “Look after Gabrielle.” She turned to Harry. “You saved ‘er. Even zough she was not your ‘ostage.”

“I couldn’t just leave her.” Harry repeated.

Fleur swooped down, kissed Harry twice on each cheek, and turned to Ron. “And you two. You ‘elped.”

Ron looked hopeful. “Yeah! Yeah, I did!”

Hermione rolled her eyes as Fleur kissed his cheeks too and pulled Gabrielle over to a chair, fussing over her. Dumbledore had finished his conversation and was now talking quietly with the judges.

“And how, exactly, did you do that, Ron? By snoring at her?”

The tips of Ron’s ears turned red, but Ludo Bagman’s voice suddenly boomed across the lake, making them all jump.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached a decision! Merchieftainess Murcus has told us exactly what happened at the bottom of the lake, and we have therefore decided to award marks out of fifty for each of the champions, as follows. Fleur Delacour, though she demonstrated excellent use of the Bubblehead Charm, was attacked by Grindylows as she approached her goal and failed to retrieve her hostage. We award her twenty-five points.”
The crowd applauded, as Fleur stroked her sister’s hair, shaking her head. “I deserved zero.”

“Cedric Diggory, who also used the Bubblehead Charm, was first to return with his hostage, though he returned one minute outside the time limit of one hour. We therefore award him forty-seven points.”

As the Hufflepuffs in the crowd exploded, Hermione quickly did the maths in her head. *Let’s see, Fleur had thirty-nine, so that means she’s now got sixty-four. Cedric had thirty-eight … plus forty-seven is … eighty-five.*

“Viktor Krum used an incomplete form of Transfiguration, which was nevertheless effective, and was second to return with his hostage. We award him forty points.”

Karkaroff clapped particularly hard, looking very superior, Hermione noticed. *Arrogant prat. So if Viktor had forty, he’s now got eighty. Cedric’s in the lead so far.*

“Harry Potter used Gillyweed to great effect. He returned last and well outside the time limit of an hour. However, the Merchieftainess informs us that Mr Potter was the first to reach the hostages, and that the delay in his return was due to his determination to return all the hostages to safety, not merely his own.”

Hermione gave Harry an exasperated look and saw, to her amusement, that Ron was doing the same thing, but they were both caught off guard when Bagman announced that most of the judges (he threw a very nasty look at Karkaroff, who looked thoroughly unrepentant) felt this showed moral fibre and that Harry was to be awarded forty-five points.

In fact, for once, it took Hermione several minutes to catch up.

“There you go, Harry!” Ron yelled over the noise, clapping Harry on the back. “You weren’t being thick after all! You were showing moral fibre!”

“The third and final task will take place at dusk on the sixteenth of June. The champions will be notified of what is coming precisely one month beforehand.”

Hermione tuned out the rest of Bagman’s words, as Madam Pomfrey began herding the champions and hostages towards the castle for dry clothes, muttering all the while about insane competitions.

As worried as she was about Harry, Hermione couldn’t help realising that Harry was tied for first place once again, this time with Cedric. At this rate, it seemed that Harry wouldn’t just survive the Tournament – there was a very good chance he’d win it.

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“I can’t believe what that woman did!”

Ginny’s voice floated back to them, and Hermione bit back a smile. ‘That woman’ happened to be Rita Skeeter, who had published a rather scathing article in *Witch Weekly* entitled ‘Harry Potter’s Secret Heartache’.

The redhead’s anger was out of protectiveness, rather than taking it personally – it was Hermione who was apparently ‘toying’ with Harry’s affections.

Hermione had been furious, and had received some very nasty letters from readers, including one filled with undiluted Bubotuber pus.

Her hands still hadn’t completely healed, but she was trying not to think about it – the sun was
shining, the sky was blue (although the February winds still howled through the streets), and she, Ginny, Ron and Harry were walking though Hogsmeade, armed with a bag of food, to meet Sirius. She had purposely slowed her pace, knowing that Harry would fall back too. “I need to talk to you.”

“What about?” Harry asked quietly.

Hermione took a deep breath. “I’m not Muggle-born. My mother’s a witch. Sirius used to baby-sit me so often I used to call him Dad. And your parents were watching me the night they were attacked.” She smiled slightly at the stunned expression on his face. “I found out about a week ago. Didn’t want to throw you off the task.”

Finally he took a deep breath. “So now what?”

“I don’t know.” Hermione admitted. “I don’t think anything’s going to change that much, Harry; I just figured you should know. Especially since … Well, I remember that night better than you do.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Harry stiffen, but he didn’t break stride. “Mum said something, didn’t she?”

“That she loved you.” Hermione answered softly. “So much.”

Harry nodded jerkily, and she reached out and squeezed his hand as they caught up with Ron and Ginny.

“I can’t believe her!” Ginny repeated.


“Good philosophy.” Harry remarked, as they reached the stile, where a large black dog was waiting for them, a few newspapers in his mouth.

“Hello, Padfoot.” Harry greeted. The dog sniffed the bag eagerly, and set of up the mountain path.

“Isn’t anyone going to wonder where we’re going?” Ginny asked, glancing over her shoulder.

“They’ll just think we’re on a double-date or something.” Harry answered with a shrug. “How much further?”

“Just round this corner.” Hermione called.

“You’re telling us all the whole story later.” Harry told her in an undertone.

“I know.” Hermione turned to Ginny as they reached the cave entrance and gave her a leg up onto the outcrop. Then she transformed and leapt up herself.

Buckbeak opened his huge orange eyes as she turned human again, and she steered Ginny over to him. “Keep eye contact and bow.”

The hippogriff regarded them imperiously for a minute, then bowed back, allowing Ginny to tentatively pat his feathery neck. “He’s beautiful.” She murmured. “Aren’t you?”

Buckbeak preened under the praise, leaning into her petting like a cat.
Hermione turned back to the cave entrance, in time to see Padfoot shift back into Sirius, Ron and Harry standing beside him.

She hugged him, as the two boys bowed to Buckbeak, and Sirius tossed the papers on to the floor, before embracing Harry as well. “How are you?”

“Better than I was Tuesday morning.” Harry quipped. “At least Ron and Hermione have stopped oversleeping.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. The sleeping draught had had a side-effect – she had been finding it difficult to get out of bed in the morning.

Sirius’s gaze turned to the other two fourth years, lingering longer on Hermione. “But you’re both alright now?”

“Both fine.” Ron answered for her, stroking Buckbeak’s neck. “This is Ginny, by the way – my sister.”

“It’s nice to finally put a face to the name.” Sirius said with a smile, shaking her hand. “You know, if I didn’t know better, I’d say that James and Lily had another kid.”

Ginny laughed. “And since you do know better?”

“You look more like your aunt than your mother.” Sirius answered.

Ron and Ginny exchanged a puzzled glance. “Aunt?” She repeated. “We only had uncles – Uncle Bilius on Dad’s side and Uncle Fabian and Uncle Gideon on Mum’s.”

Hermione flinched slightly. Mandy and Arabella had managed to get tickets to the World Cup through Mandy’s job in Magical Games and Sports, and had told them about the day the Prewett twins were killed, after Death Eaters had run riot …

“Did you get them, Dad?” said Bill sharply, as new skin began forming over his wound. “The person who conjured the Mark?”

“No,” said Mr Weasley. “We found Barty Crouch’s elf holding Harry’s wand, but we’re none the wiser about who actually conjured the Mark.”


“Harry’s wand?” Fred repeated.

“Mr Crouch’s elf?” said Percy, looking thunder-struck.

With some assistance from Mandy and Arabella, Mr Weasley explained what had happened in the woods. When they had finished their story, Percy swelled indignantly.

“Well, Mr Crouch is quite right to get rid of an elf like that!” he said. “Running away when he’d expressly told her not to, embarrassing him in front of the whole Ministry …”

“For the love of Merlin, Percy, someone conjured the Dark Mark and that person is still unknown!” Mandy snapped. “Believe it or not, Barty Crouch getting a little embarrassed is not the worst thing that happened tonight!”

“Look, can someone just explain what that skull thing was?” Ron asked impatiently, before Percy
could respond. “It wasn’t hurting anyone … why’s it such a big deal?”

“I told you before, it’s You-Know-Who’s symbol, Ron.” Hermione answered, before anyone else could answer. “I read about it in The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts.”

“And it hasn’t been seen for thirteen years.” Mandy added, sinking onto the old sofa, which creaked slightly. “Of course people panicked.”

“I don’t get it.” Ron frowned. “I mean, it’s still only a shape in the sky …”

“Ron, Voldemort …” Arabella rolled her eyes when everyone but Hermione, Harry and Mandy flinched. “It’s just a name, people. Voldemort and his followers sent that mark into the sky when they killed. The terror it inspired …” She looked at Mr Weasley. “May I use an example?”

Mr Weasley shrugged. “As long as they don’t tell Molly. I think they need to understand.”

“James – Harry’s father – was an auror, as you may know.” Arabella reached across the table and took Harry’s hand. “So he was right in the thick of it. One day, before Harry was born, we were at Hogwarts, talking to Dumbledore about something, when he got a floo call telling him that the Dark Mark had appeared over a small village in the Midlands.”

“Lily nearly fainted.” Mandy continued. “That village was the site James and the others had been called out to earlier that day, and if the Mark was in the sky …”

“It meant that someone was dead.” Ron finished, realisation crossing his face.

Arabella nodded, taking up the story again. “Lily begged Dumbledore to let her go, but she was pregnant with Harry by now and he reminded her that James would have wanted her to stay put, so we stayed with her.”

“It felt like hours.” Mandy whispered, staring at the wood-grain of the table. “We sat there in silence, waiting. After a while, Lily started crying, which she really didn’t do often. We’d taken her home by now and she just curled up on the sofa and cried.”

“Then there was a knock at the door.” Arabella smiled. “And a voice said, “it’s me.” And Lily looked up, still crying and said, “What am I thinking right now?””

Mandy laughed. “And James said, “James Potter, you arrogant toe-rag, I’m going to kill you for scaring me like that.””

The tension broke and several people chuckled.

“We let him in and …” Arabella trailed off. “He was covered in blood. Not his,” she added hastily when Hermione gasped. “But he was covered in it. Nearly gave Lily a heart attack. She yelled at him for that and sent him off to the shower, while he muttered something about not being able to win.”

“You see why everyone was scared now?” Mandy asked Ron.

Ron nodded, looking abashed. “Who died?”

“Ronald!” Hermione hissed.

But neither woman looked offended or that strongly affected by the question.

Instead, they looked at Mr Weasley, who sighed and removed his glasses, nodding.
“Fabian and Gideon Prewett.” Mandy answered in a quiet voice. “Your uncles.”

“They died heroes.” Arabella added. “Took about twenty Death Eaters with them.”

“But the Dark Mark … it represented everyone’s worst fears …” Mandy whispered. “The very worst.”

“Molly’s sister, Madeline, was in Gryffindor with me.” Sirius told them quietly, his words cutting through Hermione's thoughts. “She was killed during our seventh year, at the same time as your grandparents.”

“What was she like?” Ginny asked softly.

Sirius smiled slightly. “Very kind-hearted girl – never had a bad word to say about anybody. Incredibly ditzy though.”

“I didn’t know Mum had a sister.” Ron commented.

“In that case, you did not hear it from me.” Sirius said, smiling at Harry, who returned it half-heartedly.

“What are you doing here, Sirius?” He asked quietly.

“Fulfilling my duty as godfather.” Sirius answered. “Don’t worry – I’m pretending to be a lovable stray.”

“Not sure that’s possible, mate.” James smirked, materialising to lean against the wall.

“Not sure that’s possible.” Hermione repeated, earning two sniggers and a fake-insulted look. “He said it, not me.”

“Thanks, Prongs.” Sirius tossed over his shoulder, before turning to Harry, sobering up at the anxiety on his face. “I wanted to be on the spot. Things … Well, let’s just say they’ve been getting fishier. I’ve been stealing papers every time someone throws one out and, by the looks of it, I’m not the only one that’s noticed.”

Ron picked up the yellowing Daily Prophet daily paper from the floor and unrolled them, holding them so Ginny could see them as well.

Harry was still staring at Sirius. “But what if you’re seen?”

“You three … four …” Sirius amended “… and Dumbledore are the only people round here who know I’m an Animagus.”

Hermione saw Ron nudge Harry and hand him the papers, and she moved to read the headlines over his shoulder: Mystery Illness of Bartemius Crouch, one read, while the other explained Ministry Witch Still Missing – Minister of Magic Now Personally Involved.

Harry shuffled the papers to read the story about Crouch, his eyebrows rising into his hair line as he muttered phrases that jumped out at him. “They make it sound like he’s dying.” He said finally, looking up. “But he can’t be that ill if he managed to get up here …”

“Probably stress from putting up with Weatherby.” Ginny said dryly. “I know it turns my stomach.”

“Our brother’s Crouch’s personal assistant.” Ron explained for Sirius’s benefit, grinning slightly.
“He says Crouch is suffering from overwork.”

“Mind you …” Harry said slowly. “He did look ill last time I saw him up close. That was Halloween. And if he’s got worse …”

“Getting comeuppance for sacking Winky, isn’t he?” Hermione asked edgily, feeding Buckbeak the chicken bones she’d found in the kitchens. “Bet he’s feeling the difference now she’s not there to feed him and wash and iron his clothes and clean his house … Bet he’s wishing he’d never done it.”

Ron rolled his eyes and shot her an exasperated look. “Hermione’s become obsessed with house-elves.”

But Sirius looked interested. “Crouch sacked his house-elf?”

“At the World Cup.” Harry confirmed, and launched into the story of the Dark Mark, Hermione adding details here and there.

By the time they had finished, Sirius was pacing up and down, apparently deep in thought. “Let me get this straight … you saw the elf in the Top Box first, right? She was saving Crouch a seat?”

“Right.” The four agreed together.

“But Crouch never turned up?” Sirius asked.

“No.” Harry answered. “I think he said he’d been too busy.”

Hermione nodded in confirmation but said nothing, watching Sirius pace around the cave once before coming to a halt. “Harry, did you check your wand after you left the Top Box?”

“Erm …” Harry frowned in thought, then shook his head. “No. No, I didn’t need to use it until we got into the woods. And then all I could find were my Omnioculars. Are you saying that someone in the Top Box stole my wand?”

In hindsight, it made sense. There was no way Harry would just ‘lose’ his wand. It made much more sense that someone stole it from his pocket, and the Top Box was the only real opportunity – Harry’s jeans may have once belonged to Dudley, but there was no way someone took his wand from his back pocket without him noticing.

However …

“Winky didn’t steal that wand!” Hermione protested.

“There were other people there.” Sirius reminded her. “Who was sitting behind you?”

“Loads of people.” Harry answered. “Some Bulgarian Ministers …”

“And I got the impression they were firmly against You-Know-Who,” Hermione put in, “judging by the way they reacted to you.”

“… Cornelius Fudge …” Harry continued.

Ginny snorted. “I doubt he’s got the brains to conjure a regular snake, let alone the Dark Mark. Besides, he might be an idiot and in Malfoy’s pocket, but he’s not dark.”

“… the Malfoys …”

“The Malfoys!” Ron interrupted. “I bet it was Lucius Malfoy!”

“No, definitely not.”
Hermione jumped, startled by the new voice. “Bloody hell, Lily, don’t do that!”

“Sorry.” Lily said, smiling sheepishly.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Were you keeping an eye on them then?”

James snorted. “Absolutely. Do you really think I’d let that son of a …?”

“JAMES!”

“Harry can’t hear me!” James protested.

“But Hermione can!”

Hermione winced. “Could you hear that?”

Sirius chuckled. “No, but I can probably guess what happened – James cursed and Lily yelled at him for it.”

Ron looked almost disappointed, but Sirius just nodded. “I would have been surprised if he did. He went to a lot of trouble to keep himself out of Azkaban – running around in a crowd causing mayhem was fine, but he wouldn’t do anything more than that. Not without Voldemort to hide behind. Was there anyone else in the Top Box?”

“No.” Harry answered. “Just us and the Weasleys.”

“And Ludo Bagman.” Hermione reminded him.

“Hermione,” Lily cut in, her voice pained. “Could you please ask my son to do something about his hair? It looks like he’s been through a hedge backwards!”

Hermione gaped at her. “Are you kidding me?” She sighed, turning to Harry. “Your mother would like to request that you do something about your hair because, and I quote, ‘it looks like he’s been through a hedge backwards’.”

“It’s not my fault!” Harry protested, throwing his hands in the air. “It grows like this!”

“That’s what I keep telling her, son, but she’s bloody persistent.” James grinned, ignoring his wife’s eye-roll. “Besides, chicks love the windswept look.”

“Your father agrees with you.” Hermione said wearily. “Can we get back to the slightly more pressing issue now?”

Sirius quickly wiped the smirk off his face. “I don’t know anything about Bagman, except that he used to be a Beater for the Wimbourne Wasps. What’s he like?”

“He’s alright.” Harry answered with a shrug. “Keeps offering to help me with the Tournament.”

“Does he now?” Sirius frowned. “I wonder why he’d do that.”

“He says he’s taken a liking to me.” Harry offered.

Seeing Sirius looking pensive, and remembering Rita Skeeter’s comment (though she was loathed to believe the woman) that she knew things about Bagman that could ‘make her hair curl’, Hermione reminded the boys that they’d seen him in the forest, just before the Mark was fired.
Ron and Harry looked sceptical, but Sirius admitted she had a point and then asked again about Winky.

Hermione sniffed, still sore over the whole thing. “He sacked her – just because she hadn’t stayed in her tent and been trampled to death!”

Ron groaned. “Hermione, would you give it a rest with the elf?!”

“No, she’s got the measure of Crouch better than you have.” Sirius told him, not unkindly. “If you want to know what a man’s really like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals.” He ran a hand through his hair distractedly. “All these absences of Barty Crouch … doesn’t bother to watch the World Cup … goes to a lot of trouble to reinstate the Triwizard Tournament, and then stops attending … if he’s even taken so much as an hour of work before this because of illness, I’ll eat Buckbeak.”

The hippogriff squawked, and Sirius patted his neck absently. “No offence, Beaky.”

“Do you know Crouch then?” Harry asked.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Of course he does. I told you at the World Cup, Harry – Sirius used to be an auror, remember? And Crouch was Head of Magical Law Enforcement.”

Ron gaped at her. “Is there anything you don’t know?”

“Correct as always, Hermione.” Sirius said, smiling humourlessly. “But that’s not why he sticks in my mind. He was the one who gave the order for me to be sent to Azkaban … without trial.”

Hermione tried to speak, but the only thing that escaped was a sort of strangled squeak. She guessed that the whole conviction had been rigged … had been dirty … but she had never even considered the possibility that there hadn’t even been one.

Ron looked horrified. “But … But … But that’s illegal! They can’t keep anyone in Azkaban for more than a month without trial!”

Sirius shrugged. “Apparently murdering scum like me don’t deserve trials.”

Hermione hugged him before Harry could, burying her face in his robes to hide her tears. He wrapped an arm around her, stroking her hair soothingly.

“But he would have been your boss!” Ginny protested. “Surely he would have known …”

“Crouch never liked me. And he didn’t care.” Sirius said bitterly. “He just wanted to put as many Death Eaters away as possible, and if a couple of innocents got caught in the net, it was their fault for getting in the way.”

“But why didn’t anyone care?!” Hermione demanded.

“Because everyone was scared.” Sirius answered gently. “My family … Well, they’re not the nicest people in the world. I don’t blame anyone for doubting me.”

“Whether they thought you were guilty or not, Sirius, other people got a trial.” Ginny said heatedly. “Hell, Malfoy got a trial, however corrupt it was.”

“It was a dark time!” Sirius explained. “Measures were taken everywhere that shouldn’t have been …” He sighed. “You’re too young … you wouldn’t understand …”

Ron made an annoyed noise in his throat. “That’s all anyone seems to say to us! Try us, why don’t you?!”
A ghost of a smile flickered on Sirius’s face and he sat down on one of the boulders, letting Hermione tuck herself under his arm. “Alright, I’ll try you. Imagine a world where Voldemort is at full power. You don’t know who to trust, who to believe. You don’t know who works for him, who supports him, or who supports you. Every day, you hear more news of death, disappearances … you have to deal with the relief that it’s not someone you know, the guilt for feeling so relieved, and the fear that tomorrow it might be your parents, your siblings, your friends, your children … people you care about, people you love …”

His voice shook on the last word, and Harry sat down on his other side, as Ron and Ginny sank on to the floor, listening attentively.

"Times like that bring out the worst in some people, and the best in others.” Sirius grimaced. “Barty Crouch rose to the top very quickly. People were scared; they wanted someone who would fight back against the Death Eaters in a way that would actually stop them. Crouch was always very outspoken against the dark side, and dark magic in general.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?” Ron asked.

“Not … exactly.” Sirius answered slowly. “There is … The Ministry has a list of spells that they consider dark magic, but there’s dark magic out there that the Ministry pretends doesn’t exist, because it’s so dark that they don’t want to think about it. The dark magic they consider dark is more grey than anything.”

“But Crouch didn’t agree with this ‘grey’ magic?” Hermione asked.

Sirius shook his head. “No, not at all. There were some aurors that felt he was a bit of a hypocrite in that respect. He started ordering very harsh measures against Voldemort’s supporters; the aurors were given the power to kill, rather than capture, and several of us were authorised to use the Unforgivables against suspects.”

“But the Unforgivables are dark, aren’t they?” Ginny frowned.

Hermione sighed. “No, they’re Unforgivable. Technically, they’re not considered dark.”

Sirius nodded in agreement. “That’s why we felt he was hypocritical. An auror using the Killing Curse and bringing in a dead Death Eater was fine, but an auror using grey magic to incapacitate a Death Eater and bring them in alive, he didn’t like.”

“That’s stupid.” Ron said frankly.

Sirius grinned. “Yeah, it is. I agreed with the kill not capture part, but the Unforgivables were crossing the line as far as I was concerned. But Crouch was very popular in the Ministry – a lot of people felt he had the right idea. And a lot of people were calling for him to become Minister after Millicent Bagnold retired.”

“So why didn’t he?” Ginny asked blankly. “How come we got Fudge instead?”

Sirius smiled grimly. “Crouch’s son was caught with a group of Death Eaters who’d somehow managed to avoid Azkaban. Apparently they were trying to find Voldemort and restore him to power.”

“His son was caught?!” Hermione repeated, sitting up in shock. “Did … Did Crouch try to get him off?”

Sirius chuckled affectionately. “Go back to your original opinion of Crouch, Hermione, and tell me if
he seems like that kind of man.”

Hermione frowned. “No. But surely no one would want their child in … there, no matter what they’d done!”

Sirius shook his head. “Anything that tarnished his reputation had to go – you saw how he treated Winky because she connected him even faintly with the dark arts again. Crouch’s fatherly affection stretched just far enough to give his son a trial – by all accounts, it was nothing more than an excuse to show the world just how much he hated the boy. And then he sent him straight to Azkaban.”

“He gave his own son to the Dementors?” Harry asked quietly.

“I couldn’t believe it.” Sirius admitted. “I just … I couldn’t believe it.”

“What if I ended up doing something like that?” Harry asked. “Or …”

Hermione caught his eye and shook her head. She would tell Ron and Ginny later, but they didn’t have time for the conversation to get side-tracked.

“Or worse?” Harry finished.

“Harry, I’d be furious.” Sirius said honestly. “But you’d still be my godson. And I’d still love you. And no matter what you did, I’d never want you near those … things.”

“But Crouch just disowned …” Hermione paused. “What was his son’s name?”

“Barty.” Sirius answered. “Everyone just called him Junior. He was a Hufflepuff a few years below us.”

“A Hufflepuff Death Eater?” Ron asked. “That’s a new one.”

“Hufflepuffs are known for their loyalty, Ron.” Hermione said softly. “And he must’ve had that in spades – most of the Death Eaters just pretended they didn’t know You-Know-Who after they disappeared. So Crouch just disowned him?”

“Yeah.” Sirius stared at the wall. “I watched them bringing him in, watched them through the bars. He can’t have been more than nineteen … this pale wisp of a kid … He ended up in a cell near mine, was screaming for his mother by nightfall. He went quiet after a few days … they all did in the end … except when they screamed in their sleep …”

Hermione could almost see the shutters fall, as the light in his eyes flickered and dimmed. This time, she and Harry moved at the same time, wrapping their arms around him, trying to bring him back to the present.

“So he’s still in Azkaban?” Ron asked awkwardly.

“No.” Sirius answered, his voice dull. “He died about a year after they brought him in.”

“He died?” Ginny asked, before she could stop herself.

“He wasn’t the only one.” Sirius whispered. “Most people go mad in there … plenty stop eating in the end … lose the will to live … You could always tell when a death was coming – the atmosphere would change. Besides, the boy looked pretty sick when he arrived. Crouch and his wife were allowed a death-bed visit – he had to practically carry her out. I think she died as well, actually, not long afterwards. Broken heart probably. And after they died, people started to feel a bit more
sympathetic, started wondering how a kid from such a good family had gone astray like that.”

“And they all blamed Crouch.” Hermione concluded.

“More or less.” Sirius agreed, sounding more animated. “Crouch lost it all, when he nearly had everything; got shunted sideways into International Magical Co-Operation while Fudge got the Minister post. Merlin knows how he managed that though – last time I saw him, he was a desk clerk for the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad.”

“But Fudge didn’t help your cause either, did he?” Harry asked, then frowned. “For that matter, neither did Dumbledore. Arabella wrote me this summer and explained that she told the Ministry that you’d changed Secret Keeper, but they insisted she’d been Confunded. Fudge threatened to arrest her in the end as well.”

“Charming.” Ron snorted.

“Remus wasn’t even in the country when we changed.” Lily said softly. “You can understand that.”

“Was Mandy in the country?” Hermione asked.

“Yes.” Sirius and James answered in unison.

Hermione looked at Sirius. “You can’t even see him; how the hell did you do that?!?”

Sirius smirked. “Great minds think alike. Mandy was in the country when we changed – she left for Albania two days later.”

“Didn’t she notice a difference?” Hermione asked. “I mean, Remus was abroad – he had an excuse.”

“Mandy didn’t visit James and Lily in those two days.” Sirius said gently. “Aside from anything else, she was dating Peter at the time.”

“What?” Ron asked incredulously. “You’re kidding!”

Sirius chuckled. “I know, we were all stunned. I don’t even know when they started dating – some point after graduation presumably. One of the reasons I didn’t think twice about us changing Secret Keeper was because he seemed to adore her – forget James and Lily, I would never have dreamed that he’d hurt her like that.”

“That poor girl.” Hermione murmured, remembering the pain that seemed to be floating around Mandy when they’d met her at the World Cup. Suddenly, it made a lot more sense.

“I don’t blame her in the slightest.” Sirius said firmly. “It makes sense that she’d rather believe him a martyr than a traitor.” He cleared his throat and attempted a smile. “But it’s good to know Arabella believed in me.”

“Oh, the mass-murder thing, she wasn’t so sure about.” Harry admitted. “She thought you’d killed Peter and overcharged the spell.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Lovely.”

Harry smiled slightly, before reverting to the original subject. “Moody says Crouch is obsessed with catching dark wizards.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard he’s become a bit manic about it.” Sirius frowned. “If you ask me, Crouch reckons that catching one more Death Eater will bring back his popularity.”

“And he sneaked up here to search Snape’s office!” Ron finished, throwing a triumphant look at
Hermione.

“No, that doesn’t make sense at all.” Sirius told him.

Ron seemed to deflate. “Why not?”

“Why would Crouch sneak up here to search Snape’s office, when he could just as easily keep an eye on him without looking suspicious by continuing to judge the Tournament?” Hermione asked practically, earning an approving smile from Sirius. “Besides, Ron, Dumbledore trusts Snape …”

Ron cut her off. “Oh, come on, Hermione! I know Dumbledore’s brilliant and everything, but that doesn’t mean a really clever dark wizard couldn’t fool him! Remember first year?”

Hermione did remember first year, but the more she thought about it, the less certain she felt that Dumbledore hadn’t known that Voldemort was in the school. Noticing Sirius’s perplexed expression, she hastily swerved away from Quirrell, unwilling to go into life-threatening adventures just yet. “Yes, I do – Snape saved Harry’s life! Why would he …?”

“Maybe he thought Dumbledore would kick him out if he didn’t.” Ron suggested.

“What do you think, Sirius?” Harry asked loudly, causing the bickering pair to fall silent.

Sirius looked thoughtful. “Honestly, I think they’ve both got a point. I was at school with Snape, as you may have guessed – he was in our year. Slimy, oily, greasy-haired git, he was; not as bad as some Slytherins – he definitely made comments based on blood purity, but almost as a last resort; he didn’t seem to really believe it – but he was worse in some respects. Most people took no notice of Remus’s monthly disappearances, or that he looked so ill, but Snape did – he would actually seek Moony out. Lily used to call it ‘kicking a man when he was down’.”

“That’s because that’s what it was.” Lily scowled. “That was the reason James and Sirius pranked him so much.”

“Snape knew more curses arriving at Hogwarts than most people did finishing it.” Sirius continued. “And he was part of a group of Slytherins who nearly all turned out to be Death Eaters.”

There was a sudden surge of emotion – somewhere between betrayal and hatred – that Hermione couldn’t quite place nor, she decided, did she want to.

“As far as I know, Snape was never even accused of being a Death Eater, but that doesn’t mean much. Plenty of them were never caught.” Sirius scowled. “And, as much as I hate to admit it, Snape’s clever enough and cunning enough to keep himself out of trouble.”

“Well, Snape knows Karkaroff pretty well.” Ron said darkly. “And he seems pretty intent on keeping that quiet.”

Harry nodded in agreement. “Karkaroff came into Potions yesterday,” he explained for Sirius’s benefit, “said that Snape was avoiding him. I hung around afterwards to eavesdrop.”

Sirius chuckled. “That’s my boy! What did he say?”

“Well, I couldn’t really hear.” Harry frowned. “But Karkaroff seemed really worried. He showed Snape something on his arm, but I couldn’t see what. Karkaroff said it was getting clearer and that it hadn’t been this clear since something else, but Snape cut him off and kicked me out.”

“Something on his arm.” Sirius repeated, running a hand through his hair. He looked bewildered, but Hermione didn’t miss the flash of panic that crossed his face, nor the sense of almost fear that rose in the air. “Well, I’ve no idea what that could have been … but if Karkaroff’s worried and he’s looking to Snape for help …” He grimaced and sighed. “There’s still the fact that Dumbledore trusts Snape –
and I know Dumbledore trusts where a lot of people wouldn’t, but I just can’t see him letting Snape teach if he ever worked for Voldemort.”

“So why do Moody and Crouch want to search his office then?” Ron questioned.

Sirius frowned. “Well, I wouldn’t put it past Moody to have searched every teacher’s office; very paranoid that man.”

Harry chuckled. “That exactly what Hermione said.”

Sirius smirked. “That’s my girl! It’s understandable Moody’s like he is though – after everything he’s seen. James and I were halfway there after just a few years. I think Harry was the only one who could make a sudden noise around James and not end up at wand-point. I’ll say this for Moody though – never used Unforgivables if he could help it. Crouch … Crouch is different. You said your brother’s his personal assistant?” He asked Ron. “Any chance you could ask him if he’s seen Crouch recently? You could ask him about Bertha Jorkins while you’re at it.” He picked up the other paper, frowning at it. “I was at school with her as well. Didn’t know her too well, but I won’t deny I’m getting worried.”

“I’ll try.” Ron promised. “But it won’t be easy. Percy thinks the sun shines out of Crouch’s …”

“What’s the time?” Ginny interrupted, much to Hermione’s relief.

Harry checked his watch, more out of habit than anything. “Do you know, Hermione? Mine hasn’t worked since Tuesday.”

“That might have something to do with jumping into a lake, Harry.” Hermione reminded him, checking her own. “Three-thirty. We need to get going.”

Sirius stood up with them. “Listen, I don’t want you sneaking out.” His words were directed at Harry, though his eyes flickered to Hermione as well. “Just send notes – I still want to know what’s going on. But you are not to leave Hogwarts without permission – it’s a lot easier for someone to attack you.”

“No one’s tried to attack me yet … except for a dragon and a couple of Grindylows.” Harry protested.

Sirius scowled. “I don’t care. I’ll be damned if I’m going to lose you too. Understand?”

Harry nodded, the slightly rebellious look on his face softening, and Sirius pulled him into a fierce hug, pressing a kiss to his messy hair.

“We’d better go.” Ginny said reluctantly. “It was nice meeting you.”

“Likewise.” Sirius nodded to her.

“You three go ahead.” Hermione told them. “I want a quick word.” She waited until Ron, Harry and Ginny were out of earshot, before letting her smile fall and allowing the worry to cloud her expression. “You know what Karkaroff showed Snape. What aren’t you telling us?”

Sirius sighed. “Death Eaters have the Dark Mark branded on their left forearm. They use it to identify one another and communicate with Voldemort.”

“I wondered how he called them.” Hermione murmured. “Something told me that sending out thirty-odd owls to organise an attack was somewhat impractical.”

Sirius snorted. “Just a bit, yeah. If the Mark’s getting clearer, it means Voldemort’s getting stronger.
Pair that with Harry’s dream … I’d bet anything that the last time it was that clear was when Voldemort was in power.” He put a hand on Hermione’s shoulder. “I want you to promise me something …”

“I’ll keep an eye on him.” Hermione said softly. “Make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid.” She smiled weakly. “I’ve been doing it for years.”

Sirius sighed. “I want you to promise me that you’ll *both* take care of yourselves. Watch your backs, don’t trust blindly, be *ready* for anything.”

Hermione nodded. “What are you going to do?”

“The only thing I can do.” Sirius said grimly. “Carry on doing this and hope it actually makes a difference.” He pulled her into a hug, kissing her forehead. “I promise, Hermione, I’m not leaving you two again.”

After the last three years, Hermione didn’t consider herself naïve – not even close. She knew it was a dangerous promise to make – an empty one. If Voldemort returned – *when* Voldemort returned – there would be another war.

In war, there were no promises, no guarantees.

Just pain, and fear, and death.

And that was why she didn’t call his bluff.

She couldn’t bring herself to acknowledge reality, so she allowed childhood innocence to accompany her for a little while longer.

***

The months passed with nothing to suggest that Voldemort was planning anything, and nothing to suggest who had entered Harry’s name.

On May sixteenth, Harry left Ron and Hermione after dinner and headed out to meet Bagman and the other champions on the Quidditch pitch to learn about the Third Task, while they returned to Gryffindor Tower.

After over an hour had passed and Harry still hadn’t returned, Hermione was beginning to worry. *He should be back by now.*

“Yes, he should.” Ginny agreed from beside her, making her jump.

“You didn’t realise I said that aloud.” Hermione said weakly.

“You didn’t.” Ginny smirked. “You’re just easy to read sometimes.”

At that moment, the portrait hole swung open and Harry stumbled in, his face as pale as it was the night he learned about the dragons.

The Common Room fell silent, every face turned towards their Champion, every gaze questioning. What could have happened to make Harry Potter – quintessential Gryffindor, Boy-Who-Lived-Slayed-A-Basilisk-And-Outflew-A-Dragon – look like that?

Angelina, Alicia and Katie – who had long since adopted their Seeker as a little brother – moved towards him, but Hermione beat them to it, grasping his arm. “Harry, what happened? What’s the task?”
“It’s nothing, Hermione.” Harry assured her, loud enough for the Common Room to hear. At the same time, he placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, squeezing it lightly, three times in quick succession.

To the onlookers, it seemed like a calming gesture.

But to Harry and Hermione – and to Ron and Ginny, who had both focused on Harry’s hand the moment it had landed - it carried a simple message. _Play along. We need to talk._

“The Third Task is a maze, by the way.” Harry told the room. “Best not tell Oliver though – we currently do not have a Quidditch pitch.”

Hermione had to admire his misdirection. At the mention of their former Quidditch-obsessed captain, the three Chasers relaxed, laughing along with the joke, no longer looking like they wanted to drag Harry to Madam Pomfrey.

“Bit of an easy task, isn’t it?” Lee commented. “A maze.”

“I wish.” Harry rolled his eyes. “There’ll be various obstacles and charms to get past – and Hagrid’s lending them some of his ‘pets’.”

A shudder travelled round the room – there wasn’t a Gryffindor alive who didn’t know of Hagrid’s love for dangerous animals.

One of the seventh years – a boy Hermione knew by sight, though not by name – actually got up and shook Harry’s hand. “Nice knowing you, Potter. Anything particular you want on your tombstone?”

Harry laughed, taking the remark in the way it had been intended. “How about ‘Why is it always me?’”

“Sorry, Harry!” Neville called. “I’ve already reserved that.”

The laughter increased as Harry mock-sighed. “I’ll have to rethink it then and let you know.” As the seventh year returned to his friends, chuckling to himself, Harry yawned widely – though Hermione knew it was fake – and headed over to talk to Neville, Seamus and Dean, who were playing Exploding Snap.

Quiet words were exchanged and the three other boys nodded, looking uncharacteristically serious, and Harry disappeared up the stairs, giving Hermione a meaningful look.

Hermione understood, but with the Common Room full of people, she couldn’t just walk up to the boys’ dorms. What she needed was an excuse, and she waited patiently for Ron to provide her with one.

It came a few minutes later, when Ron stood up, stretching. “I’m turning in. Night Gin, Herms.”

Fred and George, in earshot, winced at the nickname, knowing from experience how much Hermione hated it.

“Ronald Weasley, don’t call me that!” Hermione snapped. “If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times …”

Ron just smirked and jogged off after Harry.

“Ron, I’m talking to you!” Hermione headed after him, dimly hearing Ginny make some comment about stopping her from killing him.
Glad that she’d caught on so quickly, Hermione kept yelling at Ron until she was out of earshot, slipping into the fourth year dorm behind them.

Ginny arrived seconds later, and Hermione locked and silenced the door behind her. “Nice one.”

“Thanks.” Ginny grinned. “Have you two ever really argued about that name, or is it always a ploy to get you three some privacy?”

“Oh, they’ve argued.” Harry groaned, still pale. “Believe me, they’ve argued.”

“Forget that, Harry, what happened?” Hermione asked urgently.

“Yeah!” Ron seconded. “They haven’t really turned the pitch into a maze, have they?”

“They have.” Harry said grimly, as Hermione rolled her eyes. “There’s little hedges all over the place.”

Ron made a strangled sound that seemed to be a cross between a whimper and a moan.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Ron!” Hermione sighed. “Something else happened, Harry, what is it?”

Harry took a deep breath. “After Bagman finished explaining the task, Krum asked me for a word. We walked to the edge of the Forest, behind the Beauxbatons carriage, and he asked me if the rumours were true.” He smirked slightly. “Apparently, I slayed a manticore in my second year.”

Ginny giggled. “Did you tell him it was a basilisk?”

“Yeah.” Harry grinned. “I don’t think he believed me.” He sighed and his smile faded. “Then Mr Crouch appeared out of the Forest.”

“Crouch?” Hermione repeated. “As is Percy’s boss?”

Percy had long-since replied to Ron’s letter, informing them in a very annoyed tone that Mr Crouch was not as ill as the Prophet was making out and that he was sending Percy instructions via owl.

Harry nodded. “He didn’t seem to realise that we were there to start with … he kept talking to a tree as though it was Percy.”

“Easy mistake to make.” Ron snickered.

Ginny smacked his arm. “Ron! That’s bad! The poor man must be really ill!”

“I wouldn’t call him a poor man.” Hermione muttered mutinously. “But that’s definitely more than the flu. What did he look like?”

“Awful.” Harry frowned. “All dishevelled and … And then he grabbed me and said that he needed to talk to Dumbledore … said he’d done a stupid thing and Voldemort was getting stronger and that it was his fault. And then he started talking to the tree again, like his wife and son were still alive. I told Viktor to watch him and ran to get Dumbledore.”

“So where is he now?” Ginny asked.

“That’s just the thing.” Harry said, his voice dropping. “I ran into Snape, and he delayed me, but when Dumbledore and I got back, Viktor had been Stunned, and Crouch had disappeared.”


“I don’t know.” Harry shrugged. “When we woke Viktor up, he said that Crouch had stunned him.”
“Write to Sirius.” Hermione said immediately.

“Dumbledore told me to stay in the Tower.” Harry said, almost reluctantly.

“I don’t care.” Hermione said sharply. “I’ll take it to the Owlery for you. Write down everything.” As he loaded his quill, she looked over at James and Lily, who had just appeared. “Did you …?”

“No.” James scowled, looking furious. “We both followed Harry – we never thought Krum might be in any danger. I can tell you this much though, Hermione, Crouch is – or was – either suffering from a Memory Charm or the Imperius Curse.”

Hermione sucked in a breath and repeated this to Harry, who added it to the letter, looking grim. “Who’d put Crouch under the Imperius Curse and why?”

“Do you think he could have put Harry’s name in the Goblet?” Ginny asked in a hushed voice. “Hermione saw him on the Map, remember? He was the only person who went near the Goblet!”

“But then who put him under the Imperius?” Ron asked. “Wormtail? What with Trelawney’s prediction and Harry’s dream, we know he’s with You-Know-Who.”

Pretending not to notice the Potters’ flinches, Hermione turned to them questioningly, but James shook his head. “Peter couldn’t do that.”

“He betrayed us, James.” Lily said darkly. “I wouldn’t like to take bets on what he’d do.”

“I didn’t say he wouldn’t, Lils.” James reminded her. “I said he couldn’t. It takes a certain amount of magical power to keep someone under the Imperius for as long as Crouch must have been and Peter just doesn’t have that. Not even close.”

“Then who?” Hermione asked.

Nobody answered her.
Chapter Thirteen - An Imposter

“Mandy, we’ve got mail!” Arabella called. She opened the window and let Hedwig swoop though to land on the coffee table. “Hello, Hedwig. There’s some owl treats in the kitchen, if you want.”

Hedwig hooted softly, let Arabella take the letter from her leg, and fluttered through the door.

“I swear that owl understands everything we say.” Arabella muttered, running an eye over the letter. “Mandy, it’s from Harry!”

“Just a second!”

Arabella opened the letter, which was addressed to Sirius, except his name had been crossed out, and Hermione had written beside it: Mandy and Arabella (and Remus, if you’re there).

As it happened, Remus wasn’t there – despite the fact the women had a spare room, he insisted on staying in his small cottage down in Kent.

The cottage had belonged to his parents, but both Mandy and Arabella knew that it was more than sentimentalism that kept him there – it was the reluctance to take any form of ‘charity’, even though their numerous offers had nothing to do with that.

Mandy and Arabella hadn’t lived together when they finished Hogwarts – Mandy lived in a Muggle area of London, near the visitors’ entrance of the Ministry of Magic and Arabella lived in a flat in Diagon Alley over the magical pet shop where she worked.

However, after the downfall of Voldemort, the three remaining Marauders had gravitated towards each other for comfort, and when Mandy got a promotion and decided she wanted to live in a house (rather than her tiny little flat), she asked her friends if they would like to come along.

Only Arabella accepted, somewhat fed up with the constant comings and goings of Diagon Alley, but Remus was there every other day, so they could catch up and the women could make sure that he was eating properly.

Arabella read the letter through, frowning to herself. She wasn’t sure how Harry knew that Crouch had been suffering from the Imperius or a Memory Charm, but she had to admit that, with everything that had been happening, it made sense.

“What’s wrong with you?” Mandy asked, appearing from upstairs.

With a heavy sigh, Arabella handed her the letter and leaned back, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I feel a headache coming on.”

“There’s a fresh batch of potion in the kitchen.” Mandy told her absently, sinking into the armchair. “Oh dear … Oh, that’s not good …”

“You think?” Arabella asked lightly, making her way into the kitchen, where Hedwig was sitting on the back of a chair, her head tucked under her wing.

Sure enough, there were fresh bottles in the medicine cupboard, and Arabella downed one, feeling the pain in her head disappear.
Despite working in the Department of Magical Games and Sports, Mandy had always loved Potions, and the room off of their kitchen (originally intended to be a pantry) had long-since been transformed into a potions lab.

Arabella returned to the living room, where Mandy was now reading another letter. “Where’d that one come from?”

“It just arrived.” Mandy told her, looking up with a smile on her face. “Do you want the good news before or after we talk about Harry?”

“After.” Arabella told her firmly. “What do we do?”

Mandy sighed, her smile fading. “I don’t think there’s anything we can do, Ara. Short of kidnapping Harry and bringing him here – no.” She said firmly, as Arabella opened her mouth to say that, actually, that sounded like quite a good idea. “We’re not doing that.”

“Lily would have wanted us to.” Arabella muttered.

“Well, Lily would have wanted Harry to grow up away from those people.” Mandy scowled. “Lily would have wanted us to ignore Dumbledore and visit him when he was little. Lily would have wanted us to play a bigger part in Harry’s life. Unfortunately, we don’t seem to be very good at doing what Lily would have wanted.”

“You’re the one who said we couldn’t do it.” Arabella pointed out, bending down to pick up one of her cats, which had wound its way around her legs.

“Well, one of us has to be logical.” Mandy said practically. “If Harry doesn’t compete in the Third Task, he risks losing his magic – or worse.”

“Dammit.” Arabella sighed, sitting down again. The Siamese on her lap purred and rubbed its head against her fingers. “I thought that was just hearsay – you know, a dramatic twist for the press.” Mandy shook her head. “No, unfortunately not. I was against the use of the Goblet of Fire from the beginning; I suggested that the three head teachers should select their champion. But oh no, we had to have all the traditions, didn’t we?” She stood up, walking over to the window. “Besides, even if we did kidnap Harry, there’s no guarantee he’d be safe with us, none at all.”

Arabella heaved another sigh. “That’s true.”

Another of her cats appeared from under one of the sideboards and hopped up on top of it, mewing pitifully.

“I thought you’d fed them this morning.” Mandy murmured, petting the creature absently.

“I have.” Arabella rolled her eyes fondly. “Mystic’s just greedy, so she’s trying to wrangle a second breakfast.”

Mandy chuckled, gazing out at the back garden. “How many have we got now?”

Arabella paused for a second, counting up. “Five. It was four, but Gran’s getting on a bit, and she asked me to take Mr Paws in.”

“Mr Paws.” Mandy repeated incredulously. “Honestly, Arabella, your grandmother has some strange names for her cats.”

“I know.” Arabella lazily summoned Harry’s letter and scanned it again. The second-to-last sentence
jumped out at her.

*We were wondering if Wormtail was the one that cursed Crouch, but **Mum and Dad** we don’t think he’s powerful enough.*

Arabella frowned. The words before ‘we don’t think’ had been scribbled out, but it almost looked like Harry had written ‘Mum and Dad’. *Well, that can’t be right.* “I wonder what Harry was going to say.”

“When?” Mandy asked.

“At the end,” Arabella answered absently, stroking Morgana’s head. “When he said he didn’t think Peter was powerful enough to …” She broke off abruptly, suddenly realising what she was saying and who she was saying it to.

For a few seconds, the room was filled with a heavy silence. Mandy’s hand froze on Mystic’s head, but after a few seconds, she resumed her rhythmic stroking. “I noticed that.” She said in a deceptively calm voice. “It looked like he said Mum and Dad, which makes no sense – unless he was talking in code for his letter to Sirius and altered it later. The ‘we’ looked like Hermione’s handwriting, as did our names – she probably duplicated it for him and changed some of the words.”

“Why Mum and Dad?” Arabella asked cautiously.

Mandy shrugged, still not turning to face her. “Maybe it’s not. Maybe that’s just what it looks like. It could be abbreviations for ‘McGonagall’ and ‘Dumbledore’ for all we know – Harry’s handwriting isn’t the most legible.”

“Gets that from his father.” Arabella grinned. When her best friend didn’t laugh, she sighed. “Mandy, are you alright?”

“Fine.” Mandy said briskly. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You’re not looking at me, your voice sounds funny, and I just mentioned … him.” Arabella said softly.

“You don’t have to tiptoe around me, Ara.” Mandy told her, finally turning around. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not.” Arabella disagreed gently. “You know, you’ve never really talked about it.”

“We talked about it a lot.” Mandy protested.

“Yeah, back when we thought he was dead.” Arabella hesitated. “Do you … want to talk about it?”

“Not particularly.” Mandy admitted. “But I suppose I probably should.” She returned to the armchair, and Mystic jumped down from the sideboard and ran over to jump on to her lap. “Since when is she so fond of me?”

“Since you showed her attention.” Arabella smirked. “Don’t change the subject.”

Mandy heaved a heavy sigh. “I don’t even know what to say, Ara. I thought he loved me; he stabbed us all in the back. End of story.”

“Mandy,” Arabella said softly, “that’s not the end of the story.”

“I hate what he did.” Mandy said in a low voice. “I can never forgive what he did. And yet, somehow, I can’t stop loving him.” She closed her eyes too late to stop the tear that slipped out.
“And I feel like such a horrible person for that.”

“Mandy …” Moving the Siamese, Arabella got up to perch on the arm of the armchair, wrapping an arm around her best friend’s shoulders. “Honey, you’re not a horrible person. You were together for over two years, and then you thought he was dead for twelve. You’ve never had a chance to get over him. It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.” Mandy disagreed, wiping her eyes. “He lied to us, Arabella. A lot. Every time he said his mum was sick and needed him to run an errand for her …”

Arabella groaned. “He was with … Dammit, why didn’t we notice?! She was always saying she never saw him enough, and we just took it as an overprotective mother!”

“But because we were all doing the same thing,” Mandy said miserably. “We all had secret Order missions and we all lied about what we were doing. But I should have known – it was always so sudden. He’d go and get a cup of tea and come back with a ‘letter’.” She looked up at Arabella with tear-filled eyes. “And then he’d kiss me goodbye and tell me he loved me and go off to kiss the robes of the man who wanted us all dead!” Her voice, which had risen in frustration, dropped to a whisper again. “It just hurts that our entire relationship was a lie.”

***

One month later, Mr Crouch was still missing and Hermione was, once again, questioning the wisdom of whoever had thought up the Triwizard Tasks.

The hedges of the maze were so tall and the pathways so dark that even the spectators in the Quidditch stands wouldn’t be able to see what was happening.

As days went, it hadn’t been amazing so far, which didn’t exactly fill Hermione with confidence – aside from an incredibly tedious History of Magic exam, that new Skeeter article was ridiculous.

*Harry Potter – Disturbed and Dangerous* … Hermione had never read such rubbish in her life – and that included every single one of Lockhart’s books.

Since when did being a decent person with an open mind translate as dark?

Clearly, Hermione was the only person surprised by this revelation – Ron had read the article with a scowl, but seemed resigned, and Mandy and Arabella – who had come to watch the Third Task (Remus, unfortunately, was kept away by the full moon that night) – had been angry, but not surprised.

The two women were sitting beside Hermione in the stands, and beside them Bill and Mrs Weasley were watching attentively, as the four champions gathered at the entrance of the maze.

The only good thing that had come out of the article was the renewed revelation that Skeeter was somehow getting interviews from the Slytherins, despite not being allowed on the grounds.

This time, however, Hermione was struck by an idea. She thought that maybe – just maybe – she knew what Rita was up to and if she was right the woman was in for a world of trouble.

She had just finished explaining her idea to Ginny into an undertone, when the conversation in the stands lulled to silence.

The first stars had just started to appear, though sunset was still several hours away, and Dumbledore had raised his hands for silence. Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, Moody and Hagrid, their hats (or
in Hagrid’s case, his moleskin coat) adorned with red stars, had moved to stand at the outside of the maze.

“They’re the security.” Mandy whispered to Hermione. “If a champion gets into trouble, they can send up red sparks and they’ll be rescued.”

“We offered to do it.” Arabella added. “But Dumbledore felt we were too close to Harry.”

“That’s understandable.” Hermione murmured.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Bagman boomed. “The third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the points currently stand! Tied in first place, with eighty-five points each – Mr Cedric Diggory and Mr Harry Potter, both of Hogwarts School!”

The Hogwarts students exploded. Behind Hermione, Fred and George whistled loudly.

“In second place, with eighty points – Mr Viktor Krum, of Durmstrang Institute!”

Hermione clapped, noticing as she did so that Karkaroff was very quiet. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see him applauding, but he seemed subdued for some reason.

“And in third place, with sixty-four points – Miss Fleur Delacour, of Beauxbatons Academy.”

As they clapped, more out of politeness than anything else, Harry glanced up and caught Hermione’s eye, waving at them.

They all waved back, and Hermione sat back on the bench, taking a deep breath to keep her empathy under control.

“The aim of this task is for the champions to make their way to the centre of this maze, where the Triwizard Cup awaits. Upon touching the cup, these hedges will vanish, and we will discover our winner. On my whistle, Harry, Cedric,” Bagman said with a grin. “Three … two … one …” He lifted the whistle to his lips and gave a short, sharp blast.

As Harry and Cedric disappeared into the maze, Hermione sighed, realising that she had been right. There was no way of telling what was going on in there and to whom.

Mandy put an arm around her shoulders. “Are you alright?”

“Just worried.” Hermione whispered. “Someone …”

Mandy squeezed her shoulder. “It’ll be alright, Hermione. A couple of hours, and this’ll all be over, thank Merlin.”

Hermione smiled weakly. “It must’ve been awful for you.”

“Oh, it has.” Arabella sighed. “We couldn’t do a thing to help him.”

“As per usual.” Mandy frowned. “I’m genuinely surprised Lily hasn’t come back from the dead to curse us.”

“Hermione, tell her she’s being ridiculous.” Lily said absently, from Hermione’s other side, as the second whistle blew. She was sitting between Hermione and Ginny, who had left a space between them for the spirit, muttering that she felt weird about sitting ‘in’ someone, even if she couldn’t see them.

But Hermione said nothing this time – she still hadn’t told Mandy and Arabella about the Potters, and
here and now was hardly the time to do it.

“It wasn’t your fault.” Hermione said quietly after a few minutes. “You thought Harry was safe – why would you doubt it?”

The third whistle blew, as Mandy shrugged. “I suppose so.” She turned to Hermione. “Harry’s been training, right?”

Hermione nodded. All four Marauders (because Remus had added a postscript to Mandy and Arabella’s reply) had instructed Harry to go nowhere alone or with anyone who wasn’t someone he knew wasn’t responsible for his current predicament. They had also advised that he armed himself with a secure knowledge of jinxes and hexes just in case.

“Of …” Hermione paused, as a gasp ran around the stands. A silvery glow had appeared in the maze, but it vanished swiftly. “That … Was that a Patronus?”

“It certainly looked like one.” Arabella frowned. “Why would anyone cast a Patronus?”

Hermione frowned. “A Boggart, maybe? Harry’s Boggart is a Dementor – maybe his first thought was a Patronus.”

“I hope he’s alright.” Mandy fretted. “We hardly need him unconscious …”

“He’ll be fine.” Arabella soothed. “A light that strong would have to have come from a corporeal – the Boggart would have stumbled at least.”

“Speaking of corporeal Patronuses,” Ginny commented, “guess what Harry taught Hermione while he was training.”

Hermione blushed, as the two women turned to stare at her.

“You too?” Mandy asked. “Impressive. What form does it take?”

“An otter.” Hermione mumbled.

“An interesting …” Fred began.

“… form.” George finished.

“Boys …” Ginny warned.

“We couldn’t help …”

“… overhearing and we …”

“… also couldn’t help realising …”

“. that a Patronus-Otter …”

“… or a P-Otter …”

“… is a lengthened version …”

“… of Potter.”

“Ginny?” Hermione prompted, hearing two smacks as her sister met her mark. “Of course we’re
been training.” She continued, as though the interruption hadn’t happened. “We’ve been training for weeks.”

“We?” Arabella questioned knowingly.

“Well, yeah.” Ron said from Hermione’s other side. “You didn’t think we’d let Harry do it on his own, did you?”

Mandy chuckled. “No, we didn’t.”

It wasn’t just Ron, Hermione and Ginny either. James and Lily had watched over them and given them hundreds of tips and advice that hadn’t been in the books.

At that moment a scream cut through the chatter of the crowd, and everyone fell silent.

“That was Fleur.” Mandy whispered. “Not Harry.”

There was an anxious wait, while Moody abandoned his post to speak to Hagrid, who strode into the maze. When he emerged, he was carrying the Beauxbatons champion, who was lying motionless in her arms.

The judges converged on her, while the crowd sat silent with bated breath.

“Miss Delacour has been hit with a Stunning Spell.” Bagman announced. “She is officially out of the Tournament.”

“A Stunning Spell?” Hermione repeated. “What in that maze would cast a Stunning Spell?”

“The Skrewts?” Ginny suggested. “Not actually cast it, but I wouldn’t be surprised if Hagrid put some in there – their armour’s thick enough to cause a rebound.”

“That’s true.” Hermione agreed, though she didn’t believe it for one second, and one glance at Mandy and Arabella told her that they didn’t either. She glanced at Lily, who was bouncing up and down in her seat, chewing her lip nervously.

Clearing her throat slightly, to get her attention, Hermione shrugged and nodded to the maze. *Why aren’t you in there?*

“I can’t do it.” Lily whispered. “I can’t watch him go through all that in there and not be able to help him … James is with him.”

Hermione nodded slightly, leaning into Mandy’s embrace as they worried silently about Harry.

More than ten minutes passed without incident and Hermione had just started to relax, when screams rent the air again.

Her heart clenched as the crowd erupted.

“Who is it?”

“What’s happening?”

“That’s Cedric.” Hermione whispered. “I’m sure of it.”

“You’re sure?” Arabella asked, her face white. “Positive?”

“They might be screaming, but Viktor would still have an accent.” Hermione said shakily. “And the
voice is too deep to be Harry’s – he’s still a bit squeaky.”
“Hermione!” Ron protested.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “He’s not here, Ron; get over it.”

A few minutes later, red sparks flew into the air and hovered there. Once again, Hagrid entered the maze, this time accompanied by Professor Flitwick.

But when they returned, it was Viktor who was with him, unconscious just like Fleur.

Again, the judges bent over him and, again, Bagman announced that it was a Stunning Spell that was responsible.

As the Hogwarts students began to buzz, realising that whoever reached the cup first, Hogwarts had won the Tournament, Hermione closed her eyes, carefully measuring her breathing.

Something wasn’t right. Nothing in that maze would be able to harm the champions like that; there was no way a rebounding spell had caught both of them.

And besides, if Viktor had been Stunned, how had he sent up the sparks?

She voiced this, and Ginny frowned. “Maybe Harry or Cedric was nearby. They sent up the sparks so that he wouldn’t get hurt by something else.”

“Mad-Eye would have seen someone else in the maze, Hermione.” Mandy assured her. “The only other people in there with Viktor are Harry and Cedric. Now I don’t know Cedric, but Harry would never …”

“Neither would Cedric.” Hermione said with certainty. “But somebody did.”

“Maybe Krum attacked one of them and they stunned him in self-defence.” Ron suggested.

Hermione didn’t bother berating him. “Maybe.” She said diplomatically.

“What’s your you-know-what telling you?” Ginny asked quietly.

Hermione hesitated and closed her eyes, letting her empathy expand. She was hit with a barrage of emotions and retreated almost instantly, trying to figure them out.

“Something’s not right.” She whispered. “There’s someone out there … it’s excitement, but not … not what the spectators are feeling … they’re waiting for something …”

“What?” Ginny asked. “And who?”

Hermione shook her head hopelessly, tears springing to her eyes. “I don’t know, Ginny … there’s too many people and the emotion’s too strong. But whoever put Harry’s name in the Goblet is here somewhere and something’s going to happen.”

“Something’s wrong with Karkaroff.” Ron said, frowning. “His champion’s been stunned – again. Harry said he went mental last time. Why’s he so quiet?”

“Doesn’t want to draw attention to himself.” Hermione guessed. “If I’m right, and Si – Snuffles is right, when this plan comes to completion, Karkaroff’s going to bolt. He won’t want You-Know-Who back.”

“But …” Ginny gasped and leapt to her feet, as did everyone else.
The hedges shimmered and vanished, as Harry and Cedric, the former leaning heavily on the latter, lifted the Cup together.

Cheers of jubilation changed to screams of terror as the two boys vanished, and celebration turned to panic.

In the chaos, Hermione didn’t bother with sign language, turning to Lily immediately. “Where did they go?”

“I don’t know.” Lily admitted shrilly. “James has gone with them. Oh Merlin, Hermione, why the hell does this always happen to my son?!”

Hermione didn’t answer, wondering the same thing herself. She pushed her way along the row to the stairs, and flew down them, sprinting out to the middle of the field, where Harry had vanished from.

Voices called after her, but no one attempted to stop her, as she sank to the ground, sobbing. Arms wrapped around her, and she, Mandy and Arabella waited in that three-way hug, unable to move or do anything more than cry.

Almost an hour later, still nothing had changed. The initial panic had died down now, and people in the stands were starting to get restless. The judges were huddled together talking in whispers, and several people were crowded around them, trying to eavesdrop.

Hermione had stopped crying, and had taken to pacing up and down in the place the Cup had vanished from. “We should have known.” She said in a low voice.

Known what?” Mandy asked quietly.

“That this would happen.” Hermione said thickly. “Touch of cup brings respite’s end. I just assumed it meant the Goblet of Fire. I never …” She fell into silence.

“It’s not your fault, dear.” Lily said, silent tears streaming down her face. “There was nothing you …” She vanished abruptly, and Hermione stopped, staring at the spot she’d previously occupied.

“Hermione?” Arabella asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Hermione replied, resuming her pacing. Lily was fine, she told herself. There was nothing to worry about.

“This is ridiculous.” Mandy stated, getting up from her spot on the ground. “There must be something we can do.”

“Mandy …” Arabella hurried after her as she strode off towards the judges.

Hermione smiled slightly. She knew from experience that the two women could be quite protective when it came to Harry – she didn’t envy the judges having to deal with them.

She hadn’t even glanced at the judges to see if Karkaroff was still with them; if he wasn’t, that was the least of their problems.

There was a soft thud and she stopped abruptly again, her pacing interrupted by the sudden arrival of Harry and Cedric, slumped on the ground with the Triwizard Cup.

“Harry …” Hermione whispered, dropping to her knees beside him.

Their return was quite unremarkable, and no one seemed to have noticed them besides Hermione.
herself. She should shout, scream, gain their attention, but her throat seemed unable to work, and her gaze was fixed on Harry’s dirt-streaked, pale face.

“Harry …” Hermione repeated, touching his face. “Harry?”

Harry finally looked up, and she bit back a gasp when she met his eyes. Far from the vibrant emerald orbs they had been that morning, they were now hollow … dead … and seemed to look right through her. “He’s back …” he whispered hoarsely.

“What?” Hermione asked.

His hands gripped her robes tightly, pulling her closer, and she could see the small cuts on his face, the tears in his robes. “He’s back, Mione … He’s back … Cedric … asked me … couldn’t leave him …”

It seemed a strange statement, Hermione thought; of course Harry wouldn’t leave Cedric wherever they had been – why would he?

James and Lily appeared at that moment, both shaken and crying, but she didn’t have time to dwell on the relief of their reappearance, because Harry’s mention of Cedric had drawn Hermione’s attention to the fact that the Hufflepuff hadn’t spoken – or, indeed, moved – since their return.

Her heart fell into her stomach, when she realised that not only was Cedric very still, but his eyes were wide open, and they were staring up at the stars unseeing.

With a shaky hand, Hermione reached out to touch his face, letting her fingers trail over his cold skin to his neck. She found nothing, no sign of life beating beneath them.

He was dead.

As soon as that hit her, with all the force of a bludger, she screamed, her voice echoing through the dark grounds.

Mandy and Arabella reached them first, and Mandy checked Harry over with trembling hands as Arabella bent over the young man beside them.

Harry had yet to release Hermione’s robes, and she gently disentangled his grip, taking his hand instead, feeling it clamp down on her fingers, clinging to her like a lifeline. His gaze had moved back to Cedric now, staring at him in a mixture of bewilderment and horror.

“Harry!” Mandy called softly. “Harry, sweetheart, can you tell me what happened?”

“He’s back …” Harry repeated shakily, although he didn’t seem to have heard her. “Voldemort … he’s back …”

“I think that’s fairly obvious, Harry.” Arabella said dryly, straightening up. “I’m not expert, Talon, but I’d say that’s the … Shit.”

“What?” Mandy asked, still trying to get Harry’s attention.

“Amos is coming.” Arabella said, moving forward.

Mandy looked up and cursed under her breath. “Hermione, stay with him. Don’t go anywhere.” She got to her feet as well, and the two women swept away to intercept Cedric’s parents.

A moment later, their anguished cries reached the two and Hermione flinched, pushing her empathy
down as far as she could. She could feel Harry shaking beside her and moved closer, wrapping her other arm around his shoulders. She wanted to give him words of comfort, but everything got lost on the way to her mouth as she battled against the fear and sadness that swirled around the castle, making her head pound even with her shields.

“It’s alright, Miss Granger – help me get him up to the castle.”

Hermione looked up at Professor Moody, furrowing her brow at the strange expression on his face. It looked like concern, but it seemed out of place on the grizzled old auror. “Mandy and Arabella said not to go anywhere.”

“He needs to lie down.” Moody insisted. “Come on.”

Hermione hesitated only a second more. Moody was an ex-auror, and running a critical eye over her best friend, she could see that his robes and trousers were ripped on one leg, exposing bloody skin. Lying here on the ground was not going to do him any good.

They hauled Harry to his feet and Hermione slipped under his arm, as they half-carried him into the castle, hearing him answer Moody’s questions in a dull monotone, clearly in shock. She was busy trying not to look down at Harry’s leg, and was trying not to pay attention to what actually happened – not yet – when Moody’s voice cut through her self-imposed mental block.

“You duelled with the Dark Lord?”

Hermione let out a quiet moan, her heart thudding so loud that she was sure the other two could hear it.

“Got away …” Harry muttered. “My wand … did something funny … saw my mum and dad …”

Hermione frowned, trying to work out what that might be. She glanced at James and Lily, but they were thoroughly distracted, Lily by sobbing hysterically, James by attempting in vain to comfort her.

“In here, lad. Come and sit down.” Moody opened the door to his office and ushered the two Gryffindors inside. Hermione guided Harry to a chair and sat him down, glancing around at the various Dark Detectors. On any other day, she would be fascinated, but right now her attention was solely on her best friend.

Moody produced a flask of Pepper-Up Potion and tipped it against Harry’s lips. “Drink it … you’ll feel better … Come on, Harry … you’ll be alright.”

Harry swallowed the potion and coughed, steam pouring from his ears, but his eyes seemed to focus again, and Hermione breathed a sigh of relief.

“Voldemort’s back, Harry?” Moody questioned. “How did he do it?”

“He took stuff from his father’s grave, and from Wormtail, and from me.” Harry muttered.

“What did the Dark Lord take from you?” Moody asked in a whisper.

“Blood.” Harry raised his arm, and Hermione saw that his robes were torn, revealing a fine cut in the crook of his elbow.

“He took my protection,” Lily whispered, tears still streaming down her face. “I’m sorry I left so suddenly, Hermione – I couldn’t help it; something was pulling me.”

Hermione nodded slightly to show she’d heard, but said nothing, as Moody continued in a hiss.
“And the Death Eaters? They returned?”

“Yeah, loads of them.” Harry shivered and Hermione rubbed his arm, but Moody didn’t seem to notice.

“How did he treat them? Did he forgive them?” Hermione barely had time to contemplate what a strange question that was, when the remaining colour drained from Harry’s face and he fought to stand up. “There’s a Death Eater at Hogwarts! There’s a Death Eater here at the school! They put my name in the Goblet; made sure I got through to the end!” The blood in Hermione’s veins turned to ice, but Moody pushed Harry back into his seat. “I know who the Death Eater is.”

“Karkaroff?” Harry guessed wildly. “Where is he? Have you got him?”

Hermione rolled her eyes, about to remind Harry that they’d already dismissed Karkaroff as a suspect numerous times, when Moody laughed darkly, a laugh that sent shivers down Hermione’s spine.

“Karkaroff?” He asked, with a kind of dark amusement. “He fled tonight when he felt the Mark burn. He betrayed too many faithful supporters of the Dark Lord to wish to meet them … but I doubt he’ll get far. The Dark Lord has ways of tracking his enemies.”

“Hermione …” James said slowly. “Something’s not right.”

But Hermione didn’t need James to tell her that. She finally released her empathy, skilfully avoiding the pain emanating from Harry, and landed upon the anticipatory excitement that she had picked up earlier in the evening.

It was coming from Moody.

Hermione wanted to believe that it was adrenaline – that the paranoid ex-auror didn’t march to the beat of the same drum as everyone else – but something stopped her.

Sirius’s words floated back to her. “Never used Unforgivables if he could help it.”

And yet he’d willingly demonstrated them in front of fourth years? Admittedly, it was only on spiders, but surely the principle was the same.

And why was Moody calling Voldemort ‘The Dark Lord’ all of a sudden? She’d never heard anyone calling him that … except Karkaroff … and Snape …

A Death Eater … and someone he thought to be an ally …

This was not the real Mad-Eye Moody, and a glance at the Potters told her that they had realised the same thing.

“Karkaroff’s gone?” Harry repeated, oblivious to the danger they were both in. “Then he didn’t put my name in the Goblet?”

“Professor Moody,” Hermione said shakily, gripping her wand under her robes. “Maybe I should get Harry to the Hospital Wing.” She stood to help Harry to his feet, but Moody drew his wand and pointed it at them.

“Sit down, Miss Granger.”

Hermione sank to her knees again, her attention now focussed fully on the wand aimed in her
direction.

“No, Potter,” ‘Moody’ said, one eye fixed on Hermione. “It was I who did that.”

“No, you didn’t.” Harry murmured. “You didn’t do that … You can’t have done …”

“He’s in shock.” Lily whimpered. “Oh, Harry …”

“I assure you that I did.” ‘Moody’ told him. “Expelliarmus!”

Hermione’s wand flew from her hand, and Harry’s did the same. The fake Moody caught them, never lowering his own. “He forgave them, did he? The Death Eaters who went free? Who escaped Azkaban?”

“He’s underestimating you.” Lily told her darkly. “He doesn’t think you’ll have another wand. You never underestimate your opponent, Hermione – he’s going to pay for that. Take … him … down.” Hermione shivered slightly. Over the last year, she had seen the Marauder, and she had seen the mother. But now she saw the powerful witch who had been such a threat to the Dark side, and she wasn’t a woman Hermione wanted to get on the wrong side of.

“What?” Harry asked blankly.

“Did he forgive them?!” ‘Moody’ asked impatiently. “Did he forgive the scumbags who never even tried to find him?! Did he forgive the worthless pieces of crap that escaped Azkaban?! The faithless filth who were brave enough to run around in masks at the Quidditch World Cup, but fled like cowardly rats at the sight of the Dark Mark when I fired it into the sky?!”

“You fired …?” Harry repeated weakly. “What are you talking about?”

Whatever happened that night had seriously shaken, Harry – he was normally more on the ball than this. Hermione’s mind was racing, unable to move when ‘Moody’s’ magical eye was fixed on her. So he was at the World Cup … must’ve been in the Top Box too … but who? Where’s the real Moody? And how did no one notice?

“I told you, Harry.” The imposter said quietly. “If there’s one thing I hate, it’s a Death Eater that walked free …”

Hermione shivered as an insane smile lit ‘Moody’s’ face and she shifted closer to Harry, tightening her arm around his waist.

“Tell me he hurt them, Harry.” ‘Moody’ whispered, looking quite manic. “Tell me he punished them … tortured them … told them that I alone remained faithful …”

“I can’t have been you …” Harry whispered.

Hermione felt like screaming, warning Harry that this wasn’t Moody, but she couldn’t. She forced herself to look away from the wand pointed at her and at ‘Moody’s’ face instead.

“Who put your name in the Goblet of Fire, under the name of a different school? I did. Who frightened off every person I thought might try to hurt you or prevent you from winning the tournament? I did.”

The magical eye finally left Hermione and rolled to look at Harry. Very carefully, she let her hand drift down to her ankle where the second wand lay tucked away, keeping her body very, very still.
“Who nudged Hagrid into showing you the dragon? I did. It wasn’t easy, Harry, guiding you through these tasks – you couldn’t do too well, or Dumbledore would get suspicious. I just needed to get you into that maze, preferably with the head start, and then I could dispatch of the other champions.”

Hermione fought the urge to shiver again. If this man was as insane as he was acting, Fleur and Viktor were lucky they were only stunned.

“The second task … that was when I was most afraid we would fail. I knew you hadn’t worked out the egg’s clue, so I had to give you another hint…”

“Cedric gave me that clue.” Harry disagreed, and Hermione grimaced.

*Don’t antagonise him, Harry. Just nod and go along with it.*

“And who do you think tipped Diggory off?” Moody asked. “I did. Decent people are so easy to manipulate.”

Hermione felt a surge of anger – whether it was coming from Harry or herself, she didn’t know – and gripped the wand in its holster, but she couldn’t act yet. She was taking a huge chance anyway – the wand was currently in her off-hand, and it wasn’t technically hers, so she had no idea how it would respond.

But Cedric … Cedric *had* been a decent person – a decent person who had been murdered in cold blood, apparently for no other reason than being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“You were in that lake so long, Potter, I thought you’d drowned. But the judges took your idiocy for nobility, and marked you highly for it, and I breathed again. You had an easy time of it in that maze tonight, of course. I was able to see through the hedges, to curse many of the obstacles out of your way.”

Despite the situation, Hermione couldn’t help feeling a small twinge of annoyance that the imposter had so little faith in Harry’s abilities.

“I stunned Fleur Delacour as she passed. I put the Imperius Curse on Krum so he would finish Diggory off and your path would be clear.”

So that was what had happened. In that case, either Cedric had fought off Krum, or Harry had come upon them to help.

*Not that it matters now.*

“The Dark Lord failed to kill you, Potter, and he so wanted to.” ‘Moody’ whispered. “Imagine how he will reward me when he finds that I have done it for him.”

“You dare …” James growled.

“I delivered you to him … the thing he needed above all … and then I killed him for you … I will be honoured above all other Death Eaters … his dearest, his closest … closer than a son …”

Hermione’s hand tightened around her wand, but with ‘Moody’s’ still aimed in her direction, she would be dead before she raised it high enough to utter a curse.

“The Dark Lord and I have much in common.” The imposter told them. “Both of us, for instance, had very disappointing fathers … both suffered the indignity of being named after those fathers …”
Hermione’s eyes widened. *Crouch! That’s who this is – it’s Barty Crouch Jr! He must have somehow escaped Azkaban without anyone realising … But how …?*

“And both of us had the pleasure – the very real pleasure – of killing our fathers to ensure the continued rise of the Dark Order!”

“You’re mad.” Harry whispered. “You’re mad!”

“Harry …” Hermione whimpered, unable to stop herself. “Don’t …”

“Mad, am I?” ‘Moody’ asked with a cackle. “We’ll see who’s mad, Potter! The Dark Lord is back! He is back, Potter, you did not conquer him – and now I conquer you!”

His wand swung around to aim at Harry’s chest, causing Lily to scream, darting forward to shield her son from a curse she couldn’t possibly hope to block.

Hermione saw her chance and took it. Drawing the second wand, she swung it upwards. “STUPEFY!”

It may not have been her wand and it hardly responded to her the way hers did, but it did the job; a beam of red light left the tip of the wand and struck ‘Moody’ directly in the chest, causing him to fall to the ground.

At that moment, the door to the office burst open, revealing Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape, looking furious, which soon changed to confusion. Hermione took the opportunity to shove her second wand away and grab her own and Harry’s, which had rolled towards them.

Professor McGonagall rushed over to them. “Miss Granger, Mr Potter, are you alright?”

“We’re fine, Professor.” Hermione assured her, though couldn’t stop her voice from shaking.

“Come along, Mr Potter.” McGonagall whispered, resting a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Come along … Hospital Wing.”

“No.” Dumbledore disagreed. “He will stay, Minerva, because he needs to understand. Harry needs to know who put him through his ordeal tonight and why. Recovery can only come with acceptance and acceptance can only come with understanding.”

“Moody?” Harry murmured in shock. “How can it have been Moody?”

“Harry, that’s not Moody.” Hermione told him gently, slipping his wand back into his hand. “Is it, Headmaster?”

“It is not.” Dumbledore confirmed, with a hint of a twinkle in his eyes. “When did you realise, Miss Granger?”

“Just now.” Hermione whispered. “When he was referring to You-Know …” She stopped, catching Harry’s eye.

If they were all afraid of a name, how could they possibly hope to beat him?

“V-V-Voldemort.” She said, stuttering over it slightly.

Harry gave her the first real smile (albeit a small one) she’d seen all evening, and pulled her closer so she was under his arm rather than the other way round.
“He was calling Voldemort ‘the Dark Lord’.” Hermione finished, resting her head on Harry’s shoulder. “I’ve only ever heard Death Eaters … well, people I would assume were Death Eaters calling him that. Plus, he demonstrated the Unforgivables and Snuffles said that he never used them if he could help it.” She could see McGonagall and Snape exchanging a confused glance, but didn’t elaborate. “If you don’t mind me asking, sir, when did you realise?”

“The real Alastor Moody would never have removed Harry from my sight after what happened tonight. The moment I saw you both gone, I knew.”

It was a strange answer, Hermione thought. After all, Dumbledore hadn’t told them not to move – Mandy and Arabella had. And they’d hardly conferred with Dumbledore first; they hadn’t had time.

Still, Hermione accepted it, hanging her head. “I should have made Harry stay there.”

“Miss Granger, you had no reason to distrust him.” Dumbledore said kindly. “Now …” he bent down and retrieved a set of keys and a hip flask from ‘Moody’s’ limp form. “Severus, please go down to the kitchens and bring up the house-elf called Winky, then fetch me the strongest Truth Potion you have. Minerva, kindly go down to the pumpkin patch at Hagrid’s hut. Take the dog waiting there up to my office and tell him I will be with him shortly. Fetch Amanda and Arabella from the Hospital Wing, do the same thing, then come back here.”

If either teacher was confused, they didn’t show it; simply swept from the room without a word.

Hermione watched, strangely detached, as Dumbledore opened Moody’s trunk, compartment by compartment. Usually, she would have been bursting with questions about the article – she’d never seen a multi-dimensional trunk before – but she couldn’t find her voice. However, when Dumbledore opened the seventh and last compartment, she and Harry couldn’t hold back a horrified gasp.

They were looking into what looked like a dungeon and, lying about ten feet below, chunks missing from his grizzly hair, thin and starved, was the real Alastor Moody.

Dumbledore climbed into the trunk and checked him over. “Stunned … controlled by Imperius … very weak … Of course they would have needed to keep him alive. Hermione, throw down the impostor’s cloak; he’s freezing.”

Rather reluctantly, Hermione left Harry’s embrace and retrieved the cloak, tossing it down to her headmaster. “Will he be alright?”

“Madam Pomfrey will need to take a look at him, but he’s in no immediate danger.” Dumbledore tucked the cloak around Moody and clambered out of the trunk again. He picked the flask up again and took the lid off, sniffing it carefully. “Polyjuice Potion. You see the simplicity of it and the brilliance. Moody never does drink from anything other than his hip flask; he’s famous for it. The impostor needed to keep the real Moody close, of course. He needed hair for the Potion, you see the gaps?” He glanced down into the trunk again. “But I think that, in all the excitement tonight, our impostor may not have taken his potion as frequently as he should have done. On the hour, every hour. We shall see.” He conjured two chairs and motioned for Hermione to take a seat next to Harry.

Hermione did so, glancing at her best friend, who was white and shaking, staring at the body on the floor. She rested her head on his shoulder again, and was relieved when he wrapped an arm around her, both accepting the comfort she offered, and doling out his own.

“I’m so sorry, Harry.” She whispered. “I should have listened to Mandy and Arabella and kept us there.”
“Hermione, stop it.” Lily soothed. “Moody was a well-respected auror; not even we realised something was wrong until just now. Not even Dumbledore realised and he’s a bloody Legilimens. Stop blaming yourself.”

Hermione flicked her little finger. Thank you. She wasn’t sure what it was – maybe it was the shock, maybe it was that ever-present memory of that Halloween night – but she did not want to tell Dumbledore about her abilities just yet.

For a few minutes, they all stared at the fake Moody. Suddenly, his appearance started changing; the scars were disappearing, the fake eye had popped out, the nose became whole again. And lying before them was a man with sandy-blond hair, who resembled …

Hermione heard Harry gasp, but she merely shook her head sadly. She was right – somehow Crouch Jr had escaped Azkaban without anyone – even the other inmates – noticing.

Snape reappeared in the doorway with Winky at his heels and McGonagall just behind him. “Crouch!” He exclaimed. “Barty Crouch!”

“Good heavens!” McGonagall said faintly.

Winky peered around Snape’s robes and shrieked. “Master Barty, Master Barty; what is you doing here?!” She flung herself forwards onto him. “You is killed him! You is killed Master’s son!”

“He is only stunned, Winky.” Dumbledore assured the elf. “Step aside please. Severus, the potion?”

Snape pulled a clear vial out of his pocket. Veritaserum, Hermione’s mind said absently, the truth potion. Can only be fought by very powerful witches and wizards or, failing that, Dark Magic. She sighed inwardly. Curse her brains – even in a situation like this, they were still running at full-speed.

Between Snape and Dumbledore, they managed to get Crouch Jr. into a sitting position and forced a few drops of Veritaserum into his mouth.

Snape and Dumbledore stood back and the latter pointed his wand at Crouch Jr.’s chest. “Enervate.”
Chapter Fourteen - Resurrection

Crouch Junior’s confession took a full fifteen minutes, and things seemed to fall into place in Hermione’s head, much as they had in the Shrieking Shack the year before.

This time, however, it was just a little bit too late.

If only … Hindsight’s 20-20, I suppose …

For a few minutes, the office was silent, everyone staring at the now unconscious Barty Crouch Jr, still wearing a maniacal grin.

Hermione felt physically ill, her stomach churning at the thought of everything this man had done. Any shred of childhood innocence that she had somehow retained was now well and truly gone. She swallowed hard, determined not to start crying, and felt Harry’s arm tighten around her shoulder.

Looking disgusted, Dumbledore conjured thick, heavy cords that bound the fugitive tightly. “Minerva, can I ask you to stand guard while I take Harry upstairs?”

“Of course.” McGonagall looked sickened, but she moved away from the two Gryffindors and drew her wand, aiming it at Crouch with a perfectly steady hand.

“Hermione?”

Hermione started at the use of her first name and looked up into the Headmaster’s face.

“Do you need the Hospital Wing?”

Hermione looked at Harry, who was still staring at Crouch. “I could do with a Calming Draught, sir, but it can wait if Harry wants me to stay with him …”

“I do.” Harry said quietly, turning to look at her. “Please?”

Hermione squeezed the hand not on her shoulder. “Of course.”

Dumbledore didn’t appear surprised. “Very well. Severus, if you could, I would like you to fetch Madame Pomfrey and help her get Alastor to the infirmary. Then I would like you to go down to the grounds and alert Cornelius Fudge – no doubt he will want to question Crouch himself. Tell him I will be in the Hospital Wing in a half an hour’s time if he needs me.”

Snape nodded briskly and swept from the room, his robes billowing behind him. Dumbledore nodded to Hermione and she stood up, pulling Harry to his feet.

He swayed dangerously, and she tucked herself under his arm again, frowning as he leaned heavily on her. It wasn’t that she couldn’t take his weight – Harry was ridiculously light – but it was unlike him to admit so readily to needing help, even if it was silently.

“What happened to your leg?” She asked in a whisper.

“Maze.” Harry answered shortly. “Acromantula.”

Hermione bit her lip, only just managing to avoid swearing in front of the headmaster. “Whose brilliant idea was it to put one of those things in the maze?!’ She whispered furiously. “They could have …” She cut herself off hastily, before she could comment on the likelihood of a fatality, but
Harry didn’t seem to notice as they made their way into the dark corridor.

“I want you to come to my office first.” Dumbledore told them quietly. “Sirius, Amanda and Arabella are waiting for us there.”

Hermione had completely forgotten that Dumbledore had sent McGonagall to find them, and felt a rush of relief flood through her. She glanced sideways at her best friend and felt her heart clench – just what had happened when he left the maze?

What little he had said seemed unbelievable – or, rather, it seemed too horrible for her to want to believe it. His emotions seemed to be swimming in an ocean of numbness, for which she was grateful, because her head was pounding, and she was sure that when he finally surfaced, they were bound to escape for once.

James and Lily walked either side of them, an invisible sentry, and it was James that broke the silence first, though only Hermione could hear him.

“Hermione,” he said quietly, “it might sound stupid, but … we don’t want Dumbledore knowing about us. There’s something froggy about all this.”

“Froggy?” Lily repeated, a faint glimmer of amusement seeping into her tone. “Isn’t that the Muggle phrase?” James asked, sounding a little proud. “See, honey, I do listen.”

“Fishy, sweetheart.” Lily corrected. “There’s something fishy about all this.”

Hermione coughed, covering the snort of laughter that threatened to escape, but she leaned in closer to Harry, repeating their request in a murmur.

Harry looked confused, but nodded, before clearing his throat. “Professor Dumbledore?” His voice echoed through the silent corridor. “Where are Mr and Mrs Diggory?”

Hermione and Lily exchanged a fond smile. Trust Harry to think of everyone else first. *Trust Harry to think of everyone else first.*

“They are with Professor Sprout.” For the first time, Dumbledore’s voice shook slightly, and James breathed a sigh that sounded relieved. “She was Cedric’s head of house and she … she knew him best.”

They reached the gargoyle, which sprang aside without a password, and they stepped on to the spiral staircase, which slowly carried them up to the heavy oak door.

The three occupants looked up when they entered, each of them white-faced and bearing the same fear-filled expression.

For a second, there was silence, and then Mandy let out a choked sob and darted forwards. “Oh, Harry!”

“His leg …” Hermione said hoarsely, before she could throw her arms around him. “He’s hurt.”

“Thank you.” Mandy helped him to one of the heavy chairs, sitting him down to hug him tightly. “Oh, thank Merlin you’re alright!”


Hermione stayed where she was, unable to move. The nausea welled up inside her again and she closed her eyes, swaying dangerously as she tried to swallow it back. Tears pricked behind her eyelids, and when she opened them again, Sirius was standing in front of her. “Are you alright?”
“Cedric’s dead.” Hermione said softly, looking up into his face. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

Sirius flicked his wand and turned her hastily towards the bowl he had just conjured, as her stomach promptly emptied itself.

Once she was reduced to dry heaving, now through sobs, Sirius vanished the bowl and led her over to the sofa. She collapsed into his offered embrace, tears seeping into his robes as he stroked her hair soothingly. She vaguely heard Dumbledore telling the three Marauders about Crouch, and what he had confessed.

As the story came to a close and Dumbledore settled himself behind his desk, Hermione finally managed to pull herself together. “Sorry.” She mumbled, sitting up.

Sirius handed her a tissue. “You’re taking it better than I would have at your age.”

“Much better.” Mandy agreed.

“Harry, I need to know what happened when you touched that Portkey.” Dumbledore said quietly.

“We can leave that until morning, can’t we?” Sirius asked sharply, as Mandy rested a protective hand on Harry’s shoulder.

Dumbledore did not answer. In the corner, Fawkes sang one long, quivering note, and seemed to send warmth flooding through Hermione, right through to her very soul.

Seeing Harry’s pleading look, Hermione stood up, relieved to find that her earlier vertigo seemed to have vanished with her dinner. She knew that Harry would tell them, simply because he needed to get it all out now.

On shaky legs, she made her way to the chair beside Harry, hearing Sirius follow her, and sank into it, taking his hand and squeezing it tightly.

Harry took a deep breath. “It took us to a graveyard. Looked like a private one; the graves were all really big and it looked like it was attached to this big, creepy old manor house. Cedric and I pulled out our wands … there was a cauldron, a huge one … Then a man appeared holding a bundle. A voice said “Kill the spare”, there …” he faltered, his voice catching “… there was a flash of green light and … and Cedric was … he was dead.”

Mandy moved as if to pull Harry into her arms again, but Sirius stopped her, shaking his head. She frowned, but resisted.

Hermione agreed with Sirius though; Harry needed to get all of this out in one go, or he’d never finish. The words echoed in her mind. *The spare. That’s all he was to them.*

Tears welled in her eyes once more, and she wiped them away with a free hand.

“The man tied me to a headstone labelled Tom Riddle.” Harry said softly, glancing at Hermione. She understood, but, judging by the perplexed expressions of Sirius, Mandy and Arabella, they didn’t. She could also see that there was something about this man that Harry was reluctant to tell.

“Who was it, Harry?” Hermione prompted softly, falling into the role of straight woman.

Harry sighed. “Wormtail. It was Wormtail.”

The three adults tensed behind them, and Hermione chanced a glance at Mandy, who had gone even paler, which she had previously considered impossible. She turned to Arabella, who wrapped an arm around her shoulders and exchanged a dark look with Sirius.
“He lit a fire at the base of the cauldron and whatever was inside started bubbling. Then he opened the bundle and took out … something. Like a baby, but … but horrible.” Harry shuddered, and Hermione tightened her grip. “He put it in the cauldron and started doing this … this ritual.”

Hermione closed her eyes, forcing herself to breathe deeply. She knew there was nothing in her stomach to come up, but she also knew that wouldn’t stop her body from reacting.

Sirius’s hand rested on her shoulder and she leaned into him, unashamedly seeking comfort.

“Bone of the father …” Harry said hoarsely. “Dust lifted from the grave I was standing on, went into the cauldron. Flesh of the servant … Wormtail … he … he cut off his right hand …”

Mandy let out a small cry and began to sob, crumbling into Arabella’s arms. Sirius moved to stand between the two teenagers, his other hand squeezing Harry’s shoulder.

“Blood of the enemy …” Harry swallowed hard. “He … He cut my arm and …”

“Dammit!” Sirius hissed.

Dumbledore stood up faster than Hermione would have considered possible and told Harry to stretch out his arm. Harry did so, revealing the tear in his sleeve and the cut beneath it.

“He said my blood would make him stronger than if he’d used someone else’s.” Harry said, staring at the cut himself. “He said the protection Mum left in me … it would be in him too. And he was right … he could touch me now. It didn’t hurt him … just me.”

Hermione could hear Lily muttering under her breath as she hovered between Harry and Mandy, but she didn’t bother trying to catch the words – she had a feeling she didn’t want to know. She stared at Harry in horror, unable to comprehend everything her best friend had gone through in the last few hours and why it had to be him anyway. Wasn’t it someone else’s turn to save the day by now?

As though reading her mind, Sirius moved his hand to grasp hers tightly.

Dumbledore had seated himself behind his desk again. “Very well. Voldemort has overcome that particular obstacle. Please continue, Harry.”

Harry took another shuddering breath, clinging to Hermione’s hand like a lifeline. “For a moment, nothing happened. But then … he climbed out of the cauldron … Voldemort … he came back … He used Wormtail’s Dark Mark to call the Death Eaters … gave Wormtail a silver hand …”

Hermione furrowed her brow. Even as a reward, that seemed too nice of Voldemort. There had to be a catch somewhere.

“He forgave the Death Eaters … at least I think he did.” Harry frowned. “He seemed pretty angry with them … said they should have known that he wasn’t gone … that he had travelled further than any other down the path of immortality. He addressed them by name.” He glanced at Hermione, who didn’t need prompting to rummage in her cloak for a piece of parchment and a quill.

“Could I borrow some ink, sir?” She asked softly.

Dumbledore pushed an ink-pot towards her. “A wise idea, Miss Granger.”

Blushing slightly, Hermione loaded the quill and nodded to Harry.

“Lucius Malfoy … Crabbe and Goyle Sr … Macnair … Nott … Avery …” Harry listed. “He passed
over quite a few of them … There were about thirty there.”

“I’m sure there’s more than that.” Hermione murmured. “That was probably his most faithful, right?”

“As always.” Sirius confirmed from behind her. “His inner circle. I suppose there were gaps?”

Harry nodded. “There was one really big one. He said that three people in that gap were dead, one was too cowardly to return …”

“Karkaroff.” Hermione put in.

Harry nodded. “One he believed had left him forever, and one who was his most loyal.”

“Crouch.” Hermione scowled.

“He told them that he was the reason I was there. He …” Harry’s voice, which had got stronger, shook and died. “He cast the Crucciatus Curse on me.”

Now Arabella let out a cry, tears beginning to roll down her cheeks, but no one moved, staring in horror at Harry.

“Wormtail untied me … gave me my wand back … Voldemort forced me to duel …” Harry closed his eyes. “Every single spell promptly flew out of my head.”

“I’ve been there.” Sirius murmured. The ‘but you shouldn’t have been’ was left unspoken.

“He cast the Killing Curse and I cast the Disarming Charm …” Harry sighed. “In hindsight, it seems stupid.”

“You’re still here, aren’t you?” Hermione asked gently.

“Our wands connected …” Harry said, opening his eyes finally.


“Priori Incantatem.” Dumbledore murmured, catching Harry’s eye.

“The reverse spell effect?” Arabella questioned, sounding confused. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Harry’s wand and Voldemort’s wand share cores.” Dumbledore explained. “Each contains a feather from the same phoenix.”

Hermione’s eyebrows disappeared into her hair. Harry had never mentioned that – although she could hardly blame him.

His eyes flickered in her direction and she attempted a smile, squeezing his hand comfortingly.

“This phoenix, in fact.” Dumbledore added, effectively distracting Harry.

“My wand’s core came from Fawkes?” He asked.

“Indeed it did. Mr Ollivander wrote to me the moment you left his shop four years ago, to tell me that you had been chosen by the second wand.”

“So what happens when a wand meets its brother?” Sirius asked.

Hermione opened her mouth automatically, then closed it again.
Dumbledore smiled at her, his eyes twinkling. “Do you know, Miss Granger?”

Hermione blushed slightly. “Brother wands will not work properly against one another. If the wands are forced to duel, one of the wands will force the other to regurgitate spells it has performed in reverse until the connection is broken.”

“Correct; ten points to Gryffindor.” Dumbledore glanced at Harry. “Which means that some form of Cedric appeared.”

Mandy gasped. “He … He came back to life?”

“Unfortunately, no spell can reawaken the dead.” Dumbledore said heavily. “All that would have happened is a kind of reverse echo … a shadow of the living Cedric would have emerged from the wand … am I correct, Harry?”

Harry nodded, his hand tightening around Hermione’s, seeking reassurance. “He told me to hang on … And then an old man appeared, with a walking stick … I think he was a Muggle; he said something about Voldemort being a real wizard and that I could beat him. And then a woman appeared – I think it was Bertha Jorkins … she told me to hold on … and then …” He swallowed hard. “Then Mum appeared … she told me to hang on because Dad wanted to see me … and then …”

“Then your father appeared.” Hermione finished softly, seeing that Harry was having trouble.

Harry nodded, and Mandy finally freed herself from Arabella’s arms and pulled Harry into a hug. He accepted it gratefully, releasing Hermione’s hand to bury his face in her shoulder.

Hermione looked up at Sirius, who was watching them with an unreadable expression. She’d never tried to push thoughts into other people’s heads, but now seemed as good a time as any to try it.

*James and Lily want to keep this a secret from Dumbledore for now. I’ll tell Mandy and Arabella later.*

For a second, Hermione didn’t think it had worked – at least, Sirius didn’t seem startled by a sudden voice in his head – but then he caught her eye and nodded slightly.

“What happened then, Pumpkin?” Mandy asked softly, running a rhythmic hand through his hair.

“Dad told me that they could stay for a few moments to give me some time, but that I needed to get back to the Triwizard Cup …” Harry answered, turning his head so they could hear him. “Cedric … he asked me to bring his body back … When Dad told me to, I broke the connection and ran to Cedric … I summoned the Cup and we landed back on the Quidditch pitch.”

A sudden lack of pressure on her shoulder caused Hermione to look up again. Sirius had slumped into another chair, his hands over his face.

With a rushing sound, Fawkes took off from his perch and landed on the floor beside Harry’s leg. Resting his crimson head against the wound, he sang a few notes, and two pearly white tears slid from his feathers onto Harry.

Hermione watched with no shortage of relief as the skin healed, knitting back together like the wound had never been there.

“Thank you, Fawkes.” She breathed, knowing better than to reach out and touch the beautiful bird. Phoenixes were notoriously difficult to handle, and very picky about who handled them. They were even pickier about who they donated their tears to, and Fawkes had cried on Harry twice now.
To her surprise, the phoenix fluttered up to her knee, looking her straight in the eye. Hermione’s breath caught in her throat and she lifted a hand, hesitating, but Fawkes butted his head against it, allowing her to stroke his feathers.

After a few seconds, Fawkes seemed to find what he was looking for in her eyes. He sang a few melodic notes that sent shivers down her spine and flew back to his perch, tucking his head under his wing.

“Hermione?” Sirius asked quietly. “What was all that about?”

Hermione shook her head slowly. “I have no idea.”

A soft cough brought their attention back to the Headmaster, whose eyes were twinkling as though he knew something they didn’t. A quick scan of the surface, however, told Hermione a whole other story – he was as befuddled as she was and he didn’t like it.

“You have shown bravery beyond anything I would have expected of you tonight, Harry.” Dumbledore told him gravely. “You have shown bravery equal to those who died fighting Lord Voldemort at the height of his powers and you have now given us all we have a right to expect. You will come with me to the Hospital Wing – I do not want you returning to your dorm tonight.”

It was a mark of how awful Harry felt that he didn’t argue at this – normally, it took Hermione a good two hours to get him to even go near the infirmary.

“We’ll stay with you, pumpkin.” Arabella told him softly. “We’re not going anywhere.”

“Thanks.” Harry mumbled, standing up. His leg may have healed, but the exhaustion and after-effects of the Cruciatus Curse were starting to hit him, and he sagged against her as she wrapped an arm around him.

“Sirius?” Dumbledore asked. “Would you like to stay with him?”

“Ask a silly question.” James muttered.

Hermione disguised her snort with a cough, while Sirius simply nodded and transformed into Padfoot, pressing himself against her legs.

The six made their way to the hospital wing, where – rather predictably – they found Mrs Weasley, Bill, Ron and Ginny, talking nine yards a minute, grouped around Madam Pomfrey, who looked very hassled.

Everyone looked up when they entered, and Mrs Weasley let out a muffled scream, moving towards them. “Harry! Oh, Harry!” “Not now, Molly.” Mandy said firmly, stepping between them. “Harry has been through an awful ordeal tonight and he just had to relive it for us. What he needs is peace and sleep and quiet.”

“Indeed.” Dumbledore agreed. “You are welcome to stay with him, but I do not want you questioning him until he is ready to answer.”

The intervention seemed to have quelled Mrs Weasley’s initial reaction, for which Hermione was grateful. She loved the woman dearly, but she could be a little overbearing and that really wasn’t what Harry needed right now.

Mrs Weasley nodded seriously, before rounding on the other three. “Did you hear? He needs quiet!” She hissed, as though her children had expressed a wish to throw a party right there.
Harry cleared his throat, catching Hermione’s attention. She caught his eye and he lifted his left hand to his forehead, tracing a circle around his scar, before tapping his belt where his wand was.

Hermione glanced down at her right hand and made a fist, before opening and closing it rapidly, silently assuring him that she understood. When the Weasleys asked her (which she knew Ron would), she would tell them everything, except the connection between the wands.

“Headmaster,” Madam Pomfrey said suddenly, eyeing Padfoot with trepidation, “may I ask what …?”
“This dog will be staying with Harry for a while.” Dumbledore informed her vaguely. “I assure you he is incredibly well-trained.”

“Oh, very well.” Madam Pomfrey huffed, ushering Harry to a bed.

Hermione moved over to the window, sinking onto a seat and resting her head against the wall.

“Padfoot,” Mandy said quietly, “go and wait with Hermione while we get Harry settled, okay?”
Padfoot trotted over to where Hermione sat, jumping on to the chair beside her, resting his head on her knee. She didn’t look down, but rested a hand on his head.

Arabella smiled innocently. “I swear he understands everything we say.” She glanced at Mrs Weasley, who was staring at Padfoot as though she’d seen a ghost. “I assure you, Molly, his uncanny resemblance to a Grim is merely coincidence. He wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Rats, he doesn’t like.” Ginny added sweetly, earning a chuckle from Ron and a glare from Hermione.

“Harry, I will wait here until you are settled.” Dumbledore told him. “Then I will be back to see you as soon as I have met with Minister Fudge. I would like you to remain here tomorrow until I have spoken to the school.”

“What about the rest of term?” Bill asked, a sharp tone in his voice. “There’s still two weeks.”

“I’m alright.” Harry insisted in a whisper. “I’m just tired.”
Hermione snorted mentally, but didn’t retort, even as the doors to the hospital wing opened.

Fred and George, both white-faced, strode into the Hospital Wing, only to be intercepted by their mother.

“Sorry we’re late …” Fred said.

“… we had to talk the girls out of coming.” George finished.

Hermione couldn’t help smiling. “How did you do that?”

“Promised them they could …”

“… fuss over Harry all they liked tomorrow.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Thanks guys; throw me to the wolves, why don’t you?”

“Come on, Harry.” Madam Pomfrey said softly, guiding him behind a curtain.

The Weasleys approached Hermione, Molly explaining what they knew to the twins in an undertone.

“Hey Padfoot.” Ron greeted, scratching his ears.
Hermione saw the twins perk up at the nickname and gave them a warning glance. Thankfully, for once, they listened, not trying to question them.

“Is he really alright?” Ron asked.

“Ron!” Mrs Weasley hissed. “It’s alright, Mrs Weasley.” Hermione said tiredly. “Harry told me I could tell you.” Even as she spoke, her eyes were darting around the room, making absolutely certain they couldn’t be overheard.

After all, if she was right about Rita Skeeter, locked doors would make no …

Hermione narrowed her eyes.

There was a beetle on the window sill. A beetle with markings very similar to the glasses Rita wore … much like the beetle Viktor had pulled from her hair on the bank of the lake … like the beetle Ginny had noticed on a statue when she and Ron accidentally overheard Hagrid admitting he was a half-giant … like the beetle Hermione was sure had been fluttering around the Divination classroom when Harry had his last dream …

She caught Ginny’s eye, nodding towards the window.

Ginny glanced that way and nodded, dropping both of the bags she carried to the chair on Hermione’s other side. “I got your bag, Hermione.” She said casually, moving over to the window. “It’s a bit chilly in here, isn’t it?”

The window slammed shut, causing everyone to jump.

“Sorry.” Ginny said sheepishly. “Wind caught it.”

Hermione smiled weakly. “It’s fine. Gin, if you don’t mind me filling you in later, could you run my bag back to the dorm please?”

“Sure.” Ginny shouldered the two bags again, one hand in a tight fist. “I’ll see you later. Feel better, Harry.”

“Hermione,” Ron prompted as Ginny hurried away. “What happened?”

Hermione sighed. “Well … you’re not going to believe who put Harry’s name in the Goblet of Fire …”
Chapter Fifteen - The Order of the Phoenix

After fifteen minutes, Hermione had fallen silent, horribly aware of Mrs Weasley’s halting sobs from another chair. The twins had each grasped one of her arms and guided her to a seat as soon as Hermione had told them that Voldemort had risen again.

As per her promise to Harry, she had left out the wand connection and everything that they had done, making it sound like Harry had grabbed the Cup through a lucky guess and returned Cedric out of his own initiative – it wasn’t too much of a stretch; Harry’s luck was notorious in dangerous situations and he would never have left Cedric there if he could help it, even without his last request.

Ron had sunk, white-faced, into the seat beside her, staring wordlessly across the room, where curtains hid Harry from view. By now, he had taken a Dreamless Sleep Potion, for which Hermione was grateful, because it meant that he couldn’t see, or sense, the sympathetic and pitying glances Mrs Weasley was throwing in his direction.

Hermione herself stared at her lap, unable to meet anyone’s gaze, stroking Padfoot’s head rhythmically. After a few minutes, he lifted his head, whining softly, and Hermione raised a questioning eyebrow.

In response, he jumped down and padded over to the curtained bed. Mrs Weasley half-rose in protest, but Ron squeezed his mother’s hand and shook his head.

Hermione followed him, slipping through the curtains in time to see Padfoot jump onto the bed, curling up at Harry’s feet. He looked over at Mandy and Arabella, and whined again.

Hermione smiled slightly. “Right.” She whispered. “Of course. Mandy, Arabella, could I have a word please? In private?”

Both women looked reluctant to leave Harry’s side, but the silent plea in Hermione’s eyes convinced them, and they rose from their seats by Harry’s head, and followed Hermione into the main ward.

“Madam Pomfrey?” Hermione asked quietly. “Is there somewhere I can talk to Mandy and Arabella in private?”

Madam Pomfrey looked up from checking over the real Mad-Eye Moody. “You can use my office if you wish, Miss Granger.”

“Thank you.” Hermione led the two women into the office and looked around carefully, checking for any portraits that could report back to the Headmaster. There were none, so she locked and silenced the door, before turning to face them.

“What’s wrong, Hermione?” Mandy asked.

“Nothing’s wrong.” Hermione assured her, allowing herself a smile as Lily appeared beside her. “There’s just a few things that you should know. First of all, I’m an empath.”

Unlike when she told Ron and Ginny, there was no sudden spike of emotion in the air. Both women simply smiled at her, as though they already knew.

“Sirius told us that much while we were waiting in Dumbledore’s office.” Arabella told her gently. “He also said there was something else, but that was when you arrived.”
Hermione nodded, taking a deep breath. “Well, there’s only really one way to do this. James and Lily are alive.”

Beside her, Lily burst out laughing at the looks of utter shock that appeared on their faces. “Okay, they win!”

“Be nice, Lily.” Hermione chided. “They’re in shock, and I hardly blame them!”

“Hermione,” Arabella said weakly, “did you just say what I think you said?”

“Yes, I did.” Hermione answered, before sighing heavily. “Dammit, Ginny took my bag back to the dorms, didn’t she?”

“She did, dear.” Lily confirmed. “And the transcript was in there.”

“I know.” Hermione ran a hand through her hair. “Ask me something. Something only Lily would know.”

Mandy and Arabella exchanged a wary glance. “There aren’t many things,” Mandy said slowly. “Everything I can think of, other people knew as well …” She hesitated, before pulling a face. “No, there is something. I never told anyone else, but Lily and I spoke a week before she was … killed.”


Mandy raised an eyebrow. “You tell me.”

Hermione turned to Lily, who looked both guilty and upset. “She told me she was worried because Peter was acting out of sorts lately … she was reconsidering going to Albania … worrying about him. I …” She sighed. “I thought that … I thought he was planning to propose … and I told her as such.”

Hermione felt the colour drain from her face. “Oh Merlin …” She turned to Mandy. “You’re not going to make me say it, are you?”

Mandy was just as pale, but her face was set. “Unfortunately, Hermione, yes, I am.”

“You’re a glutton for punishment.” Hermione muttered, catching her arm. Leaning in, she repeated Lily’s words in a whisper. “Believe me?” She asked, pulling back.

Mandy nodded, closing her eyes. “I believe you.”

Arabella stared between them. “Okay, first of all, what did you say? Second of all, how is this possible?”

Before Hermione had time to explain, Mandy raised a hand. “Listen.”

Hermione frowned, flicking her wand at the door. “Finite Incantatem.”

Raised voices were approaching the Hospital Wing. Silently agreeing to put the discussion on hold, the three left Pomfrey’s office to see that the Weasleys were on their feet, staring at the doors.

“They’ll wake him if they don’t shut up.” Arabella hissed, moving to Harry’s side as he began to shift. She ran a hand through his messy hair, humming under her breath, and he stilled almost instantly.

“What are they shouting about?” Ron asked quietly. “Nothing else can have happened, can it?”
“I didn’t hear anything on my way.” Ginny said, making Hermione jump. “I got back about a minute ago.” She said to her questioning glance. “I left your bag on your bed.”

“Thanks.” Hermione moved over to Harry as well, resting a hand on Padfoot’s head.

“That’s Fudge’s voice.” Mrs Weasley whispered. “And Minerva McGonagall’s, isn’t it?”

“It is.” Mandy confirmed. “But why they’re arguing, I don’t know.”

“Regrettable, but all the same, Minerva …”

“You should never have brought it inside the castle!”

The doors to the hospital wing burst open, causing everyone to jump. Padfoot jumped down from the bed to sit at Hermione’s heels as she sunk into a chair beside Harry, overcome by a sudden surge of anger.

Cornelius Fudge stormed in, McGonagall and Snape on his heels. “Where is Dumbledore?!” He demanded.

“Minister, this is a hospital wing!” Mrs Weasley protested. “And he’s not here – don’t you think you should …?”

“What happened?” Dumbledore interrupted, sweeping in with a swirl of purple robes. “Minister, why are you disturbing these people? Minerva, I’m surprised at you – I asked you to guard Barty Crouch …”

“There’s no need to stand guard over him anymore, Headmaster!” McGonagall shrieked. “The Minister has seen to that!”

Hermione swallowed nervously. She had never seen her Head of House lose control like this. Her hair was coming loose from its normally tight bun, her fists were clenched and she was almost shaking with fury.

“When we told Minister Fudge that we had caught the Death Eater responsible for tonight’s events,” Snape explained, “he seemed to feel his own personal safety was in question. He insisted on summoning a Dementor to accompany him into the castle.”

Mrs Weasley let out a gasp and pulled Ginny into her arms, eliciting a strangled protest. “Mum! I’m fine!”

“You’ve been in and out of this wing, Ginny; what if …?” Mrs Weasley could not continue, clinging to her daughter.

“I told him you would not agree!” McGonagall insisted, apparently oblivious to the byplay. “I told him you would never allow Dementors to set foot inside the castle, but …”

“My dear woman!” Fudge interrupted loudly. “As Minister of Magic, it is my decision whether I wish to bring protection with me when interviewing a potentially dangerous …”

McGonagall’s voice drowned him out, however. “The moment that … that … thing entered the room, it swooped down on Barty Crouch and … and …”

Hermione shuddered, ice flooding her veins. Padfoot whimpered at her feet, and she whistled softly, patting the chair beside her. He jumped up next to her, half-lying across her lap, and she rested a hand on his head again, feeling him shivering.

Luckily, she didn’t need eye contact to simply push words into someone’s head. *It’s alright. You’re alright. They won’t come near you. It’s gone now.*
“By all accounts, he is no loss!” Fudge blustered, ignoring everyone else in the room. “He was a raving lunatic! From what Minerva and Severus tell me, he seemed to think he was doing it all on You-Know-Who’s instructions!”

“Lord Voldemort was giving him instructions.” Dumbledore confirmed. “Those people’s deaths were mere by-products of a plan to restore Voldemort to full strength again. The plan succeeded. Voldemort has been restored to his body.”

Fudge looked as though he’d been hit with something heavy. “You-Know-Who … returned? Preposterous. Come now, Dumbledore …”

“As Minerva and Severus have doubtless told you,” Dumbledore said, "we heard Barty Crouch confess. Under the influence of Veritaserum, he told us how he was smuggled out of Azkaban and how Voldemort – learning of his continued existence from Bertha Jorkins – went to free him from his father and used him to capture Harry. The plan worked, I tell you. Crouch has helped Voldemort to return.”

Hermione was astonished to see a smile beginning to appear on Fudge’s face. She’d never had huge faith in the man’s intelligence, but surely even he could see that this was nothing to smile about!

“See here, Dumbledore, you – you can’t seriously believe that You-Know-Who - back? Come now, come now … certainly, Crouch may have believed himself to be acting upon You-Know-Who’s orders - but to take the word of a lunatic like that, Dumbledore …”

After five minutes of debate, all that had been established was that Fudge believed every word that Rita had written and that there was no way Voldemort could have returned.

Harry had woken up, and joined in with gusto – Hermione had to hold Padfoot back when Fudge suggested that Harry’s word wasn’t good enough, and Bill had to jump in to keep Mandy and Arabella from cursing the man, when he insisted that Harry was either cracking up or attention-seeking.

Hermione wanted to join in, to remind Fudge that just last year, he was warning people that Sirius might be looking for Voldemort (so he clearly believed he was alive at some point), but she held her tongue, unwilling to draw too much attention to herself – or, more importantly, to the illegal Animagus sitting beside her.

Snape even went as far as to show Fudge his Dark Mark, admitting to being a spy during the last war, but the Minister refused to listen.

Finally, Fudge stormed out of the hospital wing, dropping Harry’s Triwizard winnings on his bedside table.

Dumbledore sighed heavily, turning to face the remaining occupants, all of whom were standing, or sitting, in stunned silence. “There is work to be done. Molly, am I right in assuming that I can count on you and Arthur?”

Mrs Weasley’s eyes were wet with tears, fear encircling her like a black cloud, and Hermione’s heart went out to the woman who had already lost her parents, brothers and sister to this maniac. When she spoke, however, her voice was firm and steady. “You can. We know what Fudge is.”

For a second, Hermione wondered what she meant, but then she remembered what Dumbledore had
said to Fudge not minutes ago. “You are blinded by the love of the office you hold, Cornelius. You place too much importance, and you always have done, on the so-called purity of blood. You fail to recognise that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be.”

So the Minister of Magic was a blood-snob. That boded well for Muggle-born students.

“It’s Arthur’s fondness for Muggles that has held him back all these years.” Mrs Weasley continued, proving her right. “Fudge thinks he lacks proper wizarding pride.”

“Then I need to send a message to Arthur.” Dumbledore concluded. “All those that we can persuade of the truth must be notified immediately, and he is well-placed to contact others at the Ministry.”

“You’ll have at least two other Heads of Department, Headmaster.” Mandy said softly. “Amos won’t take this lying down. He may not actively join the cause, but he will believe us, and that’s better than nothing.”

“That’s only one.” Arabella said, looking puzzled. “Who’s the other?”

Mandy allowed herself a self-satisfied smirk. “Well, there’s been some investigating into Ludo Bagman. You remember that owl I got a month ago?”

Arabella nodded. “I don’t think you ever told me what it said.”

“Well, it informed me that Bagman was in a lot of trouble with the goblins – gambling debts – and that he was trying to rig certain games to pay them off.” Mandy explained. “They left him in place to finish commentating the Tournament, but as of two hours ago, he is unemployed.”

“So …” Arabella prompted.

Mandy’s smirk grew slightly. “So you are looking at the new Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports.”

Arabella gaped at her. “Wow … Congratulations – I was not expecting that.”

“Neither was I.” Mandy admitted, before looking back at Dumbledore. “I’ll see what I can do, Albus, but I’m not leaving Harry’s side just yet.”

“Dad can handle it.” Bill assured her, standing up. “I’ll go and tell him now.”

“Excellent. Tell him what happened.” Dumbledore instructed. “Tell him I will be in direct contact with him shortly. He will need to be discreet, however. If Fudge thinks I am interfering in the Ministry …”

“Leave it to me.” Bill slipped his cloak on and kissed Ginny and his mother, before moving over to clap Harry on the shoulder, hug Hermione, and shake Dumbledore’s hand, before leaving the hospital wing.

“Minerva, I want to see Hagrid in my office in an hour. Madame Maxime as well, if she wouldn’t mind.”

Professor McGonagall nodded, her lips still very thin, and swept out of the room.

“Poppy,” Dumbledore said, “would you be so kind as to go up to Professor Moody’s office, where I think you will find a house-elf called Winky, in considerable distress. Do what you can for her and then take her down to the kitchens – Dobby will look after her for us.”

Madam Pomfrey looked very confused, but did as she was told, whereupon Professor Dumbledore
closed the doors carefully, and made sure Madam Pomfrey was out of earshot, before speaking again.

“Now, it is time for two of our number to recognise each other for what they are. Sirius?”

Mandy put a gentle hand on Harry’s shoulder, preventing him from getting up, and she and Arabella rounded his hospital bed to stand in front of Hermione.

“Molly’s pretty handy with a wand if she thinks her children are threatened.” Arabella explained to Hermione in an undertone, under the pretence of scratching Padfoot’s ears. “Go on, Sirius. We’ve got you covered.”

Padfoot lifted his head and jumped off the chair, rearing up onto his hind legs and turning into a man.

Mrs Weasley screamed and jumped to her feet. “Sirius Black!”
“Mum!” Ron yelled, diving in front of her. “It’s okay!”

“He’s innocent, Mum.” Ginny added, grabbing her arm. “Really, he is!”

Snape looked furious. “Him?!”
“He is here by my invitation.” Dumbledore said calmly. “As are you, Severus. I trust you both. It is time for you to lay aside your old differences and trust each other.”

Neither man moved, rigidly glaring at each other, and, like in the Shrieking Shack the year before, it was hard to tell which face held more loathing.

More than once, Hermione had to tighten her empathy as the stand-off continued. Finally, she let out a sigh and lightly nudged the back of Sirius’s leg with her foot.

He glanced back, his face softening when she gave him a pleading look, and stepped forward reluctantly, his hand outstretched.

Snape regarded him for a moment, then shook his hand briefly, letting go as quickly as possible.

“Now, Sirius, I want you to go to my office and wait there.” Dumbledore told him. “Miss Granger, I want you to go with him.”

“Me, sir?” Hermione asked, startled.

“You.” Dumbledore confirmed with a smile. “The password is Drooble’s Best-Blowing Gum.”

Hermione was utterly bewildered, but she didn’t query the request. Sirius, however, seemed to have an idea about what Dumbledore was going to ask of him, but the sidelong glance he threw in her direction told her that he had no idea what her role was in everything.

Nevertheless, he nodded, sitting on the edge of Harry’s bed. “Harry, I have a feeling that what Dumbledore wants will take me away from Hogwarts. Mandy and Arabella will stay with you, but I must do what I can. You understand, don’t you?”

Harry nodded, and Sirius hugged him tightly, pressing a kiss to his messy hair. “Take care, kiddo.”

He stood up, and Mandy moved to embrace him.

“Take care of yourself.” She whispered.

“Always do, Talon.” Sirius kissed her forehead, whispered something too quiet for Hermione to
hear, and released her. He clapped Ron on the shoulder, shook Ginny’s hand, offered a still shell-
shocked Mrs Weasley a sheepish smile, and transformed back into the large black dog.

“Hermione?” Ron asked.

Hermione shrugged silently, following Padfoot out of the hospital wing, up the first flight of stairs to
the third floor.

The Dementor had clearly left by now, but the cold chill remained, and Hermione shivered as they
reached the gargoyle. She gave it the password and they stepped on to the moving staircase, to be
enveloped almost immediately in comforting warmth.

Once they were safely in the empty office, Sirius transformed and collapsed on to one of the sofas
with a groan. “We just can’t catch a break, can we?”

Hermione didn’t answer – she knew he didn’t expect one. She paced around the office, examining
all of the strange silver instruments on the desks. A few she recognised from books, but most were
bizarre and unfamiliar. “What does this one do?” She asked, pointing to a strange spiralled item that
looked like a metallic dog had left it.

“No idea.” Sirius answered, not even bothering to look to see which one she meant. “I think the only
person that knows what they all do is Dumbledore, and even then James and I had a bet going. I’m
still convinced half of them don’t actually do anything.”

“And I’m fairly sure he’s going to win.” James added, appearing beside Hermione. “Lily stayed with
Harry,” he added, “but I want to know what Dumbledore wants.”

Hermione looked up as the door to the office opened again and Dumbledore entered. She could tell
this would be a more relaxed visit than the last when he offered them a sherbet lemon.

“Now,” Dumbledore said, once they had both declined, “unfortunately, Fudge’s attitude, whilst
deplorable, is not entirely unexpected.” He turned to Hermione, gesturing for her to take a seat.
“Miss Granger, what is discussed in here is of the utmost secrecy. You cannot tell anyone – not even
Mr Potter and Mr Weasley – about what you learn, at least for the moment.”

Hermione nodded, intrigued. “Of course, Headmaster.”

“Good. During the last war, it became apparent to some of us that the Ministry was, perhaps, not
doing as much to stop Voldemort as they could be.” Dumbledore began. “On the surface, they
appeared to be doing all the right things, but there was prejudice and corruption within the system.”

“Still is, judging by those names Harry gave us.” Sirius muttered. “I could have picked half of those
out on the battlefield, simply because I duelled them so often. Sorry, Albus; I didn’t mean to
interrupt.”

“That’s quite alright, Sirius.” Dumbledore said, waving it off. “I founded an organisation called the
Order of the Phoenix to combat Voldemort in secret.”

“A sort of light resistance.” Sirius filled in. “We all joined almost as soon as we graduated.”

Hermione nodded slowly. She had heard rumours of such an organisation, and it certainly explained
why Mandy was in Albania when James and Lily were attacked – she had been a junior in the
Department of Magical Games and Sports at the time, there was no reason for her to go to Albania.
And the way Sirius had worded it made her think it wasn’t for a holiday. “What does this have to do
with me, sir?”
Dumbledore smiled at them. “Sirius, I want you to go and alert Remus, and then lie low at Headquarters. Miss Granger, I want you to go with him. I will have your trunk sent ahead, of course.”

Hermione’s mouth fell open, but it was Sirius who spoke. “Headmaster, she’s underage! You can’t really be thinking …”

“I do not intend Miss Granger to join the Order of the Phoenix.” Dumbledore assured him. “After all, the Order is reserved solely for wizards and witches who have left school. However, I would like her to be there for the first part of the first meeting, so she can help us explain your innocence.”

“Couldn’t you do that, sir?” Sirius asked, concern lacing his voice. “There’s another two weeks of term left.”
“But our exams have finished.” Hermione said softly. “And I was actually there in the Shack. I saw Peter. Professor Dumbledore didn’t. Next to Harry, I’ve got the best shot of convincing them.”

Dumbledore nodded approvingly. “Very good, Miss Granger. I would also like you to have some company at Headquarters, Sirius. With your permission …”

Sirius took the slip of parchment Dumbledore held out, a look of puzzlement on his face. “Why would you need my …?” He froze, staring at the parchment in his hand.

“Sirius?” Hermione prompted, alarmed by the sudden paling of his face. “Padfoot?”

Sirius looked up at Dumbledore, his face unreadable. “I don’t want Hermione anywhere near that place. Not unless you plan on completely fumigating it first. And you can’t possibly ask me to go back there!”

“Back where?” Hermione asked urgently. Her first irrational thought was Azkaban, but she dismissed it almost instantly, logic kicking in.


“Sirius, the house has been abandoned since 1984,” Dumbledore said patiently, “and there is a house-elf, is there not?”

Sirius grimaced. “Albus, if that house-elf has done any actual work in the last twelve years, I will be very surprised.”

“And,” Dumbledore continued, as though he hadn’t spoken, “as a former auror, I’m sure you are more than a match for anything that may be in that house.”

Sirius still didn’t look happy, but he nodded reluctantly. “Is it safe?”

“As I said, Cornelius’s position in this is not entirely unexpected.” Dumbledore answered. “I have already cast the Fidelius Charm, I am the Secret Keeper. If you would prefer we use somewhere else …”

“No.” Sirius cut in. “No, it’s the perfect place.” He turned to Hermione. “As much as I don’t want you to be stuck there …”

“Go with him, Hermione.” James urged, looking over Sirius’s shoulder. “I don’t know what Dumbledore’s playing at, but I don’t want him there alone.”

“I can handle it.” Hermione insisted, holding out her hand for the piece of parchment. “That’s the
“Right.” Sirius sighed, giving in, and handed it over.

Scribbled on the parchment, in Dumbledore’s loopy, narrow handwriting, were the words *The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.*

“You will need to keep that safe.” Dumbledore informed her. “Remus will need to see it before he can see the house. If you could ask him to gather the old crowd, Sirius, the first meeting will be on Saturday at 11 o’clock. Good luck.”

“We’ll need it.” Sirius muttered, standing from the sofa. “I’ll try and get a meeting room useable by Saturday, Headmaster.” He shook Dumbledore’s hand and turned to Hermione. “Beaky’s hiding in the Forest. Go and say goodbye to Harry and Ron, and I’ll meet you down there.”

Hermione nodded and waited for Sirius to transform, before letting them out of the office. They split up on the first floor, Padfoot loping left towards the marble staircase, Hermione running right to the hospital wing.

She burst in just as Mandy was about to give Harry another Dreamless Sleep Potion. “Hang on!”

Mandy looked up, startled. “Hermione, what on earth …?”

“I’m leaving early.” Hermione interrupted breathlessly. “I’m sure you’ll find out later.” She hugged Harry tightly. “Don’t worry, eat properly, get enough sleep …” she lowered her voice “… do me a favour and tell Mandy and Arabella about your parents. I never got a chance to finish explaining.” She kissed his cheek and turned to hug Ron, who was looking uncharacteristically concerned.

“Where are you going?” He asked immediately.

“You’ll find out soon enough.” Hermione hissed, releasing him. She slipped past the twins to talk to Ginny, lowering her voice even further. “Get her?”

“She’s in the jar that you charmed.” Ginny told her in the same tone. “What do I do with her?”

“Make sure she’s got things to eat.” Hermione answered, checking her watch. “Don’t put her anywhere she can see or hear anything important. I’ll find some way to meet you at the beginning of the holidays.” She hugged Ginny and raised her voice. “Bye, everyone.”

Mrs Weasley intercepted her to embrace her. “Do take care, dear. You’re not going home, are you?”

“I have no intention of going anywhere near my father.” Hermione said truthfully and, if Mrs Weasley noticed that Hermione had technically answered a different question, she didn’t comment on it.

After hugging Mandy and Arabella, Hermione left the hospital wing, leaving behind a group of very confused people.

As she reached the first floor, she ran – literally – into Draco Malfoy, who steadied her, looked furtively up and down the corridor, and dragged her into the nearest alcove.

“He’s back.”

For the first time in almost four years, his usually well-crafted mask was nowhere to be found, and
Hermione looked into eyes filled with trepidation.

“I know.” She said softly. “Harry told us. They won’t make you take the Mark, will they?”

“I don’t think so.” Draco answered, his right hand gripping his left arm almost unconsciously. “Not yet, at least.”

“If it comes up, tell them that you’re better off without it for now.” Hermione told him. “Tell them it will make people underestimate you or something – you’re a Slytherin, be cunning about it.”

Draco nodded. “And you?”

“I have to go.” Hermione admitted. “I’ll talk to people over summer; see if I can come up with something. I’m sorry, I need to go. Be careful.”

With an apologetic smile, she took off for the doors, running full-tilt towards the forest. She reached the cover of trees in a matter of seconds – a personal record – and slowed to a jog, trying to catch her breath.

A low whistle caught her attention, and she slipped between a few trees to see Sirius standing with Buckbeak. She met the hippogriff’s large orange eyes and bowed. He bowed back and she patted his neck, still breathing heavily.

“Ready?” Sirius asked, casting a glance in the direction of the castle.

“As I’ll ever be.” Hermione pulled a face. “I hate flying.”

“It is a strange experience, I’ll give you that.” Sirius admitted, patting Buckbeak. “But do you really think I’d let you fall?”


Sirius frowned in confusion. “That’s strange. You never had a problem when you were a baby – I used to take you up on my bike. You loved it.”

“I don’t know.” Hermione admitted. “I’ve just never liked heights.”

“Relax, Hermione.” Sirius said, helping her on to Buckbeak’s back. “There’s no difference between falling ten thousand feet to the jagged rocks below and falling out of bed.”

“Really?” Hermione asked as he jumped up behind her.

“Really.” Sirius confirmed. He paused, gathering the makeshift reins. “Except for the landing at the end, that is.”

Hermione blanched, leaning back against him. “Right, thanks for that.”

“Sorry.” Sirius hesitated. “Would you rather sit behind me?”

“No.” Hermione answered hastily. “No, I feel marginally safer here.”

“Alright.” Sirius cast a glance at the rapidly darkening sky. “Off we go.” He nudged Buckbeak’s flank with his heels, and the hippogriff tossed his head, before breaking into a gallop.

The wings rose beneath them, Hermione closed her eyes tightly, and they took off, soaring into the night.
Chapter Sixteen - Grimmauld Place

Hermione kept her eyes closed for the entire journey, and Sirius didn’t try to convince her to do anything different. Only when they began to descend did she open them again, at which point she realised something that made her groan out loud.

“What’s wrong, Hermione?” Sirius asked immediately, as Buckbeak landed amongst trees. The impact jolted them slightly and Buckbeak came to a halt in what amounted to a forest. Ahead of them, Hermione could see a small cottage she assumed was Remus’s home.

In answer, she pointed up at the night sky. “It’s a full moon.” She said flatly. “That’s why he wasn’t at Hogwarts – Mandy and Arabella told us earlier. I can’t believe I forgot.”

“I can’t believe Dumbledore forgot.” Sirius grimaced. “And I bet he’s not on the Wolfsbane either – Mandy mentioned that she couldn’t make it.”

“So what do we do?” Hermione asked quietly, sliding from Buckbeak’s back.

“Wait.” Sirius said darkly, leaning against a tree. “There’s nothing else we can do, Hermione.”

“That’s not true.” Hermione disagreed. “We’re both Animagi.”

“Absolutely not.” Sirius stated firmly. “It’s dangerous.”

“You did it.” Hermione pointed out calmly.

Sirius sighed. “That’s different, Hermione … Even as a werewolf, Moony knew our scents. If I walked in as Padfoot right now, he wouldn’t attack me because he’d recognise my scent as pack, not because I was canine. You, on the other hand, haven’t been around him enough for him to recognise the scent.”

“But …” Hermione began.

“There is a chance – a chance – that he would recognise you as a cub, so not harm you,” Sirius admitted, cutting off her protest, “but it is a chance I am not willing to take.”

A howl floated towards them from the cottage and Hermione shivered, not needing empathy to recognise the pain that echoed through the trees. “He’s hurting, Sirius, and you know it.” She said quietly. “You won’t be able to just sit here while he goes through that. And you won’t leave me alone out here – we need to both go in.”

Sirius sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. “Alright.” He said finally. “But you transform before we get in there and you stay behind me at all times until I signal otherwise, clear?”

Hermione nodded. “Crystal clear.”

“Good.” Sirius patted Buckbeak’s neck. “Stay here, Beaky – alright?”

The hippogriff gave a squawk and they made their way swiftly to the front door.

“Where will he be?” Hermione asked, slightly nervously.
“Basement.” Sirius answered. “The door’s not locked, but the werewolf isn’t intelligent enough to open the door, see?”

“But you won’t be able to close it again as Padfoot.” Hermione said. “What if he gets past you and up here?”
“I’ll lock and ward this door when we get inside.” Sirius assured her. “Although, even if he did get out, it wouldn’t be the end of the world – by the time he got anywhere close to human civilisation, it’d be tomorrow lunchtime. But better safe than sorry.”

“Plus, I’m sure he’d prefer to wake up in his home, rather than in the middle of the forest.” Hermione said dryly. She caught his eye, and smiled innocently, before transforming into her lioness form.

“Oh, and I want this story tomorrow.” Sirius told her, opening the door.

Hermione made a mewing sound in agreement and slipped inside, waiting patiently while he locked the door behind them and warded it.

Another howl sounded from beneath them, and Sirius transformed into Padfoot and led her through the house and down a flight of stairs to a thick metal door.

Padfoot reared on to his hind legs and batted at the door handle, which gave way, using his weight to push the door open.

Moony was on the other side of the room and started forward with a low threatening growl, before stopping and sniffing the air. The growl stopped and he tilted his head, apparently recognising the scent.

Padfoot barked and bounded forward, wrestling him to the ground, and the two rough-housed for a few minutes, while Hermione pushed the door closed – at least, as closed as she could get it.

Their greeting over and done with, Moony moved towards her, but Padfoot bounded between them, not quite growling but close.

Moony gave the canine equivalent of an eye-roll and Hermione dropped to the floor, making herself as non-threatening as possible, but she needn’t have bothered.

Apparently, Sirius’s tentative suggestion that Moony might recognise her as a ‘cub’ was correct, and he was far more interested in playing with Padfoot than investigating any further, so Hermione curled up to watch them until the day’s events finally caught up to her and she drifted off to sleep.

***

When Remus woke the next morning, it didn’t feel any different from any other month, until the initial pain of the transformation wore off, and he realised that he wasn’t nearly as battered as he normally was and that he was covered by a blanket.

He sat up and groaned as his head instantly protested the movement – the morning after the full moon could be worse than a hangover at times.

Getting wearily to his feet, he wrapped the blanket around his body – his house might have been empty, but his mind was running automatically right now.

Besides, it was cold down there.

He made his way to the high shelf that held the various healing potions Mandy had brewed over the
last month, too high for the werewolf to reach or – indeed – pay attention to. Finding a headache potion, he downed it in two swallows and his head cleared almost instantly, allowing him to think clearly enough to notice the soft snuffles coming from the other side of the room.

The scene that met him when he turned around confused him, worried him, and made him smile all at once.

Padfoot was fast asleep and it was he who was making the snuffling noises, but Remus had no idea what he was doing there.

He knew that Sirius had returned to Hogsmeade to keep a closer eye on Harry – and he didn’t blame him one bit, given some of the stories that were surfacing – and he knew that the Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament had been last night.

Remus would have assumed that everything was fine, and Sirius had done the sensible thing and put as much distance as possible between himself and a magical town.

Except Sirius knew better than to just drop in on a full moon without giving Remus prior warning – all the Marauders did, after James had turned up at the Shack unexpectedly during the summer before seventh year.

But if something *had* happened, Sirius would have stayed with Harry. *Unless*, a sombre voice said, *it was so bad that Sirius had to come and tell you immediately.*

The other thing that confused him was the presence of another Animagus. A lioness – too big to be a cub, but not quite a fully-fledged adult – was sleeping soundly beside Padfoot, and the smile won out, stretching across his face.

Padfoot was curled around her protectively and, as Remus watched, his ear twitched in such a way that he knew that if he so much as took a step towards her, the large black dog would be awake and alert in an instant.

*But who is she?*

Remus battled with that question for a few minutes, before deciding to go upstairs, take a shower and get dressed, before trying to wake them.

*Let them sleep just a bit longer. Besides, Sirius is a bugger to wake sometimes – best do it when I’m feeling a little more refreshed.*

***

“I’m telling you, Moony, you’re not going to believe who she is.”

“Try me.”

Hermione twitched as voices reached her through what seemed to be a thick fog. She blinked sleepily, wondering for a second about her change in vision, before the events of the night before came flying back to her.

Her eyes closed again, and she wished she could just go back to sleep, because when she was asleep, she didn’t have to deal with any of that.

But Hermione was a Gryffindor and she knew she couldn’t allow herself to use sleep as excuse to avoid her problems.
Once she had admitted this, even inside her head, there was no way she could go back to sleep, and she groaned – except, of course, she was still a lioness and it came out as a growl instead, alerting the two men talking in quiet voices.

Hermione climbed to her feet and stretched, feeling her muscles protest about sleeping on solid stone, before transforming back into her human form. “Good morning …” She yawned, cutting herself off.

“Good morning, Hermione.” Sirius greeted, looking amused at the expression of stunned shock on his friend’s face.

“Hermione …” Remus said after a few minutes. “What are you doing out of school? And when did you do that?” He turned to Sirius. “I thought we agreed that you couldn’t kidnap them.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “I didn’t kidnap her – Dumbledore sent us. And I want to hear the answer to the second question myself.”

“Why did Dumbledore send you?” Remus asked slowly.

“Because Mandy and Arabella stayed with Harry.” Sirius answered.

“That’s not what I asked, Padfoot, and you know it.”

“Maybe I should make breakfast first.” Hermione suggested, forestalling Sirius’s retort. “It’s a long story. Two long stories. I’m guessing from that little debate, you haven’t told him yet.” She added, as Remus led them upstairs.

“Told me what?” Remus asked. “And you don’t have to, Hermione …”

“No, I want to.” Hermione insisted, checking the fridge. She hesitated, reluctant to be the bearer of bad news, but she could only stall for so long. Pulling out a carton of eggs and a packet of bacon, she turned to face him, her expression grim. “Voldemort’s back.”

Remus’s face drained of colour and he sat down abruptly – luckily where a chair was as opposed to where it wasn’t. “What?”

“Your go, Padfoot.” Hermione told him firmly, setting a saucepan on the hob. “I told Ron and the others; I’m not doing it twice.” She set about making scrambled eggs and bacon, setting a couple of slices of bread in the toaster while she did. For the most part, she let the story wash over her, not too keen on hearing it again, but she caught a few phrases and, when Sirius got to Dumbledore’s intervention in the DADA office, she finally stepped in.

“… luckily, Dumbledore got there in time to Stun him …”


“What?” Sirius asked, looking startled.

“I Stunned him.” Hermione repeated, dividing the eggs between three plates. “He never considered that I might have another wand …

“Another wand?” Remus interrupted. “Why did you have another wand?”

Hermione wasn’t sure, but she thought she saw Sirius flinch. He held up a hand to stop her from replying, and leaned over to whisper something to Remus.

Piling bacon on to the plates, Hermione tried not to eavesdrop, but she was confused. Who the hell
She glanced over her shoulder, resisting the urge to extend her empathy, but their expressions were unreadable.

“Are you alright?” Sirius asked in an undertone – she almost didn’t hear him, except her hearing was still sensitive from her transformation.

Remus murmured something that sounded like “what she would have wanted”, before clearing his throat and looking at her. “Sorry, Hermione – you were saying?”

Hermione hesitated, but decided it was best not to ask. “Not much else to it, really. When he moved his wand to curse Harry, I Stunned him. I’m sure I mentioned that in the hospital wing, Padfoot.”

“I wasn’t really listening.” Sirius admitted, his face breaking into a grin. “I was worried about Harry. Atta girl, Kitten!”

The name struck a chord in her memory, and she dropped the plates on to the table and sat down, before looking at Sirius thoughtfully. “Did you call me that when I was a baby?”

“All the time.” Remus answered for him. “He said it was because when you were younger, you made a sound like a kitten when you were hungry. How’d you remember that?”

“Natural Occlumens.” Hermione answered casually. “You wanted to know about the Animagus transformation.”

“Yeah, we did.” Sirius agreed. “I mean, there’s no way you were working on it in third year, which means you managed it faster than we did.”

“Well, I didn’t exactly study the transformation.” Hermione admitted. She smiled at their perplexed expressions and began to explain, starting with the mysterious voice and finishing when she bumped into the twins.

When she’d finished, both men were gaping at her, even more bewildered than they had been before. Hermione ignored this, and calmly ate another spoonful of eggs.

“You met the Hogwarts founders?” Sirius said eventually, sounding more awestruck than disbeliefing.

“You saw me transform.” Hermione shrugged. “That was when I started picking up what the castle was feeling. Got a blinding headache when the other schools arrived though.”

“Makes sense.” Remus agreed thoughtfully. “Wards.” He sighed. “So Cedric Diggory, Bertha Jorkins and Barty Crouch are dead, Crouch Jr is alive but soulless, Mad-Eye Moody was an imposter and Voldemort’s back.”

“Yeah, that about sums it up.” Hermione said flatly.

“It’s not all bad news.” Sirius insisted. “Tell him about James, Lily, Addie and Leona.”

“What about them?” Remus asked wearily.

“They’re not dead.” Hermione answered bluntly. “They’re stuck on an island – I don’t know where. I’m an empath – I can talk to James and Lily, but Addie and Leona don’t have spirits anymore … dammit.” She sighed, cutting herself off. “I hope Harry thinks to tell Mandy and Arabella about those two. I only got as far as James and Lily.”
Sirius patted her hand. “He will.” He looked over at Remus, who was watching the two with a closely guarded expression, as though he wanted desperately to believe them, but was afraid to at the same time. “She can answer questions only James or Lily would know the answer to.”

Hermione cleared her throat sheepishly. “Actually, they’re not here at the moment, so I can’t, but …” she cast her mind back. “I believe Lily mentioned something about hexing Snape into the ground under a beech tree in fifth year. No, wait – James corrected her – into the air in fifth year. And he said – er – ‘Snivellus’ had it coming.”

Remus shook his head slowly, his face breaking into a grin. “Hermione, I could kiss you. But I won’t.”
“Yeah, I’d prefer it if you didn’t.” Hermione said in a measured tone. “Now I don’t want to bring the mood down again, but don’t we need to go to Headquarters?”

Sirius pulled a face. “Yeah, we do.”
“You still haven’t told me where Headquarters is, Padfoot.” Remus said casually. “What’s wrong with it?”

“I grew up there.” Sirius answered darkly.

Hermione was startled – she had guessed he had a connection with the house and a bad one at that, but it hadn’t occurred to her that it might be something like that. “Dumbledore said it’s been abandoned since 1984?”

“That would be when Mother died, I guess.” Sirius said, his mouth twisting into a humourless smile. “The house-elf went round the twist years ago and he never listened to me anyway.”

“I thought house-elves were bound to serve their masters.” Hermione frowned. “Otherwise, their magic starts fading. That’s what the Hogwarts house-elves say anyway.”

“Oh, he’ll obey.” Sirius said darkly. “But I’ll need to cover every loophole. He absolutely adored my mother – so naturally he hated me. We’ll need to use caution in there, because it’s probably infested by now, given Dumbledore’s little remark about me ‘being able to handle it’.”

“At least we’ve got magic.” Hermione remarked.

Sirius raised an eyebrow. “We? You’re underage.”

“But the Fidelius Charm bypasses the underage law.” Hermione reminded him. “And the Ministry can only pick up magical signatures, not who’s performing it – that’s how you managed to use magic at my house last summer. They knew there were three magical beings in that house, and two of them were adults. They had no reason to assume it was me.”

“Hermione, whilst your argument is well thought out and logical,” Remus told her, “we still can’t let you use magic.”

“Absolutely not.” Sirius agreed.

Hermione’s face fell and her lower lip trembled. “Not even a little bit? To be helpful?”

Remus closed his eyes. “Don’t look her in the eye, Sirius. Look away!”

“Padfoot?” Hermione asked, inwardly marvelling at how effective the ‘puppy-dog pout’ (as Ginny had referred to it) actually was. “You’ll let me, won’t you?”
Sirius’s expression softened as he looked at her. “Well … I suppose we can trust you not to take advantage of us …”

Remus turned to him incredulously. “For Merlin’s sake, Sirius, what do you think she’s doing right now?!”

Sirius blinked, shook his head, and gave Hermione a mock-stern look. “Nice try.”

Hermione sighed, dropping the pout. “Worth a shot.”

The two men exchanged an amused glance. “Marauder.” Remus stated.

Sirius nodded in agreement, grinning. “I’m so proud.”

Hermione chuckled, ignoring the warm feeling the filled her. “Look, I’ll only use it when it’s just us and I’ll only use it to help clean up. I won’t use it in front of Ron or Ginny, assuming the Weasleys visit – I won’t even use it in front of the twins, even though they’re of age now. Please?”

Again, the two men exchanged a glance and, after a few minutes, Sirius flashed a hand signal across the table. Remus replied in kind, and Hermione sat back, rolling her eyes – she was hardly fluent in ‘Marauder sign language’ and, even if she was, the actions were far too fast for her to catch.

“Where’s Prongs when you need him?” Hermione muttered under her breath.

“You called, fair maiden?” James asked, materialising with a flamboyant bow. “Literally.” He added, at her questioning look. “Heard you all the way in Scotland.”

Hermione smirked and nodded towards Remus and Sirius.

James turned to face them and watched the interaction for a few minutes, smiling fondly. “The bottom line, Hermione, is that they both think that you should be allowed to use magic, but Remus is worried that Dumbledore might not approve.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “Who says Dumbledore needs to find out?” She couldn’t help smirking when they both froze, looking utterly dumbfounded. “What?”

Realisation suddenly dawned on Sirius’s face. “Where?”

Hermione jerked a thumb towards James, still smirking, and glanced at Remus. “Got myself a translator.”

Remus looked at the spot she’d indicated and back at Hermione a few times, as though worrying for her sanity. “Hermione, there’s nobody there.”

“I’m nobody now?” James asked with a pout, before Hermione could answer. “Moonykins, I’m hurt!”

Hermione stifled a laugh. “Er, I don’t think Remus would appreciate that nickname, James.”

“Oh, he doesn’t.” James confirmed cheerfully. “That’s why I use it.”

“You’re impossible.” Hermione informed him.

“Sticks and stones, love.” James retorted with a wink, vanishing into thin air.

Hermione shook her head, finally allowing herself a smile. “Gentlemen, James Potter has left the building.”
“Well, that was surreal.” Remus said faintly.

Hermione shrugged. “You get used to it. So can I use magic or not?” She considered telling them about Dumbledore casting the Fidelius Charm for the Potters, but thought better of it.

True, they both needed to know, but they also needed to work with Dumbledore to combat Voldemort. Besides, right now, she had no answers for them. She needed more information before she acted on it – a lot more.

Remus sighed. “Okay, you can use magic. But only when we’re in the house and not in front of anyone else. Are we clear?”

Hermione nodded seriously. “Crystal. Are we flying?”
“Will be.” Sirius answered. “Moony?”

“What are you going to do about Buckbeak?” Remus asked, temporarily ignoring the question. “If memory serves me correctly, your family home is in the middle of London.”

“On the outskirts.” Sirius corrected. “But you’re right – I forgot about that … I’ll Disillusion us and him, and then Shrink him until we get inside.”

“Good plan.” Remus approved. “I’ll take a broom. It’ll be easier for me to follow you.”

“How are you going to follow us if we’re Disillusioned?” Hermione asked blankly.

“Well, it is possible to keep an eye on Disillusioned people and creatures, as long as you know they’re there.” Remus explained.

Sirius barked out a laugh. “What Remus is being too modest to say is that he always had a certain talent for seeing through Disillusionment Charms.”

Remus turned slightly red. “Just get on with it, Padfoot.”

“Right.” Sirius waved his wand and sent the dishes over to the sink. “Come here, Hermione.”

Hermione stood up and approached him, standing perfectly still while he rapped her on the head with his wand. Something cold trickled over her, as though a stream of rainwater had fallen on her head.

“Nice one, Padfoot.” Remus commented.

Hermione looked down and smiled – she’d read about the spell, but she’d never actually seen it performed. “Very interesting.” It looked as though she had turned into a human chameleon.

Remus flicked his wand towards the sink and the dishes began to wash themselves. “Right. No point in dragging this out.”

Sirius took a deep breath and let it out shakily. “Alright, back to hell.”

***

An hour later, they were standing in a patch of grass, in the middle of the most derelict square Hermione had ever seen. The houses were all tall, stately townhouses, and once must have looked quite handsome.

But time had taken its toll, and most lay abandoned, some with broken windows and paint peeling from the doors.
One or two had cars parked outside, but even these were old models that looked like they had no business being on the road at all.

All in all, it was a thoroughly unpleasant place and Hermione found herself thinking that it was no surprise that Sirius’s parents had hated Muggles, because their family home was hardly surrounded by the most reassuring example of Muggle life.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

“Have you shrunk Buckbeak?” Hermione asked quietly, still unable to really see either of them.

“Yeah, he’s in my pocket.” Sirius answered from beside her. “He’s not happy about it. Have you still got the note Dumbledore gave you?”

“Yeah, it’s right here.” Hermione fished it out of her pocket and held it towards the light of Sirius’s wand so Remus could read it. As she did, she glanced at the houses in front of them, seeing number eleven and number thirteen, but no gap in between for number twelve.

Hermione frowned – she knew about the Fidelius Charm, but surely there should at least be an empty space. “Where’s …?”

“Don’t say it.” Sirius’s voice told her, taking the parchment from her hand. “Just think about what you read.”

Hermione did so, and just as she reached the part about Grimmauld Place, another house appeared, pushing numbers eleven and thirteen apart as it seemed to inflate between them.

Neither house’s inhabitants seemed to notice, and Hermione once again marvelled at the things magic could do as the three crossed the square and made their way up the steps to the front door.

“Home sweet home.” Sirius muttered, tapping the door handle – which was shaped like a serpent – with his wand.

The door swung open and the three stepped into the dark hallway, huddling close to the door as it closed, plunging them into darkness.

Sirius waved his wand and old-fashioned gas lamps flickered to life along the walls, casting light over the long hallway. It had the appearance of a once grand manor house, but, abandoned for twelve long years, the carpet was faded and threadbare, the wallpaper was peeling, and the dusty chandelier above them was strewn with spider webs.

As Sirius and Remus removed the Disillusionment Charms, movement caught Hermione’s eye from the portrait frames, but they were all so dusty and blackened by age that it was impossible to tell who they were.

“Right.” Sirius said, looking around in distaste. “The first thing we need to do is find the house-elf. Then …”

“WHO DARES BESMIRCH THE HOUSE OF MY FATHERS?!”

The shriek made Hermione jump backwards with a yelp. Sirius steadied her, moving forward with his wand raised.

The largest portrait on the wall – so large it could be a window – had awoken, and it was the only one not covered in grime.

On the contrary, it looked very well cared for, but that did nothing to improve the appearance of the
She was quite old and looked half-mad, her eyes rolling, drool dribbling down her chin.

“Oh, hello Mother.” Sirius greeted flatly.

‘Mother?’ Hermione mouthed at Remus, who merely grimaced.

“Oh, it’s you.” The old woman said darkly. “Just what do you think you’re doing, coming back here?!”

“Oh, nothing much.” Sirius answered casually. “Voldemort’s somehow risen again, and we thought we’d use this as the headquarters of the light resistance.”

“I was looking for a proper answer, boy!” She snapped.

Sirius smirked. “That was the proper answer, Mother.”

The old woman glared at him and took what would have been a deep breath. Hermione clapped her hands over her ears just in time, but it hardly made a difference.

“BLOOD TRAITOR, SHAME OF MY FLESH, HOW DARE YOU BEFOUL THIS HOUSE …”

The other portraits awoke now as well, and the hallway was filled with screams so loud that Hermione was surprised the Muggle houses either side couldn’t hear them.

“Hermione!” Remus shouted over the noise. “You know the Silencing Charm?”

Hermione nodded, and began Silencing the other portraits up and down the hall, while Remus and Sirius tried to silence Mrs Black.

Finally, Sirius conjured a heavy curtain over her, and she fell silent.

“In here.” He whispered, ushering them into room off the hallway.

Instantly, Hermione pulled a face. Three of the walls, including one with a fireplace, were painted a horrible olive green colour, but the fourth bore a tapestry – floor to ceiling – that seemed to depict …

“Is this your family tree?” Hermione asked interestedly, wandering over to look at it. It was quite faded, but the golden thread still glistened, as did the large words at the top: The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black Toujours Pur.

“Yeah.” Sirius glanced at the hallway. “I think we’ll need to warn people to keep their voices down in the hallway.”

“Can’t you take her down?” Hermione asked.

“Tried just now.” Sirius sighed. “She’s gone and used a Permanent Sticking Charm.”

“ Came back to bite you, didn’t it Padfoot?” Remus asked lightly. “Sirius liked to … bait his parents when he was a kid.” He explained to Hermione. “He stuck all sorts of things up in his room with a Permanent Sticking Charm.”

“I thought you were disowned after first year.” Hermione said in surprise. “When did you do that?”

“I taught myself before Hogwarts and nicked Regulus’s wand.” Sirius sniggered. “Mother was not
“If you were telling the truth about what you stuck up, I’m not surprised.” Remus muttered. “What were you saying before your charming mother interrupted?”

“Right, need to find the house-elf.” Sirius repeated. “Then we need to find a room that’s relatively safe to hold the meeting in.”

“What’s wrong with this one?” Hermione asked.

“Well,” Sirius sniffed, “you smell that?”

Hermione mimicked his actions and shrugged. “It’s a bit musky.”


“Probably.” Sirius agreed, glancing at them. “As long as we don’t touch them, we should be fine, but the more people in here, the more likely they are to come out. And doxy bites are poisonous.”

Hermione grimaced, edging away from the curtains. “Lovely.”

“Kreacher!” Sirius called.

Nothing happened.

“Bloody elf.” He muttered.

“Sirius!” Hermione chided absently.

“S.P.E.W.” Hermione corrected tiredly. “And yes. I thought you agreed with me.”

“I do.” Sirius assured her. “But my feelings towards Kreacher have nothing to do with the fact that he’s a house-elf, nor does the way I act towards him. It has everything to do with him being a foul little git who hung on to my mother’s every word.”

“Shouldn’t he appear when you call him?” Remus asked.

“He should. Unless he’s crawled off and died somewhere.” Sirius said, looking vaguely hopeful. “But then he hasn’t considered me his master since I was twelve, if he ever did before. Not since Mother blasted me off.”

“Blasted him off?” Hermione repeated in bewilderment as Sirius left the room.

“The tapestry.” Remus explained, gesturing to it.

Hermione took a closer look, and realised that there were several burn-marks across it. “What, so someone did something they didn’t like and his mother burnt their names off?”

Remus nodded. “More or less. I couldn’t tell you who they all are, or what they did.”

“Where should he be?” Hermione asked.

Remus scanned it for a second, then pointed near the bottom. A double line of gold connected the names Orion and Walburga, and a single gold line from their names split into three – the first to the name Regulus (which Hermione vaguely remembered Sirius saying was his brother’s name), the
other two to round burn marks, almost like cigarette burns.

It was the right-hand burn that Remus was pointing to, but Hermione couldn’t help the way her gaze slid back to the middle burn mark. “Remus,” she said quietly, “who’s that?”

Remus didn’t answer for a few seconds, and when he did his voice was shaking slightly. “Jennifer Black. Sirius’s twin sister.”
Chapter Seventeen - And So It Begins

Hermione stared at the burn-mark for a few seconds, just giving herself time to make sure Remus had said what she thought he did. “Sister?”

Remus nodded and, without warning, her head exploded with pain and grief, surprising her with its intensity. She cried out, vaguely feeling him grab her arm to keep her from falling, but – like after the Second Task – her empathy refused to be controlled.

Again, she retreated into her mind, snatches of memory flying past her, but it was Lily and Remus’s voices that stood out, and she realised she had reached further back than she ever had before.

“What do you mean, she’s not there? She left over two hours ago, Lily – she has to be there.”

“I haven’t heard from her. Maybe she took a detour to Diagon Alley or to the Ministry or …”

Loud banging – on a door Hermione assumed, and she heard footsteps, before Lily’s voice, yet again. “Who is it?”

“It’s me, Lils – James. And Sirius.”

“Is Prongs coming too?”

“Don’t be ridiculous; my antlers wouldn’t fit through the door.”

This bizarre exchange was clearly some sort of code, because she heard a door open and her own voice.

“Daddy!”

“Hey, Kitten. Have you been a good girl for Aunt Lily?”

His voice was strained and shaking slightly, although she was sure that, as a baby, she hadn’t noticed.

“James, Sirius, what’s wrong?”

Hermione heard a few quiet taps and then the sound of a fireplace roaring into life – maybe James had temporarily changed the wards to allow Remus to floo through.

“Remus …”

That was Sirius.

“Remus, when did Jen get a new wand?”

“She didn’t. She’s still using her old one.”

“No, you didn’t hear me. When did she get a new wand?”

“Sirius, you’re making no sense. Jen doesn’t have a new wand. She has the same one she’s had since first year – willow and dragon heartstring, nine and three-quarter inches.”
“James … Honey, what is it?”

“The Dark Mark’s been sent up, just inside the apparition wards.”

“I know, we saw it out the window … James, you’re scaring me.”

“We found her wand underneath it, Lil. There was no sign of her …”

“Hermione!”

Remus’s voice cut through the memory and her eyes flew open, almost gasping for air. She was sitting down now, on the moth-eaten sofa, and Remus was kneeling in front of her, looking worried.

“Should I call Sirius?”

“No.” Hermione whispered, taking a deep breath. “No, I’m fine. My empathy was playing up …” She ran a hand through her hair, her gaze being drawn back to the tapestry. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s hardly your fault, Hermione.” Remus told her kindly. “It’s difficult to control that kind of …”

“No.” Hermione interrupted. “I’m sorry about Jennifer.”

“That wasn’t your fault either.” Remus said quietly. “But thank you.” Hermione stood up slowly, taking a second to reassure herself that her legs would still hold her, and returned to the tapestry. “It’s her wand, isn’t it?”

“It was.” Remus corrected quietly. “Its allegiance has probably changed.”

Hermione shook her head. “Not to me. It’s resisting me still – I can feel it. What …?” She hesitated. “What actually happened to her? I know you found it under … under the Dark Mark.”

“How did you know that?” Remus asked curiously.

Hermione traced one of the singular golden threads with her finger, linking a burn mark with the names Narcissa and Bellatrix. “I’m a natural Occlumens, remember. When I can’t control my empathy, I go into my memories. I remembered.”

“Oh.” Remus sighed heavily. “I honestly don’t know, Hermione. We never found her. It seemed … It seemed incredible that we didn’t … She was an auror – the best to pass through the Ministry … A lot of people felt that without her, we had no chance.”

“She must have been an amazing witch.” Hermione commented.

“She was.” Remus agreed, smiling sadly. “Powerful, smart, and stunning to boot. She was older than Sirius by two minutes, and never let him forget it.”

“And you love her.” Hermione finished softly, not bothering to use past tense. “Who was that?” She asked, pointing at the second burn mark.

Remus didn’t seem to mind that the subject change was clumsy at best. “Andromeda. She was their favourite cousin, you know – not that there was much competition. Narcissa wasn’t too bad if you caught her on a good day – she and Lily were actually pretty good friends towards the end – but Bellatrix was …” He caught himself. “Well, not a very pleasant witch, to put it lightly.”

Hermione was about to ask why Andromeda was ‘blasted off’, when a thud from above them made them both jump.
“I think he’s found Kreacher.” Remus commented dryly.

***

Number Twelve Grimmauld Place was silent.

This wasn’t surprising – it was, after all, three o’clock on a Saturday morning and the house was almost empty. Of ten bedrooms, only three were occupied; the rest lay undisturbed.

Hermione was wide awake, trying to catch her breath. Her empathy had alerted her to a nightmare within the house, and she had somehow been pulled into it before she woke, leaving her in no doubt as to whose sleep was being disturbed.

She got out of bed and slipped her dressing gown on, tying it around her waist, before leaving her room and closing the door firmly behind her.

The house was even creepier at night, and she tiptoed up the stairs almost silently. There were five floors in the new Headquarters, plus an attic and a basement, which housed the kitchen (being the least infested room and of a decent size, it had been duly decided upon as the meeting place).

The first floor held one bedroom only, dedicated to other uses instead – Hermione knew there was a dining room and what could have once been a ballroom of some kind, but she hadn’t investigated. It also held the library, which Sirius had made her promise to stay out of until he had cleaned it out, and then to avoid the books he didn’t expressly tell her were safe. Having just watched him wrestle a book to the ground to keep it from tearing his throat out, she made that promise very quickly.

The other three floors all held three bedrooms. The third floor – where Hermione slept – held Sirius’s mother and father’s rooms. Hermione had been slightly surprised there were two master bedrooms, until she remembered that it was probably an arranged marriage.

Both were very gloomy and very ornate. Buckbeak was in the Mistress’s Chambers, as Sirius had gleefully informed his mother’s portrait, resulting in a slew of insults that were still ringing in Hermione’s ears.

For such a ‘refined pureblood lady’, she certainly had an interesting vocabulary.

Sirius had originally offered her and Remus rooms on the fourth floor, where his room was, but they had turned them down.

One had been Jen’s at one point, the other Regulus’s. Neither Hermione nor Remus felt comfortable taking Jen’s room, and Regulus’s … Well, it was almost eerie in there – everything was frozen in time, as though he’d simply gone out and not come back.

Which, Hermione reminded herself, he had, and his mother, whether out grief or something else, had just let the room remain as it was, a silent shrine to her oldest son.

Hermione stepped on to the topmost landing, passing by the other two doors (one of which was neatly labelled with the words *Do not enter without the express permission of Regulus Arcturus Black*) and knocked on the third.

There was no answer, and she pushed the door open quietly, tentatively poking her head inside.

Sirius was still asleep, but he was clearly restless, and the emotion was stronger in here – a tepid mixture of fear, guilt and misery.
The architecture itself was the same as the other ‘Heir Suites’ (as Sirius had called them in a mocking tone), but the decoration was in red and gold, and Hermione couldn’t help allowing herself a smile at the reaction Sirius’s mother must have had when she saw it. There were also several pictures of motorcycles – Hermione remembered hearing an engine that Halloween night; maybe that’s what it was – as well as Muggle pictures of bikini-clad women.

Given that Sirius ran away after first year, Hermione doubted there was anything other than innocent mischief behind that decision, but she still admired his guile.

She crept over to his side and put a hand on his shoulder, shaking him gently. “Sirius?”

He didn’t wake, shivering violently. Having seen what he was dreaming, she didn’t blame him.

“Sirius! Wake up!”

Still, his eyes remained closed, his lips moving silently, and she sighed.

“SIRIUS!”

***

The house looked just as it always had before that night, no peel of smoke billowing from it, no sign that anything was wrong.

Sirius sprinted towards it, praying that everything had just been some horrible dream, and burst through the front door, but everything was quiet.

It was never quiet.

He ran up the stairs, listening desperately for any sign of life, and paused at the nursery, pushing the door open.

Rather than smoke and rubble, he was confronted by an empty room, grey stone walls, grey stone ceiling, grey stone floor.

He stepped inside and the door swung closed behind him, leaving him in a heavy silence. His footsteps echoed and the room seemed to expand as he walked, getting larger and larger.

But still empty … except …

Something was lying up ahead, and he quickened his pace, racing towards it, only to skid to a horror-struck stop, when he realised that it was James Potter, lying spread-eagled, glasses askew, staring unseeingly at the ceiling.

Time seemed to stop as Sirius fell to his knees, burying his face in his hands. “Merlin, Prongs, I am so sorry …”

A hand grabbed his arm, causing him to jump, and he looked up to see James grinning at him. But this wasn’t James’s usual, I-just-pulled-a-prank-and-you-are-never-going-to-live-this-down grin. No, this was cold and slightly maniacal, and it sent a shiver down Sirius’s spine, because James never looked like this, not even going after Death Eaters.

“You killed us, Sirius.”

Sirius shook his head frantically. “No! No, I didn’t, James! It was Voldemort!”

James’s hand twitched, and Sirius watched in horror as the skin began to peel away from it. “You
told us to switch to Wormtail!” James whispered. “You killed Lily! You killed me! You took away the
only family Harry had!”

“He has family!” Sirius protested. “He’s got me! And Moony! And Mandy and Arabella …”

“But he’s not with you now, is he?” James’s hand, now more bone than flesh, fastened itself around
Sirius’s throat. “He’s at Hogwarts, where you left him to deal with hell on his own. And then he’s
going back to Petunia. You remember Petunia, don’t you Sirius? You remember the times Lily cried
over her. Do you really think she treats Harry any better?!“ His hand tightened and Sirius gasped
for air. “You deserved Azkaban for what you did to us! We were happy, dammit!”

“Not so tight, James.” Lily’s voice admonished, though far more coldly than Sirius remembered.
“Don’t make it too quick.”

“L-Lily …” Sirius managed to turn his head as James’s grip loosened ever so slightly, but he
immediately wished he hadn’t. Lily’s once vibrant hair was dull and flat, her eyes lifeless, but filled
with a malicious glint that he really didn’t like.

“You’re a traitor to the Order, Sirius.” Lily said coldly. “A traitor to your friends. A traitor to your
family. How could you?!“

“Lily …” Sirius choked out. “Lily, I’m sorry! I didn’t know; I swear!”

“Face it, Sirius.” Another, chillingly familiar, voice stated. “You could have saved them.”

James finally released Sirius, shoving him away, and he spun around, praying it wasn’t who he
thought it was, but, for the first time, he found himself wishing he wasn’t seeing Addie’s face before
him.

Because it wasn’t her face – her smile and her eyes were colder than he’d ever seen them, and, like
James, she was slowly decaying, as though she had climbed out of a grave. “You could have saved
me.”

“Addie …”

“I loved you – I trusted you! You left me here to die!”

“Addie, please …”

“You’re no better than them.” Tears began to spill from her eyes, and it was worse than her
coldness, because he always hated seeing her cry. “No better than Bellatrix …”

“Sirius …”

“No better than your mother …”

“Sirius! Wake up!”

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

“SIRIUS!”

***

Hermione jumped back and breathed a sigh of relief as her last shout caused Sirius to jerk awake,
flushed in a cold sweat. “Are you alright?”

“Nightmare.” Sirius gasped out, sitting up. “I’m fine.”
“I’ll agree with the first.” Hermione said. “Maybe not the second. You’re still shaking.”
“Really bad nightmare.” Sirius amended. “What time is it?”

“About three o’clock, I think.” Hermione answered.

“Why are you awake?” Sirius asked, his breathing becoming steadier.

“You had a nightmare, I’m an empath.” Hermione said with a shrug. “And you managed to drag me into it. I would have rated that as worse than ‘really bad’.”

“I’ve had worse, but I’m sorry you had to see it.” Sirius reached out a hand and she sat next to him, letting him wrap an arm around her shoulders. She wasn’t sure if it was for her sake or his, but she didn’t care – the dream had shaken her as well.

They sat there in comfortable silence for well over twenty minutes, until movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. She turned her head and saw a magical photograph lying on the nightstand.

Sirius had stopped shaking now, but he was still very tense and, wanting to take his mind off of his nightmare, she picked the photograph up and lit her wand to examine it.

There were ten people in the photograph, all about sixteen or seventeen years of age, all sitting on the bank of the Hogwarts lake, smiling and waving at the camera.

Hermione’s gaze was drawn first to James and Lily, on the right hand side of the photo, holding hands and exchanging loving looks.

Beside them, Sirius was laughing and joking with a girl she didn’t recognise with long blonde hair and blue eyes. Every now and then, he would say something that would cause her to smack his arm, but her smile never wavered.

To their left, Remus was smiling tiredly at whoever was taking the picture. Maybe it had been a full moon the night before or not long ago. His arm was around the waist of a girl Hermione assumed to be Jen. Her dark hair was pulled back into a braid, her eyes the same grey as Sirius’s. ‘Stunning’, Remus had called her – and Hermione had to agree.

Peter was next to them, and Hermione’s eyes lingered on him for a few minutes. He was different than she had expected – from the encounter in the Shack, and the way McGonagall and Madam Rosmerta had talked about him in the Three Broomsticks, she had assumed that Peter had been a tagalong, not really part of the group, but if that was true, it didn’t convey itself in the picture. He held himself well – not with the easy confidence of James, or the casual elegance of Sirius – but he was there, with no sign of discomfort or the air of I-can’t-believe-my-luck that she was expecting.

He was talking to Mandy, Arabella, and another girl Hermione didn’t know, but recognised nonetheless. She had curly dark hair and blue eyes, with a round face that reminded her strongly of someone she went to school with.

“That’s Neville Longbottom’s mum, isn’t it?” She asked, pointing to her.

“Alice Bones.” Sirius confirmed. “Well, Alice Longbottom eventually, of course.”

Hermione nodded, remembering what Neville had said about his mum and Susan’s dad. “So she’s Susan Bones’s aunt, right?”

“That’s right. Susan was Edgar’s daughter – the rest of the family was killed in the first war.” Sirius
told her. “I believe Susan lives with their other sister, Amelia.”

Hermione frowned, realising that Neville had only ever mentioned his mum that one time. “Sirius …” she said slowly. “What happened to her? Because Neville lives with his grandmother, but … he’s never spoken about them …”

“She’s in St Mungo’s.” Sirius answered heavily. “In the long-term ward. Shortly after Voldemort fell, she and Frank were tortured into insanity by some of his followers.”

“Oh Merlin.” Hermione closed her eyes, thankful beyond anything that she hadn’t questioned Neville about his mum that day in December. “No wonder he doesn’t tell anyone; that must be awful …”

“She was David Potter’s goddaughter.” Sirius said absently. “She was like James’s little sister – probably the only person who could get away with calling him ‘Jamie’.” He chuckled. “He’d have gutted the rest of us.”

“But that didn’t stop you, did it.” Hermione asked smirking.

“No.” Sirius admitted with a grin.

Hermione laughed, looking back at the photo. “That’s Addie, isn’t it?” She asked, pointing at the girl he was talking to.

“Yeah.” Sirius answered, his smile fading slightly. “That’s Addie.”

Hermione tilted her head up to see his face. “It wasn’t your fault, you know. And Addie doesn’t blame you.”

“I thought you couldn’t talk to her.” Sirius said mildly.

“I can’t.” Hermione agreed. “But remember what Lily said the first time I spoke to her? She still loves you. She can’t blame you – and it’s not your fault anyway.”

“I could have …”

“So could everyone else.” Hermione interrupted. “No one knew for sure she was dead, and no one looked. That’s not your fault. And neither was what happened to James and Lily, for that matter, so stop it.” She looked back at the photo without waiting for a response, and pointed to the girl beside Remus. “That’s Jen.”

Sirius nodded. “Yeah, that’s Jenny.” He sniggered. “Not that she liked me calling her that. Only Reg could get away with calling her that.”

“I thought you didn’t get along with your brother.” Hermione said curiously.

“We got along fine until Jen and I were sorted into Gryffindor.” Sirius sighed. “Suddenly we ceased to exist to him. It hurt me, it nearly killed Jen. I suppose you could say she was a Daddy’s Girl, and our father was never the paternal type.”

“So Regulus filled that spot.” Hermione said softly. “What happened to him? There’s a date of death on the tapestry …”

“Honestly, Kitten, I don’t know.” Sirius admitted. “Two days after Jen disappeared, we got word that Reg was dead … word through the grapevine was that he’d been killed by aurors, but no one in the aurors had any knowledge of it. Personally, I think he got in so far, realised the lengths
Voldemort was willing to go, and tried to back out.”

“You think Voldemort killed him.” Hermione concluded.

“On his orders, at the very least.” Sirius agreed quietly.

In another attempt to change the subject, Hermione asked a question that had been bothering her for the last few days. “Why Jennifer?”

Sirius gave her a quizzical look. “What do you mean?”

“Well …” Hermione shrugged. “Sirius, Regulus, Narcissa, Bellatrix, Andromeda … They’re all unusual. Actually, they’re all stars, except Narcissa. That’s a flower.”

“Well, Black family tradition says we name our children after stars and constellations.” Sirius explained, rolling his eyes. “But it gets a little difficult with girls, so if you can’t go star, you go Latin, flower or mythology.”

“Still doesn’t explain Jennifer.” Hermione pointed out.

Sirius smirked. “That’s because Jennifer wasn’t her real name. It was Guinevere.”

“Now that sounds more like it.” Hermione remarked. “So why do you and Remus call her Jennifer then?”

“Because she didn’t answer to Guinevere.” Sirius answered simply. “It wasn’t like Andie’s daughter, Nymphadora – she’ll hex you if you insist on using it – she just blanked you until you called her Jennifer or Jen. And she was stubborn. David Potter wrote to McGonagall just before the Sorting warning her, so even the teachers called her Jennifer.”

Hermione nodded. “Andie – Andromeda’s the Healer, right? Why was she disowned?”


Glowing numbers appeared in front of them. 03:49.

“You need to go back to bed.” He told her. “It’s too early for you to be awake – you need to sleep.”

Hermione didn’t bother to argue, putting the photograph back on the nightstand. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

Sirius smiled, kissing her forehead. “I’ll be fine.”

Hermione stood up, stretched, and made her way towards the door. Just as she reached it, she remembered something she’d been meaning to ask, and turned around. “What was her Marauder name? Jen, I mean.”

“Selena.” Sirius answered. “Her Animagus form was a wolf.”

Hermione smiled. “Goddess of the moon. Appropriate.”

“Lily thought so.” Sirius agreed. “Goodnight.”

“Night, Padfoot.”
Seven hours later, Hermione was sitting down in the kitchen at the huge oak table. She had been unable to get back to sleep and, eventually, gave up, wandering down to the huge, cavernous room. She had whiled away the time by making a ridiculous amount of food for breakfast, and mentally listing all of the very good reasons why she couldn’t – and shouldn’t – visit the library yet.

“Did you even go back to bed?” Sirius asked tiredly, appearing in the doorway.

“Good morning to you too.” Hermione said flatly. “Yes, I did, but I couldn’t get back to sleep, so I gave up at about six. I figured if I came down here and made coffee and breakfast, I’d be less likely to be tempted by the library.”

“McGonagall will bring your trunk by today.” Sirius told her, sitting opposite her. “How much food did you make?”

Hermione blushed slightly. “More than necessary, admittedly. I got a bit carried away.”

“Nothing wrong with that.” Sirius told her, loading his plate up. “One can never have too much breakfast. I’ve never known a fourth year to drink coffee before – normally that hits in the OWL season.”

“I’ve been hooked since second year.” Hermione admitted, taking a sip. “Merlin knows I needed it.”

“What actually happened during your first two years?” Sirius asked curiously, pouring himself a mug as well. “No one seems to want to answer the question. It can’t have been anything bad, can it?” Hermione considered that for a few seconds. “They were worse than third year.” She said finally. “But better than this one.”

Sirius closed his eyes. “You spent third year thinking I was trying to kill Harry.” He said in a strained voice. “What could be worse than that?”

Hermione sighed heavily. “Can we wait for Harry so we can tell you together?” She asked, almost desperately. “It’s a long story, and I don’t know all of it anyway.”

“Then tell me this,” Sirius said quietly, “how bad are Harry’s aunt and uncle?”

Hermione hid her grimace by taking another sip of coffee. “What makes you think they’re bad?”

“The fact that after knowing I was innocent for an hour, he was willing to choose me over them.” Sirius answered heavily. “Plus, he’s told me about Jess in his letters – it can’t be a normal family situation for him to prefer his next-door neighbour.”

Hermione heaved another sigh. “I don’t know.” She said, only half-truthfully. “Harry never talks about them. He didn’t know he was a wizard until he was eleven, and they told him James and Lily died in a car crash.”

In actual fact, Harry had told her more about the Dursleys – a lot more – but Sirius was not going to happy when he heard it, and she would much rather have someone else there to keep him from doing anything stupid when she told him.

Sirius muttered something under his breath that sounded as though it was aimed at the Dursleys, but Hermione didn’t ask him to repeat it, because at that moment, a clanging noise echoed through the house, and Mrs Black’s portrait began screaming.

Again.
“Bloody hell!” Sirius exclaimed, jumping to his feet. “Is that the time? The meeting starts in an hour!”

“Someone’s early.” Hermione commented, getting up as well. “I’ll get it.”

“Where’s Remus?” Sirius asked, looking up the staircase to the main hall, as though expecting his best friend to suddenly materialise.

“Popped out to run a few errands.” Hermione answered. “But he knows better than to ring the doorbell – stay here.” She hurried up the stairs and into the hallway, diving for the curtains that now framed the portrait.

After much struggling, in which the word ‘Mudblood’ was screamed at least fifteen times and ignored just as many (much to Mrs Black’s mounting anger), Hermione managed to close the curtains and the furious old woman fell silent.

Pausing to catch her breath, and to direct a Silencing Charm at the other portraits, Hermione opened the door to see Professor McGonagall standing on the step, looking very unusual in a brown Muggle house-coat. “Good morning, Miss Granger.”

“Good morning, Professor.” Hermione greeted in a whisper, stepping back to let her in. “Sorry about the wait, but our hostess isn’t very accommodating.”

“Yes, Walburga Black was always a thoroughly unpleasant woman.” McGonagall agreed in the same quiet tone, as Hermione led her down into the kitchen.

When they got there, Padfoot was sitting beside the table, wagging his tail hopefully, and wearing the most pathetic ‘puppy-dog’ eyes Hermione had ever seen.

McGonagall removed her coat, revealing an old-fashioned tweed day-dress. “That won’t work on me, Black.” She said sternly, laying the coat over the back of a chair. “Professor Dumbledore told me everything.”

Padfoot whined softly, looking at Hermione, who shrugged. “Don’t look at me. She’s my head of house too, remember.”

Turning human again in one smooth movement, Sirius gave Professor McGonagall a charming smile. “Good morning, Professor – may I say how lovely you look today?”

“Don’t give me that!” McGonagall snapped. “Now I would like to think that the Headmaster is mistaken on this point, but he very rarely is. Is it true that you became an illegal Animagus, right under my nose, in fifth year?!”

Sirius gulped audibly. “Well … it was towards the end of fourth year actually … but, yes ma’am, that’s true.”

“Well, I have just one thing to say to you, young man!” McGonagall paused, and Sirius flinched in anticipation. Then, she smiled – the first real smile Hermione had seen her give anyone in a long time. “I am incredibly proud of you.”

“What?” Sirius asked, looking bewildered, only for her to step forward and hug him, like he was her long-lost son who had finally returned home. Hermione picked up her coffee again, hiding her smile behind her mug, as Sirius tentatively patted McGonagall on the shoulder, looking slightly scared by this sudden turn of events.

As Professor McGonagall released him, the doorbell rang again, and Mrs Black’s screams echoed
Sirius groaned. “Professor, I don’t suppose you can remove a Permanent Sticking Charm, can you?”

Professor McGonagall didn’t quite roll her eyes, but it looked like it was difficult not to. “Believe it or not, Mr Black, the whole point of a Permanent Sticking Charm is that it is permanent.”

Hermione tried and failed to hold back a snigger. “Help yourself to coffee and breakfast, Professor. Sirius, you might want to stay as Padfoot until the meeting starts.” She hurried up the stairs and into the hallway, skidding to a halt in front of the painting. “Listen, you old bat, I’m not spending the entire morning shutting you up every five minutes!”

Her words seemed to startle the old woman, which gave Hermione the opportunity to force the curtains shut. So that’s the answer – say something to stun her into silence and then close the curtains.

Musing on this new development, Hermione opened the door to see a tall, bald, black man, who looked to be about Sirius and Remus’s age, with a single gold hoop in his right ear. The witch beside him was in her early twenties, and had bright pink hair and dark twinkling eyes that shone from a pale, heart-shaped face.

There was another man with them as well, but he was standing behind them shrouded in a travelling cloak.

“Password?”

She should have gone through this with Professor McGonagall as well, she realised, but she couldn’t see any Death Eater willingly disguising themselves as Minerva McGonagall.

They’d never live it down.

“At least someone’s got some sense.” The cloaked man growled.

Hermione’s heart seemed to stutter to a halt, and she raised her wand, her hand shaking slightly. “Password?”

“Phoenix.” The young woman supplied, with a reassuring smile. “Are you alright, miss?”

“You must be young Potter’s friend.” The other man lowered the hood of his cloak, revealing mismatched eyes, one of which was scanning the house, and a heavily scarred face. “I understand from Potter that you’re the one who took down the arsehole pretending to be me.”

“Y-Yes, sir.” Hermione lowered her wand again. “Sorry, Professor, I wasn’t expecting you – it took me by surprise. Come in – keep your voices down in the hallway.”

“No point calling me ‘Professor’, lass.” He told her, limping over the threshold. “Didn’t get round to much teaching, did I? Just call me Mad-Eye – everyone else does.” He took out a flask from his pocket and took a swig. Seeing her eyes fixed on the flask, he offered her a twisted smile and removed the lid, holding it out for her to sniff. “Firewhiskey.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose at the smell. “Better than Polyjuice.” She turned to the other two, holding her hand out. “Hermione Granger. Fourth year Gryffindor.”

“Kingsley Shacklebolt.” The man said in a deep slow voice, shaking her hand. “Former Ravenclaw, current auror. This is Nymphadora Tonks.”
She rolled her eyes, shaking Hermione’s hand in turn. “Don’t call me Nymphadora unless you want me to hex you – Tonks is fine. Why are we whispering?”

Before Hermione could explain, the doorbell rang and the curtains flew open again.

“FILTH! SLIME! HOW DARE YOU …?!?”

Hermione sighed. “That’s why. Go on down to the kitchen; there’s food and coffee if you want it. Sooner Remus gets back the better,” she muttered under her breath as the three made their way down the hall. Once they were out of earshot, she turned to Mrs Black with a bright smile. “Hi Grandma! Didn’t Dad tell you about me?!”

Once again, she took advantage of the temporary silence and forced the curtains closed. “This is going to be a long day.”

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An hour later, most of the Order had arrived, and there were more people than she had expected. Thankfully, Remus had returned before long, and they had taken it in turns to shut Mrs Black up and let people in.

Hermione was currently leaning against the kitchen wall and trying to remember at least some names.

Nearest her, Hestia Jones – short auburn hair with pink cheeks – and Emmeline Vance – tall, with long black hair braided down her back – were conversing cheerfully. Hestia was also an auror, she had told Hermione, and Emmeline worked elsewhere in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

A few seats down, Elphias Doge – almost as old as Dumbledore, but very short – and Dedalus Diggle – just as short, but slightly younger, and wearing a most peculiar violet top hat – were discussing the Ministry in very grave voices.

Next to them, Mad-Eye was drinking from his hip-flask and watching Mundungus Fletcher – short and pudgy, with droopy blood-shot eyes, and a smell of stale smoke and firewhiskey lingering around him – suspiciously, although Fletcher seemed more interested in examining the Black Family silver than paying attention to the grizzled old auror.

Bill Weasley was talking to Kingsley Shacklebolt and Tonks, who – Hermione had remembered – was Sirius’s first cousin once removed. She couldn’t believe it had taken her so long to realise that – Sirius had mentioned her earlier that morning, but the resemblance between the two cousins was almost non-existent.

At least it was until Tonks mentioned that she was a Metamorphmagus and Hermione realised that she might not be seeing what the woman really looked like.

Mr and Mrs Weasley were sitting next to Bill, talking in low voices, looking uncharacteristically worried.

No one was paying attention to the large black dog sitting at Hermione’s feet, except Mrs Weasley and Bill, who kept looking over warily, and Professor McGonagall, who was scribbling something on a spare piece of parchment with one hand and absently scratching Padfoot’s head with the other.

Hermione smirked inwardly at what the other Marauders would have said if they’d known while they were at Hogwarts. Judging by the smirk Remus wasn’t bothering to hide, it would have been quite entertaining to witness.
But there were two people missing that Hermione had been expecting to see, and she leaned over to Remus. “Where are Mandy and Arabella?”

“They told Albus, in no uncertain terms, that they weren’t leaving the castle until Harry did.” Remus told her just as quietly. “Not even for Order meetings. Are they here?”

Hermione shook her head, straightening up again. No, James and Lily were nowhere to be seen, and hadn’t been for a few days. She could only assume they were still with Harry.

At least, she hoped that was where they were.

Finally, Professor Dumbledore entered the room and the gathered Order members lapsed into silence.

“Thank you all for coming today.” Professor Dumbledore said gravely. “However much I wish we had no need to gather, we find it once again necessary.”

“He’s definitely back, Dumbledore?” A voice asked – Hermione couldn’t see who.

Dumbledore nodded. “I’m afraid so, Sturgis. I must admit, I had been expecting this to happen eventually. As I am sure you have noticed, the Ministry is doing their best to ignore what is happening, so, once again, we are forced to act in their stead. First things first, I am sure you are wondering about our headquarters.”

There was a murmur of agreement, and Emmeline shuddered delicately. “Where exactly are we, Professor? This place looks like it belonged to the darkest of Dark Wizards.”


Hestia gasped, her hands flying to her mouth. “But … But Professor! Sirius Black … what if he comes back here?!”

A flash of pain and a whimper from her feet caught her attention, and Hermione reached down to pat Padfoot’s head, not bothering to wonder – Hestia was about his age and, as an auror, she would have worked with him.

Dumbledore caught her eye and motioned her forwards. “To answer your question, Hestia, I would like to introduce you all to Hermione Granger. I am sure some of you may have met her already – to forestall your protests, I am not about to induct her into the Order; though I am sure she would make a great asset, she is still only fifteen.”

Hermione blushed slightly at the praise. “Thank you, Headmaster.”

“Hermione is here to answer that very question.” Dumbledore told them, his eyes twinkling slightly. “Miss Granger?”

Hermione stepped forward, feeling a little nervous as every face turned to look at her. She caught Remus’s eye and he nodded encouragingly; they had already discussed how she would explain all this.

“Bill,” she began, “when you were at Hogwarts, did you ever hear of a group called the Marauders?”

Bill looked a little startled. “Yeah. Yeah, I did. They were pranksters, but no one had a clue who they were. They first appeared in 197 … 5, I believe, and the pranks didn’t stop until 1981, but they were very sporadic after 1979, so most people figured they graduated that year and returned to Hogwarts every so often for … whatever reason. No one knew what house they were in, because
they targeted all houses equally – they must have pranked themselves constantly, because no one ever got spared. They only ever targeted the whole school or whole houses, unless they were retaliating for something – normally some form of bullying.”

“The Marauders always signed their pranks.” Hermione continued, when Bill stopped. “*Courtesy of Messers Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs.* And most people were right – they did graduate in 1979. Most people also had no idea about Misses Selena, Shadow, Jade, Bastet and Talon, but that’s another story. These four boys were best friends – brothers, in fact – so when they figured out that Mr Moony was a werewolf in second year, they decided they wanted to help him.”

The room was utterly silent, every occupant intrigued, even if they didn’t know why.

“They became Animagi.” Hermione explained. “Werewolves are only a danger to humans, not to animals, and while they were there, Mr Moony kept his mind, more so than he would normally have done. In their third year, they discovered their Animagi forms and assigned themselves nicknames, which is when the pranking … not started, but became more anonymous.”

“They did still continue pranking overtly.” McGonagall said, her lips thin. “We could just never prove they were the Marauders. Continue, Miss Granger.”

“And naturally, they became known as the Marauders. Mr Wormtail was a rat, Mr Padfoot was a dog, and Mr Prongs was a stag. After they graduated, Mr Prongs and Miss Jade got married and had a baby – little Pronglet.” She paused for a moment. “They were very happy, until they learned that Voldemort …” she resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the squeaks and gasps of protest (Harry was right – that was really annoying) “… wanted to kill Pronglet. So they went into hiding under the Fidelius Charm. Mr Padfoot was their Secret Keeper.”

Instantly the tension in the room increased tenfold, as everyone began to realise just who the Marauders were.

“But in October of 1982, that all changed.” Hermione’s face darkened. “They changed Secret Keeper to Mr Wormtail, who betrayed them and, on Halloween, Voldemort attacked, leaving Pronglet as the Boy-Who-Lived.”

“So Mr Prongs,” Bill said quietly, “was James Potter. Miss Jade was Lily Potter. And Mr Wormtail … Sirius Black?”

“No.” Remus answered tiredly, as Hermione put a warning hand on Padfoot’s head. “Mr Padfoot was Sirius Black. Mr Wormtail was Peter Pettigrew.”

“The next morning,” Hermione continued, before anyone could interrupt, “Padfoot tracked Wormtail down, but rather than going in quietly, he shouted, “Lily and James, Sirius! How could you?!” whereupon he blew the street apart, cut his finger off, turned into a rat and sped down into the sewers.”

“But that would mean …” Emmeline said slowly. “That would mean Sirius Black is … innocent.”

“He is.” Hermione confirmed. “I saw Peter Pettigrew with my own eyes last June. Pettigrew had been living as a domestic rat.” She looked at Mr and Mrs Weasley. “Crookshanks didn’t eat Scabbers.”

Mrs Weasley gasped in horror.

“But …” Emmeline still looked sceptical. “This would have all come up in his trial …”

“He wasn’t given one, Em.” Hestia whispered, staring at the table in shock. “Several of the aurors
protested, but I …” Guilt and what felt like affection rose in the air as she shook her head. “I should have known. We were friends – why didn’t I know?”

“None of us did.” Remus said heavily. “I was his best friend, Hestia, and I didn’t believe him. You’ve got nothing to feel guilty about.”

“So Sirius Black will be joining us.” Kingsley concluded. “When?”

Hermione smiled sweetly. “Don’t tell me you all forget what animal Padfoot was.” She looked down at the dog by her feet. “Are they always this unobservant?”

Padfoot stood up and transformed back into Sirius, slowing down the transformation so as not to startle anyone. “I think they’re out of practice, Hermione; give them a break.”

Before anyone else could say anything, Tonks stood up quickly and manoeuvred around the table with a grace that surprised even Hermione (after just an hour, she knew the woman was notoriously clumsy), before throwing herself into Sirius’s arms.

“Mum never thought you did it.” She half-sobbed. “Not really.”

Sirius hugged her tightly, and the whole room seemed to let out a collective breath. When the cousins pulled apart, they both had red-rimmed eyes, but no one commented on it.

Kingsley stood as well, reaching across the table to shake Sirius’s hand. “Good to see you again, Sirius. I’m in charge of the search for you, you know. Apparently, you’ve just been spotted in Hawaii.” He added, winking at him.

Sirius laughed. “Well, I hear the weather’s lovely there at this time of year.” He turned to Hermione apologetically. “I hate to say this, Hermione, but …”

“I know.” Hermione sighed. “I can’t stay for the meeting. Do you have my trunk, Professor?”

Professor McGonagall pulled a small package out of her robes and placed it on the floor, tapping it with her wand to resize it. “There you are, Miss Granger.”

“Here.” Sirius waved his own wand over it, casting a Feather-Light Charm. “That way you can get it up the stairs. I’ll remove it later for you.” He added, with a meaningful smile.

“Thanks, Sirius.” Hermione said, hearing the unspoken reminder not to mention her use of magic in front of the Order.

She carried the trunk out up into the hallway, before drawing her wand and levitating up the rest of the stairs to her room. Removing the charm herself, she dug through the contents until she found a book she hadn’t read – at least in a while – before settling down and losing herself in the pages.

***

Late that evening, when the Order had left, Hermione found herself down in the kitchen again, nursing a mug of hot chocolate. Remus had left that afternoon, to do … something – he hadn’t been very forthcoming with information, and Sirius, oddly, had not pushed for any.

They had been sitting in silence for a few minutes, when Hermione asked, “Did something happen between you and Hestia?”

“What makes you think that?” Sirius responded quietly, after a few seconds.

“She was the only one I really got a lot of guilt from earlier.” Hermione answered. “And affection
too. It just seemed like you were closer than just ‘colleagues’.”

“We were friends.” Sirius conceded. “Like she said.” He sighed. “And I suppose you could argue that we dated briefly, except we didn’t.”

“You dated but you didn’t.” Hermione repeated slowly.

“It’s complicated.” Sirius said, pouring himself a glass of firewhiskey.

It was a vague answer, but by no means a dismissal, so Hermione pushed on. “Did you love her?”

“No.” Sirius answered, sitting down opposite her. “Well, yeah, sort of, in that I loved Lily, Mandy and Arabella. But I wasn’t in love with her. I still loved – love – Addie, and she had lost her fiancé to Death Eaters a few years previously. She was a few years ahead of us.”

Hermione frowned. “So why did you date?”

“I told you, we didn’t.” Sirius grimaced. “Just promise me you won’t tell Harry about this, alright?”

“Alright.” Hermione agreed, intrigued. “Is it … bad?”

“Not bad.” Sirius assured her. “Just embarrassing. Rita Skeeter asked me out and I turned her down. She did some digging, found out I hadn’t dated since Hogwarts, and … and outing me on the front page of the Daily Prophet.”

It took all of Hermione’s self-control to keep a straight face. “She told the wizarding world you were gay.”

“Yes.” Sirius confirmed, rolling his eyes. “You can laugh.”

Hermione lapsed into giggles, just in time to prevent her ribs cracking from the effort of holding them in. It took her a few minutes, but she finally managed to get them under control. “How did everyone take it?”

Sirius smirked. “Well, Mother’s reaction was almost enough to convince me to just ignore it and let them all think that, but … Well, you’ve read Rita’s stories; one scandal just isn’t enough.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “Oh, she didn’t …”

“She did.” Sirius nodded. “Didn’t come right out and say it, but there were definite implications about the others. One woman actually asked Lily about it, very sympathetically, how awful it must be to read that and how did she feel about the whole thing. I think she meant the implications, but Lily, with a completely straight face, just said ‘I’m two months pregnant – how do you think I feel?’” He sniggered. “James didn’t talk to her for two weeks.”

“Where did Hestia come into it?” Hermione asked, once the fresh wave of giggles had died down.

Sirius smirked. “Well, people were starting to pressure her about ‘getting back in the field’ as it were.” Sirius said, shaking his head. “I don’t know why they thought that was their place – grief doesn’t have a set time-limit. You can’t just wake up one day and say ‘Well, they’re gone; best get on with it!’” He sighed. “I lost Addie seventeen years ago – I still haven’t done that.”

Hermione patted his arm. “Hestia.” She prompted.

“Right.” Sirius took a sip of firewhiskey. “We were talking after an Order meeting, commiserating about our respective problems … I can’t even remember who suggested it, but we went out to dinner a few times. Her ‘friends’ stopped bugging me; Skeeter’s story was proved wrong.” He grimaced. “I still can’t stand that woman though. Someone needs to make her shut up.”
Hermione smiled secretively. “Maybe they will.” She leaned back in her chair, the humour slowly draining from her body as a sense of foreboding took its place. “What happens now?”

“With Skeeter?” Sirius asked blankly.

“With the war.” Hermione corrected softly, staring into her mug.

“We wait.” Sirius answered grimly. “As much as I hate waiting. Did you have any plans for the summer?”

“Not really.” Hermione said with a shrug. “Viktor did ask me if I wanted to visit Bulgaria – his mother offered me a summer apprenticeship … but after all this … I need to stay in England.”

“Well, you and Harry always have a home here.” Sirius told her, before sighing. “However much I wish it wasn’t here.”

Hermione nodded absently, staring into the fire as it cast flickering shadows across the walls. “Do you think we can win?” She asked finally, looking up to meet his gaze.

“With the team we’ve got?” Sirius asked. He grinned at her, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “We’re Marauders, Kitten. No doubt about it.”

Hermione pretended not to notice the doubt in the air and tried to believe what he said, to believe that he wasn’t trying to convince himself as much as her.

He was definitely right about one thing though. They were Marauders. And they weren’t going down without one hell of a fight.

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