Harry Potter and the Unwinnable Fight by Leviathan

by Leviathan0999

Summary

When Harry and Hermione disappear before his eyes, Ron Weasley will do whatever it takes to bring them back.
But while Ron fights to save them, Harry and Hermione are lost in a world where the only thing they have is each other...

Written Post-HBP, Pre-DH

It didn't look dangerous, or they never would have touched it. Hell, it didn't even really look particularly mysterious or unusual. In fact, as Hermione would tell McGonnagall -- months later -- it had looked like nothing more than one of those phoney Victorian-era advertising signs you could buy in slightly snobbish home-decorating stores, the sort of things you might see decorating the walls of a "casual dining" chain restaurant.

The three of them were in the attic of Number 12, Grimmauld Place, covered by now with dust and cobwebs as they carefully inventoried the bizarre collection of memorabilia and magical objects that the Black family had collected for centuries. This had been Hermione's brainstorm. "After all," she'd said, "We'd feel pretty stupid if we spent a few years hunting Horcruxes all over the planet, only to find out they were in Harry's attic all along!"

They'd found a lot of unusual and interesting things -- some very interesting, to say the least -- and that was enough to keep them looking. And so, when they'd seen the large wooden sign, commonplace and ordinary, on top of the promising-looking crate, Harry had shrugged and asked Hermione -- who happened to be closer to the other side -- to help him with it.

It had been coincidence, not choreography that had them grasping opposite edges at the same
time, and then Ron Weasley had screamed.

There was an infinitesimal moment when, like a gag from a Muggle cartoon, their clothing seemed to hang motionless and unsupported in the air, the ribbon from Hermione's hair still perfectly ovoid, her bracelet sparkling, even the dust they'd been covered with forming a ghostly outline, Harry's glasses looking like wide, surprised eyes. But even as the photographic impression registered in Ron's brain, it was all falling, quietly and without any fuss, to the floor.

"Oh, bugger," Ron screamed. Harry and Hermione were gone. Ron jumped forwards, grabbed hold of the sign, felt a weak ripple of magic lap at him, then ebb, leaving him kneeling on Hermione's sleeve and Harry's glasses. He turned and ran for the stairs, and help.

"Well," said Mad-Eye Moody, gruffly, "I can't say they're alive, Weasley, but this thing didn't kill 'em if they're not."

McGonagall let out a held breath and patted Ron's shoulder, as the red-headed boy looked back and forth between them. "What does that mean?"

Moody speared him with a look. "It means, Weasley, that when a witch or a wizard dies, their magic doesn't simply disappear. Remember your basic paraphysics: Magic cannot be created or destroyed, it can only be converted. If your friends had been destroyed, their magic would've been released, here. There would be signs. Visible signs." He rolled his magical eye. "Very visible, considering how powerful they both... are."

"So, they're alive, then!"

Moody shook his head. "We don't know that, Weasley. This thing didn't kill them, didn't destroy them, and didn't make them invisible, so it sent them somewhere. Just them, just what was alive." He reached down with an unerring hand, and picked up a curling, caramel-colored hair from the floor. "We've got no way of knowing what kind of environment they were sent into. Deep space? The dark side of the moon? The heart of the Sun?" He smiled slightly at the appalled look on Ron's face. "Could just as easily be the Presidential Suite of the Canberra Hilton. We just don't know. It could be... Anything."

“It's... nothing!” Harry heard Hermione's voice, a hushed whisper, as his eyes blinked slowly open, and struggled to focus. All he saw was formless white. Curtains around a bed in the Hospital wing, maybe? He groped for his glasses, and instead found a blank, pliant, surface under his hand. And, now that he thought about it, under his side, his hip, and his bare leg. It was like lying on a gymnastics mat, white and without detail. He tried to get his face close enough to the surface to see it clearly, but even when he could bring his hand into perfect focus, it was like whatever he was lying on was miles away.

"H-Harry?" It was Hermione's voice. "Harry, where are-- OMIGOD!"

Harry swung around to try to look at her, but could make out only a blurry, vaguely humanoid shape, its head a caramel-colored nimbus, still showing some motion.

"Hermione, are you all right?" He reached to touch her shoulder, felt bare skin, and drew his hand back, hearing her let out a very small, uncomfortable, squeak, and he suddenly felt his own lack of clothing. "Oh."

"Yes, Harry!" Hermione's voice had the kind of hushed, whispered urgency that he knew. If
she were facing him, he knew she'd be blushing furiously. "We- We're--"

"Lost," Harry cut in, wanting, for no reason he could think of, to forestall that next word.

"Oh!" If anything, Hermione seemed more chagrined by this statement than her own. "Oh, we are! I'm sorry, Harry, that's much more important, really, I was just so-- Anyway..." He could see that her head was tilting down. "Oh, God!"

Harry touched her shoulder again, trying to ignore how... female it felt, and squeezed what he hoped was reassurance. "It's okay, Hermione," he murmured. "It's okay. We're here. We're all right."

She started to turn toward him, then gasped, and turned away again. "Harry, I can't!"

"If it's any help, Hermione," he said softly, "I can't see you. Not really."

Her head whipped toward him, and one hand reached up toward his face. "Oh, dear! Oh, Harry, you don't have your glasses!"

"I don't have anything." He smiled. "Neither do you, I'd guess."

She reflexively drew her arm back to cover herself again, and Harry realized he'd seen a disconcerting flash of brown on her chest before her hand covered it.

Hermione saw his eyes flicker down and then up, saw his face flush. "Harry, just how bad is your vision?"

He flushed again. "I promise, Hermione, it's real bad. It's like... One of those frosted-glass shower-doors, sort of. Only, you know, not, er, broken up. I have to be within a few inches of something to see it clearly." He dropped his eyes, not to her body but to the void-ground between them. "I'm really sorry, Hermione."

"No." She took a breath, squared her shoulders. "No, this is stupid. We are not going to do this. We are not going to be this." She pulled her legs in under herself, stood up, and reached one hand down towards her friend.

"Stand up, Harry," she said. "Stand up and look at me."

He chuckled as he clambered to his feet. "Yeah, for all the good it does me."

Hermione took his bare shoulders in her hands, leaned her face close to his, eyes staring into his. "Can you see me now?"

Harry nodded, staring into her eyes. "Yeah, I--" He blushed again. She was so close to him, so far into his personal space. It was a strangely intimate feeling. He took her shoulders, moved her back an inch or so, until he started to lose focus. "That's about right."

Hermione looked seriously at him. "We're in real trouble, Harry. I don't know where we are, or how we got here, but I know this much: We may die of hunger, or thirst, or--" her lips quirked into an ironic half-smile "--or exposure..." Harry smiled back. "But you and I, Harry Potter, we are not going to die of embarrassment!"

Harry chuckled. "Easy for you to say. You're a beautiful girl, and you can see. I'm a half-blind skinny guy with my willy hanging out!"

Her eyes dropped involuntarily, as Harry's had before, and she flushed as she snapped them
back to his face. "I'm sorry, Harry, it was, I was--"

"'S okay, Hermione. Really."

She stepped back away from him, turned, looking around at the featureless white space, no walls, no horizon, no sky, no roof, just that pliant white surface, credible as either ground or floor.

"What can you see, Hermione?" Harry asked.

"The same as you do, I should think. Nothing. Loads and loads of nothing at all." She pulled her lower lip between her teeth. "This is... This resembles a lot of people's beliefs in the afterlife, actually."

Harry, hearing the slight hitch in her voice, raised an eyebrow at her. "You mean..." he breathed with a quiet mockery of seriousness, "I'm a spirit? A soul? A nearsighted soul?"

"Oh, honestly, Harry, there's no need to be snide, I was just making a cultural observation, of course, I mean, if we were..." Her relief came through in the tone of her voice as she chattered. "Well, obviously, we're not, so, well, there's no point in talking about it, really."

"All right then," said Harry, still smiling.

Hermione smiled back, then, realizing he couldn't really see it, her smile faltered. "Harry, this is going to be a pain," she said. "I guess, if we're going to get out of here, I'm going to have to lead the way."

Harry squinted at her. "You have a plan?"

"Yes, I do," Hermione replied. She looked around the featureless environment, seeing nothing in any direction. Then she pointed, her arm straight and decisive. "We walk that way."

And she set out at a brisk pace, Harry following.

"I take it you see something this way?" he asked after a few moments.

"No."

"Then why...?"

"It's as good a way as any other," said Hermione.

Harry stood still for a moment, watching her blurry form recede. He shrugged. "Fair enough," he said, and started after her again.

The light never changed. They left no footprints. They had no way of telling how far they'd gone, nor how long they'd been walking. Hermione's brisk pace had slowed and slowed again as they walked, and Harry had been grateful to slow down along with her.

"How long, d'you think?" she asked him.

"Dunno."

She took a couple more steps, then sat down. "I think it's been a few hours," she said. "I'm getting hungry."
"I so wish you hadn't said that!" Harry sat beside her, and his stomach grumbled loudly. He looked down at it. "And really wish you hadn't said that!"

Hermione laughed for a moment, then looked around. "This is going to get to be a real problem, Harry."

"I know, Hermione," he said. "But I can't think of a damned thing we can do about it. Can you?"

"No," Hermione replied, absently. "The only protein around is us. And that won't work, because, quite apart from the prohibitive emotional factors, we don't have any, er, implements, and Human teeth aren't really all that sharp, so--"

"You were thinking about eating me!?!?" Harry cried.

"No, Harry, I was thinking about you eating me."

"What!?!?!?"

She shook her head. "It wouldn't work anyway, Harry, so--"

"Wouldn't work? Hermione, that's not the point, you can't--"

"Yes I can, Harry," she said, quietly but with stunning intensity. "If it comes down to a choice of which of us lives, I choose you."

Harry sat, not knowing how to respond to that, and looked at the blurry form of his friend.

"I can't stop Voldemort, Harry," she murmured. "Only you can. Only you. I know you, Harry. I know you'd want to lay down your life for me, for Ron -- hell, you'd do it for the Dursleys! But you can't. You can't because you can't truly save anybody's life while Voldemort lives. Until he's dead, the rest of us are dead anyway."

Harry's head sank down to rest on the forearms crossed between his knees, and Hermione couldn't think of a thing to say to make it better.

It was perhaps a half-hour later that Harry began shifting uncomfortably.

Hermione looked over at him. "What is it?"

"I, uh... Excuse me for a minute." He stood up, took a step back the way he came. "Don't watch."

"Are you crazy? I am absolutely going to watch!"

Harry snickered for a moment, then something about her tone and posture stilled him. "You're serious?"

"Harry, how far can you see?"

"Um... I dunno, without my glasses, there's no way to tell."

"Well, I can see perfectly, and I can't tell either. Losing sight of each other is a risk we can't afford."
Harry stood, facing her for a moment, suddenly very conscious of his nakedness. *I can see perfectly.* He fought the urge to cover his crotch with his hands, and drew a deep breath. "okay," he said. "All right. Tell me when I get as far as you're comfortable with."

Hermione stopped him after about 20 yards, and he quietly took care of his sanitary needs, then realized something, and swore.

"What's wrong?" called Hermione.

Harry shook his head. "No loo roll! This is gross!"

There was a long silence.

"The ground seems fairly soft...." Hermione called.

_There's a thought._ Harry tried to dig his fingers into the ground, to tear up a piece, but he couldn't break into it. He looked back toward Hermione, feeling thoroughly degraded and humiliated. "I can't get into it to tear anything loose that I can use."

"Huh!" Hermione's tone was amused. "I hadn't thought of *that.* I was more thinking... Sometimes Crookshanks, when he's got a problem like this..."

"Oh, God!" Harry's mind swam with a vision of the flat-faced cat, its underslung jaw giving it a determined look, with its hind feet out in front of it, pulling its behind along the carpet. In the vision, he was suddenly beside Crookshanks, doing the same. He hung his head. "Could this day get any more humiliating?"

"I'm very sorry, Harry," called Hermione. There was genuine sympathy in her voice.

After a few minutes of awkward contortion, he'd found a posture that gave him friction and purchase to move, and then stood and walked, not really feeling clean, back towards Hermione. As he sat, he glanced back the way he'd come, and started chuckling.

"What's funny?"

Harry grinned over at Hermione. "Well, we were complaining before about this being such a bland, colorless environment. There's a bit of color now, isn't there?"

Hermione laughed in spite of herself. "Earth tones. My Aunt Cecily is an interior designer. She says earth tones are soothing."

They sat for a moment in companionable silence, looking, despite themselves, at the only scenery in their world.

"I don't find myself," Harry finally said, "particularly soothed."

Hermione laughed long and hard.

After a few minutes, Harry began to stand. "Ready to move on?"

"Not quite," she said. "You go on ahead, about 20 yards or so, and wait for me." She looked back at the only bit of color visible, and pointed in the opposite direction. "That way, I should think."

Harry looked askance at her, and Hermione felt herself blushing. "When I catch up, Harry, there'll be *two* bits of color in our environment... In a line... Pointing the way we're going..."
Harry's eyes widened. "A landmark! You're going to use... that... as a landmark!"

He actually saw Hermione's face color, and she started to stammer. "Harry, we're in a terrible-- We need every-- We can't afford--"

"Hermione." Harry took her bare shoulders in his hands again, again aware of how resonantly female she felt. He looked firmly into the indistinct oval shape of her face, trying to concentrate on the shadows that were her eyes. "Hermione, don't! I'm not criticising, I'm not making fun. You're brilliant! You're going to get us out of this alive."

She looked down. "Tell me that when I think up something to eat."

Harry pulled her toward himself for a comforting embrace, but, only an inch or so into the gesture, he stopped, realizing that he'd reacted, physically, to their proximity, to their nakedness, and he held her back, inches away from poking her in the belly.

"Harry, what...?"

Harry flushed, and glanced down at himself, wincing as he realized the impulse had not only given him away, but also given him his closest, clearest view of her, still fuzzy, but close enough for round shadows of pale brown to be apparent on her breasts, and a darker triangle further down, and even as he squeezed his eyes shut, he felt himself throb.

Hermione's gaze followed Harry's and she saw what stood between them, pointing at her like an eager finger, saw it pulse, and she stepped back, eyes wide, face red. "Oh, Harry!"

She bit her lip, and turned away from him. "Oh, my, oh, dear!" She straightened her shoulders. "Well, it's to be expected, really, isn't it? I mean, it's a perfectly, I mean, what could be more normal, you're a teenaged boy, for heaven's sake, and we're naked, and you were touching me, so of course you'd get--" Her eyes widened again. "After all," she said, "It's not like you're doing it on purpose or anything, and I suppose it's a nice compliment, really, I mean, didn't someone used to call that 'the Gallant Reflex'? I'm sure they did, and it is a reflex, it really is. It's the most natural thing in the world. So there's nothing to worry about, really. Of course there is. Nothing at all." She drew a deep breath, then looked vaguely toward Harry, and spoke in a tiny voice. "Now you're going to have to walk over there, and watch me go to the bathroom."

Harry barked out a choked sound, somewhere between a laugh and a cry of frustration, and started walking away from her. "And the answer," he said, "as it turns out, is Yes!"

"What answer, Harry? Oh, and that's far enough, I think."

Harry stopped, and turned. Hermione, now a more abstract blur, was low to the ground. Squatting.

"The answer to the question I asked earlier. Yes, this day can indeed get more humiliating."

Hermione moved towards him a bit, and then, in a motion that owed much to gymnastics classes long ago, managed to lower herself to the ground and drag her nether regions across it towards Harry.

"Tell me about it," she said.

They had walked on for another hour or so in awkward near-silence. Every now and again, Hermione would look back at their landmark, smile fleetingly at Harry, who was far enough behind
her that he couldn't see the expression, and turn forward again. Her mind raced, and she reminded herself of the truth of what she'd said to Harry. He was a teenaged boy. It would probably take less provocation than being naked together with a teenaged girl to make that happen. Stimulus and response.

Of course, there was more than one naked teenager here, and that was part of her problem, too. A half-blind skinny guy with my willy hanging out. Harry's self-image was behind the times. He was tall, now, and his form had filled out well from the exercise he regularly got. Quidditch had been good to him. And the part that was hanging out was... intriguing. It wasn't that she loved him--Well, of course, she did love him, he was her very best friend in all the world. She would tell people that she loved him like a brother, but that wasn't quite true. Her love for Harry was platonic. But he was not her brother, and he was right there, naked and handsome, and while it didn't mean she was falling for him, she felt drawn to him physically. You're a teenaged girl, Hermione. You have as many hormones in your bloodstream as Harry has in his. There's nothing wrong with that, but don't mistake it for something it isn't. Your body has its say, but your heart and your mind do not have to follow.

But the image kept returning to her, the one she'd seen when she first, accidentally, glanced down at him. His broad chest, the smooth planes of his belly, the thatch of dark, curly hair, the pink shape nestled within it. And that image led inexorably to the next, that same pink shape now awake and pointing at her, as if in accusation: You did this to me!

Hermione shook her head, glanced back again at the distant spot of color, and trudged onwards.

"Hermione?" Harry said.

"Yes?" she said, over her shoulder, but didn't turn back to him.

"No, Hermione, wait a minute."

She stopped then, turned back toward him. "What is it, Harry?"

He drew a breath, looked at his feet, then back up to her. "I'm sorry, Hermione."

"About what?"

Another long pause. "About getting... You know... Excited. I didn't, I mean, it wasn't--"

"Oh, Harry, it's perfectly all right, I mean, after all it really is just a normal human reaction, I mean in this situation, I'd be worried if you didn't get--"

"You're chattering, Hermione." Harry interrupted. "I know you. You chatter when you're uncomfortable."

She stared at him for a long, frantic moment, then nodded. "Yes, I do."

"Hermione, we have to get past this. I don't know how long we're going to be here, but I can tell you, it's going to happen again. Lots. We can't let it get in our way." He held out his arms to her. "Come here, Hermione."

She stepped over to him, and he took a breath, and then took hold of her shoulders, and pulled her to him, his arms wrapping gently around her, and she fell against him, her head resting on his collarbone, her arms coming up around his waist.
They stood like that for a time, and Harry let himself be aware of her, let himself feel her breasts pressed against his chest, feel the softness of her skin, the elegant curve of her back under his hands.

"Harry... It's happening again."

"Told ya," Harry murmured, a smile playing with his lips.

Hermione giggled.

"And do you know what we're going to do about it?"

Her voice was tiny. "What?"

Harry smiled fiercely. "The same thing I've done every other time it's happened because of you. Or Luna."

Hermione looked up at him, surprised. "Luna?"

Harry chuckled. "Sure. Or Padma, or Parvati, or Angelina -- great legs, that girl has -- Or Harriet, or, Hell, even Pansy Parkinson a few times."

"Pansy Parkinson?"

"Sure. She has these robes with big, broad sleeves, and sometimes, when she waves her arm out to her side, you can see... Well, stuff you normally don't."

"Harry!" Hermione was laughing now, amused and scandalized at the same time.

"Hey, what do you want? You said it: I'm a teenaged boy! Anyway, we're going to do the same thing that I do whenever I get wood any other time. We're going to ignore it."

She felt his hardness, pressing into her belly, felt the firmness of his chest beneath cheek, felt his hands stroking lightly on her back. She felt his maleness and was excited by it... But she also felt the friendly, platonic love of his embrace, not threatening, not sexual, just comforting, and she sighed, and snuggled against him for a minute longer, then broke away from the embrace, and grinned up at him.

"'Get wood,' is it?" she said tartly.

Harry laughed. "Yeah, among other things. Wood, woodie, boner, stiffie-- Honestly, we could be here for hours."

Hermione reached over, took his hand in hers, glanced back to take a bearing on their landmark, and smiled at him. "Let's go, then," she said, pulling him into step with her, "and you can tell me more on the way."

They walked on for a couple more hours, chatting companionably with one another, and the long day of stress and exercise began to wear on them. Their pace slowed, their steps became irregular. After her fourth yawn, Hermione brought them to a halt.

"We should get some sleep," she said.

Harry nodded, yawning, then stretched. "So, how should we go about that?"

"Together," said Hermione, then blushed. "I-- I mean, you know, near each other, not like
we should *sleep together*, just that we should, you know... Sleep. Together." She put her face in her hands. "Oh, God, this never ends, does it?"

Harry laughed, and sat down on the soft ground, patting the space beside him. "It's okay, Hermione. Just sit down here."

She sank gratefully down beside him, still blushing. "God, Harry, you must think my mind is permanently in the gutter."

Harry snickered. "You dirty girl!"

"I am *not*!" she cried, then looked again at him, saw the teasing glint in his eye. "Oh, I am *so* going to hurt you!"

Harry leaned toward her, their shoulders touching, and look as sincerely as he could into her eyes without really being able to see them.

"Hurt me baby," he said, in a low, throaty voice, then snickered again as he lay down and rolled over, facing away from her. "Good night!"

She swatted his back playfully, and reclined beside him, and rolled to face the other way, then scooted forward a bit, as she realized that her bottom was touching his. He snickered again, and she laughed in spite of herself. "Oh, shut up, Harry." Another snicker. She reached a hand back, and patted his side. "Good night."

"'Night."

Ron Weasley sat in the attic, looking at the sign that had taken Harry and Hermione from him. He'd already tried the obvious, touching it himself in an attempt follow them, but, although he'd felt a faint, weak buzz of magic coming from it, he hadn't gone anywhere. His best guess was that it had discharged most of its magical energy transporting Harry and Hermione, and just didn't have enough juice left to do more.

It was a wooden sign, painted to show a happy-looking couple, in vaguely Edwardian-looking clothing, holding hands. Bogus-looking old-fashioned script spelled out, across the top, in large letters, "CASSIOPEIA'S SPA." Below that, smaller, clearer script, read, "An Atmosphere of Good Health. Your Satisfaction shall be Compleat, by Cassioepia's Guarantee."

"Cassiopeia..." Ron murmured. He remembered Professor Sinistra mentioning that name. Something from Astronomy then. A planet? A star? A constellation? A constellation. That seemed right. But the word "Star" floated back into his consciousness. What stars *did* he know the names of? Polaris, the North Star... Betelgeuse, Hermione had told him about that one after they'd watched the great, funny muggle viderio-thingie. Of course, there was Sirius, the Dog Star, hard not to know that one, with--

Ron sat up straighter. Sirius Black. Named after a star. His brother, Regulus, that was another star... Ron sprinted for the door, and ran down toward the front room, with its tapestry that showed the Black's Family tree.

Yes! Cassiopeia Black was Sirius's great-something aunt, died in 1991. What was her story? If she had created this thing, perhaps he could find out what it was meant for, what it did, where it sent them.

He walked quickly through to the Blacks' library, and started looking through the shelves.
Hmm... This seemed a good place to start: *Pure of Blood, A History of the Black Family*. There were several volumes, and Ron looked at the spines more closely: 1500-1600, 1600-1700... He moved ahead. Ah, here it was: *1900-The Present*.

Ron took the book to a table, and started flipping through the pages, looking for information about Cassiopeia Black.

Harry woke up slowly, on his back. He had, it seemed, rolled over in his sleep. So had Hermione. She was snuggled up to his side, her arm thrown across his waist. He looked down, in spite of himself, to see that one of her breasts sort of lay on his ribs, the pale brown nipple looking like a milk-chocolate coin.

He pulled his eyes away, looked instead at the fine hairs on her arm and shoulder, when it hit him, and he blinked, rapidly. He could see! He looked at her forearm, at the hairs, the freckles. He looked further down, to his foot. Every toe stood out clearly, the wrinkles on each joint clear and distinct. He turned back to Hermione, his eyes pausing involuntarily on that milk-chocolate nipple, the skin of it slightly crinkled -- blimey, that was cute! -- then on up to her sleeping face, on his shoulder. Her bushy hair framed her face, and in sleep, the animation of her expressions absent, she looked younger, more vulnerable, and Harry felt ashamed of seeing her so clearly.

He tried to gently extract himself from her without waking her, but it just couldn't be done, and her eyes flickered open with her head still on his shoulder. Her first expression, on seeing him, was a sleepy smile of greeting, and then she realized where she was, that she was snuggled up to him, pressing against him, and pulled away from him and sat up, covering herself, with a panicked half-shriek. "Oh. my God! What are you-- What did we--" She looked around with wide, wild eyes, then memory started to filter back, and she relaxed a little. "Oh, Harry, I'm sorry."

Harry grinned over at her. "I'm not, Hermione," he said. "I can see!"

Her eyes widened a bit. "You can--" Harry saw her hands start to move, to cover herself again, and she shut her eyes, and stopped the motion, and dropped her hands to her sides. She took another breath, and opened her eyes, looking thoughtfully at him. "What do you think?"

Harry's eyes widened, and he glanced down at her body. What the hell could he say to that?!? "Well, I mean, you're--"

Hermione huffed at him. "Not that, you idiot, thank you very much! What do you think about your eyes fixing themselves overnight?"

Harry winced, and dropped his head back to the soft ground, with enough force to make him glad it wasn't a normal floor. "Oh, God, Hermione, I'm sorry, I feel like six different kinds of idiot."

"Don't worry, Harry, you're just one kind. And I think you know which kind."

"Yes, I do, and I apologize." He turned his attention away from the badinage, and thought about her question for a moment, then sat up and looked at her. "Are you hungry?"

Hermione smiled approvingly, her eyebrows raised. "No, I am not. What does that suggest to you?"

Harry bit his lip for a moment. "This place seems to be... Remarkably good for us. We can't hurt ourselves, my vision gets fixed, we get fed in our sleep..." He looked around in all directions, then back to Hermione. "And our nasty waste products clean themselves up overnight." He frowned and concentrated on his own body, then snapped his eyes open and looked at Hermione. "All of
them: I feel really clean!"

At this, Hermione’s eyes widened, and she squirmed slightly. "Oh my! You're right! Me, too! So, whatever is going on here, it's as if this place was determined to see to our needs." She looked back over his shoulder. "We've lost our landmark, though."

"Was it really that good to have? We can tell we're in this bit of featureless white terrain instead of that one, because there's a bit of brown in the distance?"

"I don't know," Hermione said. "I guess I felt like, at least with that to judge by, we knew we were getting somewhere."

"Well, I guess we can always make more," Harry allowed.

"Actually, I doubt that." Hermione looked at him. "We're not hungry, we're not thirsty, but we haven't eaten or drunk. My guess would be that this place is giving our bodies exactly what we need, and there'll be no waste to excrete." She looked at the ground for a moment, and then back at him. "I mean, don't you usually need to..." She bit her lip, then soldiered on. "Don't you usually need to pee in the morning?"

Harry blushed. "Well, yeah..." and the thought hit him. "But not this morning! Looks like you're right, Hermione." He stood up. "Still, I guess having a landmark is a good idea. Which way do you think we came from?"

Hermione looked around as she clambered to her feet, and then pointed back over Harry's shoulder. "Assuming we didn't move around too much in our sleep, I should think it was that way."

"All right," Harry said, and held out his hands, palm-downward, in front of him, closing his eyes. His forehead creased, and his lips tightened, his eyes clenching more and more firmly...

And a wave of royal blue spread through the ground at his feet, filling out in a circle a couple of feet in diameter, and then spreading in only two directions, toward Hermione and back behind him. When this blue line reached the ground under her feet, that portion widened in front of her toes and then seemed to taper, and she took a step back, and sure enough. There was now, in the ground, a six-foot blue arrow, pointing their direction onward.

Harry slumped to his knees, breathing in great, shuddering gasps, and Hermione was immediately beside him on hers, rubbing his back, a steadying hand on his shoulder. "Harry, are you all right?"

Harry nodded, drew a few more wracking breaths. "Wow..." he finally managed to gasp. "That's... Hard!"

Hermione smiled admiringly at him. "I'll tell you this, Harry Potter. It's the most astonishing display of wandless magic I've ever seen!"

Harry grinned raggedly at her, and got to his feet once more. He stood for a moment, hands on knees, as she rose beside him, and gestured with his head along the arrow. "Shall we?"

She nodded, and they set off at an easy walk.

Ron sat at the Blacks’s library table, with a semicircle of open books in front of him, looking like the audience at an outdoor concert.
Cassiopeia Black had spent her life as a dilettante businesswoman, dabbling briefly in all manner of magical enterprises, but lacking the stamina or dedication to bring them through to fruition. Many she got off the ground, then sold them to real entrepreneurs, and a few of those were still prominently successful businesses -- She had, in 1939, founded *The Quibbler* as a kind of political opposition paper to confront the staunchly pro-Ministry *Prophet*!

But if she'd ever owned or operated a spa of any kind, he'd found no record of it yet, and he'd been busily cross-referencing the various histories that chronicled the Blacks' fortunes for the last week, looking for some clues. Cassiopeia may not have gotten as far as opening this spa of hers, but that didn't mean she hadn't dabbled with the idea, maybe gathered some kind of materials, put together some ideas.

He looked at the books surrounding him, and let out a sound that was both laugh and sigh, thinking how proud Hermione would be to see him like this, buried in books, reading and researching. He had even, Merlin save him, found himself reading over *Hogwarts: a History*, after learning that Cassiopeia had gone there for some "Continuing Education" courses in the early 1950s. But Hermione's favorite book, it turned out, was more a cheerleading PR piece than a thorough history, and although it covered quite proudly the brief and progressive stewardship of half-blood Headmaster Morrison Prince-Hedges from 1952 to early '54, it centered more on his kindly egalitarianism in offering continuing education courses, but glossed over the subjects actually taught.

Considering how very pure-blooded the post of headmaster had been since then, and the odd political shenanigans that seemed to have surrounded Prince-Hedges' departure from the job, Ron had the distinct feeling that Hogwarts liked the egalitarianism better in theory than in practice.

Ron liked something about Cassiopeia's continuing education experience. He wanted to learn more about it. He wasn't yet sure why, but something about it felt like something he should investigate. He'd have to talk to McGonagall, see if he could learn about that.

In the mean-time, maybe he should check into advertising styles from that time period, to see if the sign was in keeping with them.

Harry thought he might just go insane. *I'm supposed to be used to her by now, aren't I? We're supposed to be used to each other!*

There were seventeen blue arrows in the ground behind them now. Every morning -- if morning, indeed, it was -- he or Hermione would make a new one before they started walking, and the line behind them, straight and true, dwindled into the distance. Seventeen nights naked with Hermione. Seventeen mornings waking up beside her -- or, more often, cuddled up with her.. At some point, wasn't the novelty supposed to wear off?

Instead, he was finding her more and more tantalizing, finding himself working harder and harder to keep a lid on his desires.

It wasn't that he was falling in love with Hermione. She was a great girl, a wonderful friend, and he loved her, of course he did, how could he not? But it wasn't "in love" love, it wasn't passion, it was a deep and abiding affection. But now it had a new layer. Now he also *wanted* her. He kept finding himself looking at her bottom when she walked ahead, at her breasts when they stopped to rest. Four days ago, she'd been sitting, cross-legged facing toward him, and his gaze had dropped, and he'd seen soft-looking pink-brown flesh within the caramel-colored curls between her legs. When he'd finally dragged his gaze back up, his eyes met hers, and she looked at him frankly. A hot flush of shame filled his face, but below he was still insistently hard.
He felt terribly ashamed. Ashamed that he was viewing his friend in such a frankly sexual way. Ashamed because he knew that she loved Ron, and that Ron loved her. In some ways, it would have been better if he had been in love with her. Better if he'd started thinking about betraying Ron because of a great love of his own. But this wasn't love, this was want. This was simple desire, a lust as blunt and stupid as the erection it caused. It was low, it was base, it was crass and physical and it filled his mind.

She was leading this morning, and he couldn't stop staring at the wonderful roundness of her bottom, at the interplay of muscle and sinew in her legs, the elegant curve of her spine, the occasional flash of her breast as she moved.

She suddenly stopped short, with a brief sound of frustration, turned, and faced Harry.

"Dammit!" she cried. "I cannot fucking stand it anymore!"

Harry stared at her, mouth hanging open. Hermione had been known to resort to physical violence to punish him or Ron for such mild oaths as 'Bloody!' Now she was -- what was that American phrase he'd heard? -- 'dropping the F-Bomb'?

"Hermione, what...?"

"You know damned well what!" Hermione's eyes flared at him. "This sexual... thing in the air between us!"

Harry bit his lip and looked at the ground. "Oh, God, Hermione, I'm--"

"I just can't stand it any more! I've been thinking about it for days now--"

"Tell me about it," grumbled Harry, but she steamed onward as if she hadn't heard him.

"--and there's only one solution I can see. There's nothing else for it, Harry, no matter how awkward it is for us."

Harry's eyes widened as he stared at her.

"Masturbation, Harry," said Hermione. "It's the only thing for it!" She bit her own lip, and looked off into the distance, as Harry's mouth dropped open once again. "I'm sorry, Harry."

He gaped at her for several long moments, mouth opening and closing like a fish's, before finding his voice. "I'm supposed to wank!?!?" Her head spun towards him as he ranted. "Right here in front of you? And you'll, what, stand there and be my own human centerfold to look at while I'm flogging it!?!? Are you insane!?!?"

"Y--" Hermione swallowed thrice rapidly. "You!?" Her eyes were wide as she stared at him. "I was talking about myself, Harry!" She paused for a moment, drew a deep, ragged breath. "Oh, my God, of course it's just as bad for you, how could it not be, It's not like I haven't been looking at the evidence for two an a half weeks." She took a half-step toward him, her face and voice apologetic. "I'm so sorry, Harry! All this time, I've been looking at that" -- she gestured down at his tumescence - - "And I could only think about how it made me feel! Christ, Harry, it's your body, and I never stopped to think what it meant about how you feel!"

She looked at the ground again, and then squared her shoulders, and looked him in the eye. "It's still the only solution. For both of us"

Harry closed his eyes and sat down on the soft ground, shaking his head. "I can't-- We can't--
Oh, God, Hermione...

He felt her hand on his shoulder, and it burned in his flesh like a warming fire on a winter's day. His erection pulsed, almost painfully. "Ignore it' is a perfectly good plan in the real world, Harry." Hermione's voice was gentle. "Even here, it was a great plan for a day or two, and not a bad one for a week. But we can't keep it up. You see that, don't you, Harry?"

"It's not right, Hermione."

"No, it's not," she agreed. She sat, not quite beside him, to his left, facing him, put her left hand back on his shoulder. "We shouldn't be sharing that kind of sexual intimacy. That's for the people we really love. That's for me and Ron; for you and Ginny."

He looked up at her, surprised.

"Don't you think I know that? If we weren't here, alone, together, this would never be an issue. I'd have my moments of noticing your, er," she looked down, embarrassed, "manly charms, and you'd occasionally check out my arse in my jeans, or take the odd glance down my shirt and maybe each of us would occasionally imagine the other while touching ourselves, and that would be that. I'd be with Ron, and you'd be with Ginny, and all we'd have between us would be friendship, and the occasional odd moment of attraction."

"Jesus Christ," Harry breathed, "you're so calm about this!"

Her hand tightened on his shoulder, then slid across his chest. He could almost see a trail of sparks behind it. "Are you out of your mind, Harry!? Do you have any concept how not calm I am!? I want you, Harry Potter! Want your hands on me and you inside me! Not out of love, but just sheer animal rut! I have someone I love, Harry, and I miss him so much it hurts, and I still want you! If I don't get some release, some relief, I'm going to push you down and take you, I swear to God I am. And you know you're no different!"

"Come on, Hermione, I'm no rapist!"

"It wouldn't be rape, Harry. It would be sex. It will be sex. And if you think m--" She took a breath, started again. "If you think masturbating with me is wrong, then what the hell is that?"

Harry stared at her. '"Will be'!?!? What does that mean? You're talking like it's inevitable!"

"Isn't it?" she said bitterly. "We're fighting a holding action, Harry. We're doing our best to hold it off for as long as we can. But, honestly, how long do you think we can go on like this, before we just give in? Even if we follow my plan, start letting off pressure on our own, how long can we do that before it's not enough? How many times can I watch you ejaculate in your own hand? How may times can you listen me as I climax?"

"It's going to change everything between us, isn't it?"

She closed her eyes. "Everything has already changed between us, Harry. You know that. I'll never be able to look at you again without knowing how much I can want you. I'll never be able to look at you again without knowing how much you can want me. However platonic we are together, this will always be somewhere in our minds, and we're different because of it, Harry, and that just can't be helped." She leaned over toward him, her hand behind his head, and pulled him to her for a kiss. It was wonderful. Brief and unhurried, loving and chaste, Nothing like a sister and everything like a friend, and it made Harry want to cry, because he knew, in some strange way, it was a kiss good-bye. Good-bye to the innocence of their relationship. Good-bye to their uncomplicated
friendship. He'd never had a kiss from her like this before. They had always been embarrassed, 
apologetic pecks, flustered and blushing and too concerned with propriety and appearance and 
reactions to really express the affection she felt for him. He'd never had a kiss like this from her 
before, and he ached for what he'd missed. And he'd never have another, because they were about to 
cross a line that they'd rather not cross, into a relationship that they'd rather not have, forced against 
their will by the chemicals that ruled them.

She broke away from the kiss, and smiled sadly as she began to lean back, pushing his chest 
as she did so. As he lay back himself, on the soft ground, aware of the ludicrous mast of humble 
flesh standing above him, he looked over at her, and was mesmerized. She had pulled her legs up 
toward herself as she lay down, and beneath her raised knee, he saw that he was looking literally into 
her. She was spread open like the petals of some sort of flower, the fingers of her right hand already 
stroking herself, and he turned slightly and saw her eyes meet his. "Look," she murmured. "It's all 
right, go ahead, watch, watch it happen." Her eyes moved lazily over his body, his erection, and 
back to his own eyes. "Go ahead and look, because I am..."

At that the breath whistled out of him, and he took himself in his right hand, his gaze moving 
from her stroking, probing fingers to her face, eyes now slitting in pleasure, now widening to stare 
into his, and he stroked himself, and she was already starting to cry out, and that first cry was all it 
took to send him over the edge, and has back actually arched, once, twice, and his left hand groped, 
and found hers, and they clasped hands together as he whimpered and ejaculated messily onto 
himself, and she watched that, eyes wide, and screamed an inarticulate sound of pleasure and despair 
as her own orgasm took her.

They lay still for a long time, side-by-side, panting and looking over at one another, 
squeezing each other's fingers.

Hermione sat slowly up, looking over at Harry, at the mess on his belly, and he pulled 
himself up onto his elbows, looking at her. She met his glance, and quirked a half-smile at him. "Let 
me try something," she said, and held her hands out over him, eyes squeezed shut. "Scourgify!"

Harry looked down, saw his belly was clean, and back to Hermione, to see her sag slightly. 
"God," she breathed. "That is difficult. I've got to practice more wandless magic."

He started to reach for her with his right hand, stopped, scourgified it with his left, and finally 
squeezed her shoulder. "Hermione, are you all right?"

She smiled weakly. "It's just tiring, Harry. I'm not as good at wandless magic as you are."

"I didn't mean that."

The smile fell from her face, and she looked at him seriously. "I don't know, Harry. I held 
your hand as I came. That was wonderful. But I always knew that the hand I was supposed to hold 
was Ron's and I hate that it was wonderful without Ron, and I look at you and my feelings are a stew 
of regret, and I'll always remember what you looked like, it was the first time I saw a boy come, and 
that should have been Ron, too. So I feel dirty, and unfaithful, and disloyal, and I'm sure this was a 
terrible mistake. And that's why I think it was the right thing to do."

Harry felt like his brain was getting whiplash. "What? What?"

"Because five minutes ago, I looked at you, and all I could feel was want. At least, feeling 
regret, I know I'm thinking with my heart and my head, and not my glands." She stood up, held a 
hand down to him.
He took her hand as he got to his feet, and they looked awkwardly at each other for a moment. Then Hermione stepped over to him, wrapped her arms around him, leaned her head against his chest. "Thank you, Harry."

Harry brought a hand up to her face, looked into her sad, grateful eyes, knowing his must be much the same. "I'm here for you, Hermione. Still and always.

They glanced back for a line on the arrows, and then started walking once again.

"So, Mr. Weasley," asked Professor McGonagall, "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Ron leaned towards what used to be Albus Dumbledore's desk, and handed her the collection of scrolls. "I'd like you to look these over, and second-guess me," he said. "I've been holed up in the library at Grimmauld Place for three weeks now, researching and cross-referencing --"

McGonagall smiled. "It's good to see that Miss Granger's efforts have not been in vain, Mr. Weasley."

Ron actually smiled at this, considerably surprising her.

"Yeah, well, desperate times... Anyway, I've been trying to figure out what that sign was, and what it did. And I think I'm part-way there. I think it was a business of Cassiopeia Black's."

McGonagall shook her head. "We've investigated, Mr. Weasley. Cassiopeia Black never opened any spa of any kind. She never even found, nor investigated finding, the space for it."

"No Professor, that's not what I mean. That wasn't a sign to hang in front of some health-club on Diagon Alley. I think that sign was the business itself. I think it somehow contains -- or was meant to contain -- some sort of... I don't know, a health-giving environment of some sort. I think she started off to do this in the early 1950s."

He opened one of the scrolls on McGonagall's desk. "See here: In 1949, she got into a feud with the Diagon Alley Landlords' Association. And here's her letter to the Prophet -- Oh, she was thoroughly disgusted with what the Lovegoods had done with the Quibbler by then! -- in 1951 saying that she was going to find a way to make landlords obsolete. Now, keeping that kind of a mad-on, on one topic, for two years-- That was an eternity for her!

"And in 1952, she started taking 'Continuing Education' classes here at Hogwarts. That's why I'm here. I think she signed up for a class that she thought would help her beat the landlords. And I think she made some progress with this Spa. So I was hoping we could get her class transcripts and see what she took."

McGonagall smiled fondly at him for a long, long moment. "Mr. Weasley, you have done Miss Granger proud! I do believe that you will bring them home alive." She stood, and gestured him toward the door. "Follow me, Mr. Weasley, and we'll see what the Registrar's office has to tell us."

"Y'know what I miss?" Harry said thoughtfully. He was laying on his back with his hands behind his head, looking at the featureless white sky, distinguishable from the featureless white ground only by gravity. Hermione lay cater-corner to him, head resting on his chest, eyes closed.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Food," said Harry. "I'm not hungry. I'm not thirsty. But I'd really enjoy eating and drinking
right now. Tasting the food, feeling the texture of it in my mouth..."

"Oh, God, Harry," cried Hermione, "you're killing me!"

Harry chuckled. "Sorry."

They were silent a couple of moments. "That couch in the common room," Hermione said. "The one with the mismatched patches on the arms."

He snickered at this. "It looked like Dobby, wearing the stuff you knitted for the House-Elves!"

"Hey!" She reached up and smacked his arm.

"Ow!" Harry pulled his arms out from behind his head so he could rub the spot she'd hit, and she laughed at him. "Oh, that's good, Harry! You'll take on a roomful of Death Eaters, and pout when you get smacked by a girl!"

He laughed, and lowered his arm to her, while she shimmied a bit to get her neck to a more comfortable position.

The two unwatched motions combined, and Harry's hand settled, not on her ribs, but on her breast. They lay silently for another fraction of a second before it hit them both at the same time, and Harry pulled his hand away as if it had landed on a thumbtack, while Hermione squeaked and bolted upright.

"Oh, my God, Hermione, I didn't-- I wasn't-- You moved--"

"No, no, Harry, I know it wasn't, that is, I did move, and I know you weren't paying attention, I don't for a minute think you decided to grope me, I just reacted because I wasn't expecting it, that's all, I'm not mad, it's fine,don't--"

"You're chattering," Harry said.

Her eyes flashed at him. "Well, I'm incredibly humiliated!"

"I really am so sorry, Hermione!" Harry sat up and scrubbed his face with his hands. "You know I--"

She reached over and touched his knee. "I do know, Harry."

That sat, silently, for a moment. Harry glanced down at his hand, biting his lip.

"It was actually sort of nice," Hermione said quietly. "It reminded me, there was one night, late last year, when Ron and I were sitting up late on that sofa in the common room, looking into the fire after everyone else had gone to bed, and he did this big, elaborate yawn as a pretext to put his hand there."

Harry looked at her, eyes wide and shocked.

Hermione nodded. "I know. He was half-expecting me to rip his arm off and beat him with it, i think," she said. "But I thought, I've got on a jumper, and a shirt, and a bra under that, and... It really did feel nice. I never in my whole life saw a bigger smile from Ron."

As Harry watched, her smile seemed to begin to crumble at the edges, and her expression started to sag. "Oh, God, Harry," she cried. She threw her arms around him, buried her face in his
Harry blinked slowly awake, feeling himself being watched. He angled his head to the right, and saw Hermione's face, right there, her eyebrows quirked in an amused half-smile. He smiled back in greeting, slightly flexing the arm that was around her, gently squeezing the breast he held in his--

Harry bolted upright, his face red, and Hermione started laughing.

"Hermione, I'm, I'm so sorry, I didn't, i wasn't, I--"

"You're really quite insistent in your sleep, Harry," she told him. "After the third time, I just gave up."

Harry buried his face in his hands. "Oh, Godric."

He looked up at the touch of Hermione's hand on his shoulder.

"It's all right, Harry. Really. It was... It felt nice, really." she moved her hand overt to cup his cheek. "I was really quite enjoying it, above and beyond being amused." She blushed and looked down for a moment, her hand creeping from his face to his chest, which Harry guessed was fair enough, all things considered.. "I'm really quite turned on, to tell you the truth."

She looked significantly into Harry's eyes, and he inclined his head, very slightly, in acknowledgment. Twice more, in the seven days since that first time, they had masturbated together, side-by-side. Harry had made a point of not reaching over for Hermione, but she had insistently reached to take his left hand in hers, needing to feel connected to someone as orgasm overtook her.

Now she took his hand in hers and brought it back to her breast, felt her nipple harden against his palm, as she reached her other hand down to herself, rubbing gently at first. "Squeeze, Harry," she moaned. "Touch me."

He reached up with his other hand, held her breasts, explored them with his fingers, feeling the pliant softness, tweaking sideways across her nipples with his thumbs, looking, fascinated, from her breasts to face, then down to her stroking, probing fingers. Hermione rode her fingers, her body moving up and down over her hand, and looked down, her hair forming a curtain around her face, tickling against the hairs on Harry's forearms as he still held and caressed her breasts.

Her free hand reached up, and took hold of Harry's right wrist, drawing his hand down towards her crotch. Harry hesitated, but she increased the pressure, forcing his hand down with furious strength, and Harry saw her shoulders jerking upwards, heard her breath catching, and she looked up at him, her face a mask of misery and despair, tears flowing freely as she pulled his hand down towards hers.

"Hermione..." Harry's voice was gentle as he tried to pull his hand away. "What's wrong?"

Her face contorted with rage, crumpled in on itself like a fist. "Don't you dare!" Her voice was low, throaty, a venomous hiss. "Don't you fucking dare, Harry Potter!" A terrible, wracking sob burst from her. "I need this! I NEED this! You WILL fucking do this for me! You WILL, do you hear me!? You fucking will!"

She pressed his hand into her crotch, and he felt the slick heat of her moist folds against his fingers. He'd never touched a woman down there before. He had only the vaguest notion of what to
do, or how to do it. He caressed with his fingertips, as gently as he could, and she put her hand over his and steered it, pushing his middle finger over some sort of hooded, fleshy nob, near the apex of where those most, parted lips joined together. Harry's magical education was quite good, but neither the Dursleys nor Hogwarts had prepared him for anything like this, and he knew that, whatever Hermione was going through, he was nothing like qualified to deal with it. But he knew she was his friend, and he loved her, and if she needed his hand there, then he'd be as gentle as he could. His other hand had left her breast, and he moved it to her face, and she snarled, and tried to bat it away with her head.

"Hermione..." His voice was quiet, soothing.

"Shut up, Potter, shut your fucking mouth and do this!"

Her hands forced his fingers into her, deep, and he found his fingertips meeting with some resistance.

"Break it!"

"Hermione? I don't... What do... How, what--?"

Her jaw tightened even more, and she shoved, and he felt flesh stretch and then tear beneath his fingers, as her back arched and she barked out a single, almost percussive, shrieking sound, and thick, warm -- was that blood? -- flowed over his fingers. He felt her spasm, once, twice, and she screamed with what could be pain or pleasure, and then her whole body seemed to collapse, and she fell, face-first, into his lap, her forehead landing on his erect penis, which had apparently elected to ignore the conflict and fear in Harry's mind, and concentrate on the slippery warmth around his fingers.

She angled her head up, and took the end in her mouth, and Harry tried again to pull away, but she reach in with a swift, snake-strike gesture, and literally held him, none-too-gently, by his testicles as her head bobbed, and her mouth slid over him, tongue insistently probing and stroking. Harry stared, open-mouthed, confused and upset for his friend, but his traitorous body ignored his anguish, and he came, swiftly, in hard shuddering spurts that filled her mouth, and she pulled herself away from him, sat back, her eyes closed and expression unreadable, and swallowed.

"Oh, Hermione," Harry murmured. "Oh, God."

He looked down now, saw blood on the ground and her thighs, blood on his own fingers. He had torn her open inside!

"You're bleeding!"

Hermione opened her eyes, focused on him, and nodded. "It's normal. You broke my hymen."

Harry looked blank.

"My maidenhead, Harry. My--" her voice broke. "My virginity. You bleed when that happens. It's all right, it's normal, it's not dangerous."

"You're sure?" Harry asked, his voice almost a whisper.

Hermione's eyes closed briefly as she nodded. "Quite sure, Harry."

He sat for a moment of quiet, started to move his hands to scourgify and her face balled back
into a fist.

"Leave it!" her voice was savage.

Harry drew his hands back as if scalded, bit his lip, eyes flickering over her face, then his jaw hardened. He reached for her hips, pulled her toward him, as his hands slid down to her buttocks, and he lifted her over his crossed shins, and she hurriedly moved her legs apart as he pulled her against him. Harry felt her slick, bloody folds against his now quiescent penis, and ignored the organ as brutally as it had ignored him, as he wrapped his arms around his friend, and held her for dear life. Then her arms were wrapping around his neck, and her face burying itself in his shoulder, and she let go, let the wracking sobs take her, and they sat like that for a long time, holding one another and crying.

Eventually, she slid down from his lap and a little ways away from him, leaving, he was horrified to see, a pale smear of blood on the ground behind her. She she lay down, facing away from him, and he saw small swirls of blood from his fingers on her back. He moved over to her, lay down behind her, wrapping a protective arm around her.

"Thank you, Harry," she murmured, and, eventually, they dropped back to sleep.

They woke, probably only a couple of hours later, clean and refreshed, as always, and Hermione stood first, with a businesslike motion. "Ready to go, Harry?"

He shrugged and followed her to her feet, marking the ground with another blue arrow -- the twenty-sixth -- before they started walking again in silence.

Harry's mind spun as he looked at Hermione's back, trying to get his mind around what had happened between them. Had he done wrong? Should he have fought his way away from her when she had started to... Harry didn't even have a word for what had happened to Hermione. A breakdown? Something else? He had a hard time believing that being part of that bloody deed had been the right thing to do, but it was no easier to believe that the kind of physical altercation disengaging would have provoked would have been preferable.

And that rough tearing, the blood, that had to be a trauma. She'd spoken of it so matter-of-factly, trying to convince him that everything was all right. But then, that vicious hiss: Leave it! That was not all right, that was nothing like all right, and he was afraid for her. Something seemed to have broken loose inside of her, every bit as brutally as her flesh had torn under his fingers.

Hermione had said nothing to him since Ready to go, Harry, and he was inclined to respect that silence, but he was becoming more and more frightened. The sensation of tearing flesh under his fingers, the sight of that blood on his hand, on her thighs, on the ground, kept returning to his mind. Finally, he had to speak.

"Hermione..."

She walked on as if she hadn't heard.

"Hermione, please."

One more step and then she stopped, shoulders stiff, back straight, but didn't turn to face him.

"Hermione... I need... I need to know if you're okay."

She drew a long, ragged breath. The silence was interminable, then she spoke, her voice
modulated. "Of course I'm all right, Harry. Why--"

"Don't you dare!" Harry's voice was coldly furious, and Hermione spun, wide-eyed, to face him. He held his right hand up to her. "I felt you tear open inside, and I felt your blood, Hermione, and I slept with it literally on my hands! I hope you're all right. I pray you're all right! But don't you dare try to shrug this morning off as if nothing happened, Hermione! That was brutal! That was barbaric, and it had nothing to do with love or affection, or anything else but hurting yourself, and you used me to do it!"

"That didn't stop you from coming in my mouth!" Hermione scowled.

"No, it didn't, Hermione. My willy is blind and stupid. It's not my brain, Hermione, and it's not my heart, and it stands up anyway, and responds when it's touched, and if I could have stopped it I would have, but I couldn't. I'm not a rapist, Hermione, and I hate that you want me to feel like one!"

At this, the anger left Hermione's face, and she stepped quickly to him, wrapping her arms around him. "Oh, God, Harry, I know you're not!" She was sobbing now, head on his shoulder as she cried. "That's not it at all, Harry, oh, I swear to God it's not!"

His hand rubbed up and down on her back, softly. "It can't ever be like that again, Hermione." Harry's voice was soft, but very firm. "Never again."

Hermione squeezed him tightly. "No, Harry."

She drew a breath that was almost a gasp, and the truth came spilling out of her in a rush. "It's just-- Your hands felt good on me, Harry, they felt so good, and I wanted you to touch me, I wanted you! Oh, God, Harry, I felt terrible about that! What kind of person am I to want you like that, my boyfriend's best friend, my best friend's boyfriend, my best friend? It didn't matter that I didn't have a right, it didn't matter that we both love someone else, I just wanted. And it would have been wonderful, Harry, I knew that, and I couldn't stand it. I had to make it awful. Can you understand that? I had to make it dreadful!"

Harry closed his eyes for a long moment. "So... It was like you were punishing yourself, even as you did what you thought you deserved to be punished for?"

He felt her nod against his chest. "Yes," she said after a moment. "Yes, I think that's it."

He stroked her back in silence for a long time. "It can't ever be like that again, Hermione," he finally repeated. "You can never use me as your punishment again. You can never use me as a weapon to hurt yourself with."

He drew a breath. "I'm not strong enough for that, Hermione. I'm nowhere near strong enough."

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Ron was back in McGonagall's office, shaking his head. "It's like there was a purge, Professor," he was telling her. "I mean, I'm sure the ministry must have something, somewhere, but Scrimgeour thinks I'm talking out my--"

McGonagall raised one eyebrow.

"--er, my hat, talking through my hat!" Ron blurted, then continued on quickly. "So he's not going to waste valuable elf-hours digging through old records. Outside of the ministry, it's all like the registrar's office. The records are just gone. Not just the Continuing Education thing, but everything that happened here during Prince-Hedges' time as headmaster. I've spoken to many wizards the right age to have attended then, but every one of them claims they just missed his term. Flourish and
Blott's won't even release a list of textbooks Hogwarts ordered during that time!"

McGonagall tutted. "It was a dark time for Hogwarts, Ronald. I was working for Madame Maxine at Beaubaton's, and, of course, Albus was still on sabbatical after the Grindlewald affair." She smiled for a moment. "Poor Albus. They wanted him to take a post at the ministry, for goodness sake! Deputy Minister for Magical Defense! He had to go all the way to Nepal to get away from them. You'll see, when you and Mr. Potter and Miss Granger finally defeat You-Know-Who."

Ron scoffed, and she looked seriously at him. "Yes, Mr. Weasley, I said 'when.' There isn't a doubt in my mind that that will happen. You'll bring them back to us, Mr. Weasley, and the three of you will bring him down. I have faith in you, Mr. Weasley. I have all the faith in the world, and so did Albus. Not just faith in Harry. Faith in the three of you. He believed in each of you, and he believed in the three of you together."

This time Ron did scoff. "He also believed in Snape."

McGonagall's eyes darkened, and she looked down at her desk. "Yes, well..."

"Indeed, I did, Minerva," chuckled a voice from behind her. Ron started, and looked up at the portrait of Dumbledore, which gazed down fondly at them. "I did and I still do."

"Yes, well, Albus, there's a reason you're a portrait," said McGonagall tartly.

"Indeed there is, Minerva," agreed the painting, not at all put out by the criticism in McGonagall's words. "But I'm glad I can, er, hang about, as it were, to offer my help."

The portrait looked inordinately pleased with its atrocious pun, and Ron chuckled. Then, in an instant, the smile fell from his face, and he snapped his fingers.

"Yes!" Ron was on his feet, past McGonagall, looking at the identifying tags on portrait frames, while various past headmasters glowered down at his impertinence.

McGonagall watched him with growing approval, and suddenly touched Ron's shoulder. He paused and looked up at her. "I just wanted to point out to you, Mr. Weasley, that it was you who thought of this. Not Mr. Potter. Not Miss Granger. You're nobody's sidekick, Ronald Weasley."

Dumbledore's portrait gazed proudly down at him. "My very thoughts, Ronald. My very words."

Ron smiled for a moment at them, started to turn back to the wall, then stopped, and smiled brightly, and called out, "Professor Prince-Hedges?"

"Over here, lad," said a small voice. "Just below the portrait of my good friend, Armando Dippet."

Ron smiled and stepped over to Dippet's portrait, and noticed, for the first time, that, beneath it, Spell-o-taped to the wall, was what looked like a small panel torn from comic-book. It was a simplistic line drawing, reminding Ron a lot of the illustrations in some of the old issues from the 1950s that his father had collected of The Adventures of Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle. It showed a handsome, bland-looking man with a neat, short hair-cut, holding a smoking pipe.

Ron sat on the floor, putting himself at eye-level to the little drawing. "How do you do, Professor," he said. "I'm Ron Weasley."

"Arthur's boy, I imagine? Yes, yes, you would be. He was a good student, your father. Well,
Ron, it's a pleasure to meet you. How can I be of help?"

"Well, sir, my friends have sort of, er, gone missing--"

"Oh, I know that, I've heard about it from the other portraits, my lad. Touched some object and went who-knows-where, yes?"

Ron nodded. "That's exactly it, sir. I think the object they touched was created by a student of yours, from your, er, 'Continuing Education' experiment."

"Experiment! Is that what they're calling it these days? Of course they are. It's only a breath away from 'Failure,' after all." He smiled cynically at Ron. "Don't think I don't know why I'm where I am on this wall, and why my good friend Armando's retirement and return are now called a 'Sabbatical.'"

Ron chuckled. "Well, you know more than me, then, sir."

"As is frequently the case between headmasters and students, young Ron. But you're not here to listen to a bitter old man witter on about politics. Your quest has nothing to do with why I left Hogwarts. What would you like to know?"

"Well, sir, as I said, the sign -- that's the artifact that seems to have transported my friends, sir -- I think it was created by one of your 'Continuing Education' students, and I was hoping you could give me some insight into what sorts of magic she was studying."

"Of course, my boy, of course! Who was the student?"

Ron smiled. "Her name was Cassiopeia Black."

Prince-Hedges' face fell. "Oh, dear," he said, bitterly. "She was why I left Hogwarts."

Ron's mouth dropped open as he heard McGonagall gasp behind him.

"A student, Morrison?" Her tone was reproachfull.

"Oh, do me a favour, Minerva," said Prince-Hedges' portrait, testily. "She was four years my senior at the time."

"Still, Morrison, what were you thinking?"

"Not an awful lot, I fear, dear lady." The portrait sighed. "In any case, it was a trap on her part, wasn't it? Prove how bad it was to have a half-blood headmaster and all that. And as unpopular as I was at the time, well, it's hardly surprising, is it, that... er... spending time with an older woman who was here to take adult-level dimensional transcendence charms was enough to see me out?"

Ron's eyes widened. "Dimensional Transcendence,"

"Dimensional Transcendence," replied Prince-Hedges' portrait and McGonagall in unison.

McGonagall regarded Ron's baffled expression for a moment. "Dimensional Transcendence is the Magical principle that things' dimensions do not, in fact, have to relate to one another. It's the basis for things like magical tents. They're bigger on the inside because they are dimensionally transcendent."

Ron grinned. "Brilliant! So there could be a whole health club, right inside that sign!"
McGonagall shook her head. "In theory, perhaps, but in practice, there are very real limits to the extent to which an object's internal and external dimensions can be mismatched."

"Well, now, Min," said Prince-Hedges' portrait, and McGonagall's eyebrow lifted, "that's an interesting point, because that was what Miss Black seemed most interested in. I had done some work on increasing that ratio while I was working for the Ministry, don't you know, co-authored a paper that suggested that there really was no limit, and she asked me about it frequently. When she found out that all the real innovations from that project came from my overseas partner, she turned me straight in to the Board of Governors for our, er... involvement, and hopped a floo to Burgas to attach herself to Fyodor!"

Ron was starting to get a sinking feeling. "Where the hell is Burgas?" he asked, eyes closing against the answer he somehow knew was going to come. "And who's this Fyodor bloke?"

"Bulgaria," said McGonagall, while Prince-Hedges' portrait told him, "Why, my overseas partner, young man. Fyodor Krum!"

Ron sat on the floor in front of the small portrait of Prince-Hedges, and nodded sagely for a long, long moment, before shifting sidewise, slightly -- it was only polite, really -- and banging his forehead repeatedly against the wall.

Harry and Hermione were sitting cater-corner to each other, Harry looking contemplatively back at the line of arrows.

"Do you feel like our days are right?"

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"I mean, we've been walking and sleeping, walking and sleeping. We've made our own days and nights. I wonder if they're really lasting a day."

Hermione looked back along the line of arrows, frowning. There were an awful lot of those blue arrows visible. Walking for a day, in a straight line, you'd expect to lose sight of any given one you made. Yet there they were, far away and tiny, the nearest looking like little more than a dot, but beyond it was another, then another... She could count seven, and there was a hint of discoloration beyond them, near the... The what, exactly? It was hardly a horizon, after all.... Oh.

"Harry, I think our days are about right. Don't think about how many we can see, just about how far away the first one looks. Remember, we're not on Earth -- not on a planet at all, more than likely. The ground doesn't curve down away from us, so we can see it much further away."

Harry shrugged. "That makes sense." He chuckled. "It'd be pretty damned depressing if we could see all thirty-three of them."

She nodded at that.

"Hermione, where are we going? We've literally walked more than a month, and what difference has it made?"

"It has to have an end somewhere, doesn't it?" she asked.

Harry shrugged. "I suppose..."

"Is it better than sitting in one spot for a month?"
He smiled and nodded, and sat back, propping himself up on his elbows. "A straight-backed chair would be nice around now," he murmured.

She smiled at that, and they drifted for awhile in a companionable silence.

Harry leaned back and looked at the nothingness, his mind becoming a nearly-equal void, letting his eyes go out of focus, listening to his own heartbeat. When he raised his head again, a few minutes later, he saw that Hermione was sitting, her head tilted down, with a similar faraway expression, the slightest curl to her lips giving an appearance of pleasant contemplation to her demeanour. Harry regarded her fondly for a moment. It was how she looked when reading some particularly interesting portion of *Hogwarts: a History*. The specificity of that thought drew his focus to her a bit more, and he suddenly realized, with a flush of embarrassment, that she was gazing absently at his penis. Well, fair enough, he supposed. He remembered enough instances of her catching him staring at her privates, after all. Still, it seemed a little odd. It was just hanging there, limp -- not for long, he imagined, if he kept thinking about her looking at it -- and thoroughly unspectacular.

And that was when she laughed, a sudden, raucous sound, suddenly interrupted when she noticed him watching her, and flushed deeply. "Oh, Harry," she said, "I'm so sorry!"

"No, no," said Harry, "'cause that's exactly the reaction I look for when a girl is looking at my willy!"

Hermione chuckled. "I'm sorry, Harry."

"And just why *were* you looking at my willy, anyway?"

"Oh, it was just there in front of me, and it started me thinking about the important role penises have played in culture."

Harry just looked at her.

"I'm serious, Harry. In many ancient cultures, power centers around the penis. And it still carries through to today. Look at the role circumcision plays! In the wizarding world, of course, it's unheard-of, but it's not uncommon in Muggle cultures. Hell, it's *de rigeur* in America, for some reason. I'm actually pretty surprised you're circumcised."

Harry scowled. "The Dursleys. I was three. They had the hell of a time finding a doctor who would do it, and I have a vague memory of hurting for days. Apparently, I'd wet the bed once, and Uncle Vernon had some mad idea that it was because I wasn't circumcised."

Hermione's face darkened, and she looked away. "They're just horrible excuses for human beings, aren't they?"

"I guess," Harry said, not wanting to go down that unhappy road. "Anyway, the cultural impact of circumcision doesn't seem to me to merit the belly-laugh it seems to have got from you."

"Oh!" Hermione blushed. "Actually, I was remembering a joke I heard at-- A joke I heard this summer: What do you call the useless bit of skin at the end of a penis?"

Harry looked blankly at her.

"A man!" Hermione answered.

Harry chuckled at that for a moment, and then looked down. "Ginny told you that one, didn't
she? At Bill and Fleur's wedding."

Hermione nodded.

"Yeah, I pissed her off pretty thoroughly that night."

Hermione nodded again. "She told me."

"Why can't she understand?" Harry's words were a harsh whisper. "I'm trying to protect her!"

Hermione reached over to him. "Harry, I love you. You know I do. But I swear to God, Harry, sometimes you are the biggest idiot on the face of the Earth."

"Not you, too! Dammit, Hermione, I can't make her a target! I couldn't stand it if she was hurt to get at me. If we're together, she could be used against me!"

"Anybody could be used against you, Harry! Don't you get that? You're a good man, and Voldemort knows that. He doesn't need you to be in love with someone to hurt you by attacking them. You'd move Heaven and Earth to save the Dursleys!" She brought her hand to his face, turned him toward her. "You'd risk your life to save Draco Malfoy, or Snape. You know it's true."

He broke her gaze, looked down again.

"Harry, you aren't protecting Ginny. All you're doing is hurting her." She pulled his chin to face her again. "And yourself."

Harry felt the tears filling his eyes, wiped angrily at them with his knuckles. "I miss her, Hermione. I love her so much, and I miss her so much..."

She nodded slowly. "I know, Harry. I know you do."

He drew a deep breath. "I am such an irredeemable bastard!" he finally said. "I sit here, moaning on and on about how I miss Ginny, and I still want you." He squeezed his eyes shut, and tears began to flow. "There's a war back home, and God only knows what's happening, who's alive and who's dead, and here I sit, moaning about my love life, and I still want you. I pushed away love, when it's supposed to save us all. I fumbled us around in Grimmauld Place, and it's never gotten us anywhere, and now we're here, and it's all my fault, and what am I doing about it? Nothing, because I'm too busy thinking about your fanny. You scare me silly after last time, and it still doesn't matter, because all I can think about is wanting you. I really suck, Hermione."

Hermione looked at him for a time, wanting, with everything in her, to wrap her arms around him, to cover his mouth with hers, to try to bring the happiness and humour back into his eyes. But she also knew that that would be exactly the wrong thing to do, so she got gracefully to her feet, and reached down to him. "Come on, Harry," she said. "Miles to go before bed-time."

He looked blankly at her hand for a few seconds, and then raised his eyes to hers, the grateful hint of a smile in them, and he took the hand, pulled himself to his feet, and they set off.

They'd been walking for perhaps another couple of hours when Harry stopped, staring into the distance with narrowed eyes. "My God!" The voice was little more than a breath. "My God! Hermione... I think I see something!"

She stared, too, saw... something. a hint of a smudge, a tiny point of darkening, in the farthest distance. It had been there for awhile, she'd realized, but so subtle that they hadn't at first noticed it.
"I see it Harry! I knew it! I knew if we just kept moving, we'd get to something!" She redoubled her pace, and Harry had to trot a few steps to catch up with her.

By the time fatigue had brought them to a halt, they were no closer to seeing the darkness at the edge of vision. They collapsed side-by-side, and slept.

Ron stepped out of the International Apparition Point in the Bulgarian Ministry of Magic, and looked around warily, before recognising the bulky, dark-haired form.

"Viktor," he greeted him, his expression carefully neutral. "Thank you for helping me."

"Is a pleasure," said Viktor Krum, "If I can help you save her, I vill do anything I can."

Ron's heart simultaneously lifted and sank. This man, this wealthy, famous man, an idol of millions, a celebrity, truly did love Hermione. How could he hope to compete with that? But he would put every resource he had available into finding her, saving her, and however much Ron feared this man, he'd a million times rather lose Hermione to him than to this flaccid nothingness. If she were alive, safe in Bulgaria, safe in Krum's arms, that would hurt; but if she were truly gone, and gone forever, well, living with that would simply be impossible.

"Thanks, Viktor," he said, after a moment, and Krum clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"This vay, Rhon," he said. "The intercity floos are over here." Ron looked puzzled, so Krum explained, "Bulgarian Ministry is much more, er, strict than British. Floo networks are restricted to single city, with official floos going from city to city in government offices. Oh, and, pliz, do not try to Apparate, except at official Apparition Point. There are many anti-apparition vards throughout the country, and anyone who survives the splinch is arrested."

"Wow," said Ron, impressed despite himself. "They're serious."

"Vas much vorse under Communists," said Krum, with a nasty-looking grin.

They arrived in front of a large, utilitarian-looking cinder-block fireplace, a rectangular hole in the wall, four feet by six, with eight small gas jets flaming from its floor. There was no mantel-piece, and Ron couldn't imagine children hanging stockings over it at Christmas in any case. Krum handed Ron some Floo Powder, then threw in his own handful, saying "Burgas."

Krum stepped into the flames, spun, and disappeared. Ron looked around for a moment. A Bulgarian Ministry official eyed him suspiciously from a desk. He shrugged, tossed his powder into the fireplace, and repeated Krum's "Burgas," then stepped into the flames, and whirled away.

The office he arrived in was altogether nicer, much more like the Ministry offices back home in London. This fireplace, he was pleased to note, was a large, homely affair, in red and brown bricks, with a wooden mantelpiece, upon which were several decorative plates, with moving pictures of beach scenes, and quaint old-fashioned-looking buildings.

Viktor smiled. "Welcome to Burgas."

Ron looked around the government office, with its larger number of smaller, still pleasant-looking fireplaces, interspersed with doors into other offices, and paintings and posters: Lots of beach scenes, waves crashing silently onto sandy shorelines dotted with bathers; Some solemn-looking older men, who Ron assumed were higher-ups in the Ministry, or, in the case of one or two non-moving paintings, the Muggle government. There were also a couple of posters of Viktor himself, in his Team Bulgaria Quidditch uniform, riding his broom showily from poster to poster, with a
confident grin at them.

The real-life Viktor himself looked a trifle embarrassed by these. He shrugged at Ron. "Local boy makes good. What can you do?"

"You deserve the fame, mate," Ron said, quietly. "You're a hell of a Seeker."

Krum looked measuringly at him for a long, long moment. "You are good man, Rhon Veasley." His hand came down on Ron's shoulder again. "That was not easy. I know how you feel about me. It was hardly subtle at Trivizard Tournament."

"Yeah, well, I could afford to be a lot more childish then. I've had to grow up some in the mean-time." He took a breath. "I have to think about Hermione now. She needs you. I can't be selfish."

Krum regarded him for a moment through narrowed eyes. "Hermione is right," he said, finally. "You are prat. Brave, noble, selfless, but prat." He gathered Ron's orange T-Shirt in one meaty fist, pulled him into his own face. "She does not love me, you prat. She loves you. She has always loved you. At Yule Ball, she was loving you. She wrote me that you had heard that ve -- how you say? snogged? At Yule Ball. Even that was all about you. I am famous. I am celebrity. When I kiss a girl, I expect her to be eager. When Hermione kissed me, she was punishing you for not having asked her. I was almost afraid!"

With an easy roll of his mighty shoulders, he placed Ron back on his feet. "I bring Hermione back to you Rhon. It is you who can make her happy. Not me. You." He glanced down at Ron's shirt, and chuckled. "You have less to fear from me than I have from your Chudley Cannons!"

"Oh, now that's not on!" Ron said. "You can call me what you want, but don't you disrespect the Cannons!"

Viktor laughed as he led Ron towards yet another fireplace. "Friend Rhon, there is more to Qvidditch than scoring. Or offense. Or defense. Or hitting bludger. Or dodging bludger, or catching snitch, or flying ability, or, er, any sort of fundamental talent, really. There is thing called heart, Rhon, and your Chudley Cannons have it, through and through!" He handed Ron more Floo powder, while throwing a handful in a fireplace. "Castle Krum," he said, and disappeared.

Ron looked at the fireplace for a moment, then threw his own powder and repeated the address. "I am absolutely going to kill that man," he said, as he stepped into the green flames.

On the third day after Harry and Hermione had realized that they could see something in the distance, Hermione came to a sudden stop, mouth hanging open, causing Harry to plow into her back.

"No," she said. "Oh, no. No, no, no, n o, no...."

"What?" Harry asked. "What is it?"

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no,..." She squatted down, held her hands low over the ground, face fierce with concentration. "Telescopium!" The muscles in her arms and shoulders quivered, standing out in sharp relief. A trickle of blood ran from her right nostril. "Telescopium!"

There was a very small Pop! and a brass spyglass, the sort Harry had seen sea captains using in old movies, appeared on the ground beneath her hands. She collapsed in a heap beside it, wracked with spasms.
Harry was instantly on one knee, hand on her shoulder. "Hermione? Are you all right?"

She drew a breath, grabbing his hand in one of hers, the spyglass in the other, and he helped her to her feet. "I'll tell you in a minute, Harry."

She stepped ahead of him, brought the spyglass to her eye, focused, muttering again, "No, no, no, no, no," and then shrieked, an inarticulate sound of rage. She turned to Harry, her eyes aflame, and held the telescope out to him. "No," she said, quietly. "No, I am most definitely not all right."

Harry took the spyglass, looked through it toward the irregularity they could barely make out in the distance, struggled to bring it into focus. It swam in and out, and there was a split second of clarity, and then his fingers sank into the brass of the spyglass, as it became insubstantial, and was gone.

He stared at Hermione, eyes wide, and she responded, her voice choked, "Well?"

Slowly, he nodded, and she screamed again, "FUCK!" and sank to the ground, shoulders wracked with sobs.

"Come on," he murmured, sinking down beside her, rubbing her back. "Come on, it's all right."

"No..." she keened. "No. We're never going to get out, Harry. You saw. You saw them!" She drew in a ragged breath, then spat the words as if they were a mouthful of excrement. "You saw the arrows!"

Harry nodded again, the image replaying itself in his head: the fuzzy black circle of the view through the little telescope, the blur coming into focus, form and color coalescing for the briefest fraction of a second before dissolving again into nothingness as the conjured spyglass faded from existence: Off in the distance, at the edge of vision, pointing cheerfully away from them, in the direction of their travel, he could just make out three six-foot, royal blue arrows marked into the ground.

They had somehow circumnavigated this... This place, this world, this moebius room, and come back almost to where they'd started.

"It's a closed system, Harry," cried Hermione. "It doesn't matter where we go, we'll end up back where we started!" She turned toward him, her arms around his neck, crying onto his shoulder, and he wrapped her in his embrace, stroking her hair as she wept. "It's a closed system, Harry, and I don't see how we can ever get out."

He hugged her tightly, and she moved towards him, sobbing harder now, her words dissolving to a nonsensical keening of despair. His hands stroked her hair and her back, and he kissed her forehead, and her cheeks, and then her eyes, tasting the salt of her tears, as he murmured comforting sounds to her. She moved closer to him, swung one long, graceful leg up and over, and moved herself up onto his crossed legs, and she sat before him, her bottom tucked into the hollow formed by them, her legs wrapped around him now, as well as her arms. She leaned slowly forward, her hands moving up behind his head, and her lips joined his, so softly, so softly. She wriggled against him, and he felt her breasts on his chest, the soft warmth of her folds against his penis, which immediately began to stir against her.

Her sobs had slowed, stopped, and Harry drew back slightly, looked into her eyes.
They were wide, dark and serious, infinitely sad. He felt his penis hardening, rising up to press into her folds, and she nodded slow acceptance.

God, she felt so good, warm and soft, curved and pliant and female. In his memory, he heard their voices again. "You're talking like it's inevitable!" "Isn't it?" The fear in his voice. The bitterness in hers. "Isn't it?" He felt the warmth of her in his arms, felt the heat of her folds against his erection. The acceptance in her eyes. "Isn't it?"

_Perhaps_, he thought. _But not today_. He moved her back a bit away from him, put his hand on her left leg and guided it back from behind him, so he could turn her sideways in his lap, and hold her close, stroking her hair and her back, and murmuring quiet nonsense to her.

She drew him down into a kiss, long and deep, and they cuddled together, held each other, against the featureless white.

Castle Krum, as it turned out, was more an old-world European manse, with deep-green stucco walls and dark-colored beams visible both inside the house and out. The rooms were warmly lit by fireplaces and candle-light, the furniture was sturdy and comfortable, and, except for a Persian rug in the rather formal living room, not remotely ostentatious.

"My father was big one for lording wealth over others," Krum had told Ron, as he gave him a quick tour of the house. "When he died last year, I auction off all manner of thrones and golden fixtures and antiques. Raised millions of Lev for Muggle children's hospitals." He laughed warmly. "Father would _hate_ that!"

Ron raised an eyebrow at him.

"He vas... Never brave enough to be Death Eater," said Viktor. "But agreed with them, the damned fool. He _hated_ Muggles. Like plague. Always claimed Muggles would be death of all Vizards -- starting with him."

Ron looked sour, pleased on some level that Krum seemed equally disgusted. "What happened to him?"

Viktor chuckled. "Was hit by Muggle bus."

Ron laughed a moment, then felt shame. "Viktor, I'm sorry, it's really not funny--"

"Is funny!" Krum insisted, chuckling still. "He vas crossing street wit'out looking, in small town in America, on vay out of Dairy Qveen! Died wit' Chocolate Blizzard all over him. Vas father's dirty little secret. Hated Muggles, but couldn' t get enough Muggle junk-food. I found lock-box full of McDonalds wrappers in family vault!" He looked more seriously at Ron. "He vas my father, and I loved him. But he I know what he vas."

He led Ron to another door. "Here is where ve're going."

The door opened into a large room, perhaps twenty feet by thirty, two stories up to a vaulted ceiling with sky-lights. Each of the four huge walls was a mammoth bookcase, and there were two levitating platforms which could be used to browse among the books in the higher shelves. There was a huge fireplace, and several well-stuffed chairs with accompanying tables, and the center of the room held a "partners" desk, with comfortable, high-backed chairs.

"Oh, wow," breathed Ron.
"Hermione loved this room when she and her parents stopped over last summer," Viktor said.

Ron looked over at him, his eyes narrowed, and Viktor frowned. Had he said too much? Had Hermione not told Ron of her visit?

"Hermione?" asked Ron, his voice low, suspicious.

"And her parents. They stopped for a night during their vacation last summer. You knew this, yes?"

"Hermione," Ron repeated, the tone still there.

"Hermione," answered Krum.

Ron's eyebrow raised slowly. "Don't you mean Herm-OWN-ninny?"

He had to chuckle a bit as Krum blushed. "Oh, vell. Uh, yes. I, uh, I figured that out a little after second task. Please, Rhon, don't tell her." Krum looked at the floor. "I think she thinks is cute."

"Well, yeah," said Ron, grinning broadly now, "because, you know, if there's one thing in the world I really want to encourage, it's Hermione thinking you're cute!"

Viktor smiled again as he moved toward one of the levitating platforms in the corner of the room, gesturing Ron towards the other. Something was happening here, something he really hadn't expected. He'd been determined to help Ron Weasley in any way he could, out of loyalty to Hermione. He'd expected to put on an act, the kind of tough-but-affable routine he'd normally display in foreign-press interviews, because his quiet nature came off as frightening and sullen. He'd expected to act the part of genial host, while quashing a burning resentment. But he was finding, much to his surprise, that he genuinely liked Ron Weasley. He liked his willingness to come to Krum for help, to put aside his own insecurities, of course. That was a man who was worthy of Hermione. But he also liked Ron's comfort with himself, the humour and equanimity with which he dealt with his one-time rival, not knowing, as Viktor did, that Krum had never stood a chance. Who would have thought it? Viktor had set out to put aside bad feelings and help Hermione. He had a feeling, though, that he'd ended up with a very good friend indeed.

He pointed towards the top shelf, in the eastern half of the room. "Family lore," he told Ron, "says Uncle Fyodor was raging ego-maniac. In his teens, he created spell to journal his life. All of it. Whole top shelf, all around room, is his journals. Every word he spoke, every thing he saw -- every piss he took. Whole life is in those books. Vas like Qvick-Qvill on Pepper-Oop Potion, my father told me. I think 1950s are over here. Grab handful of books, and we'll start looking."

Four hours later, Ron looked up from the volume spread open on one side of the partners' desk, and regarded Krum. "Your family lore was right! Merlin, man, it takes eight pages to get through a single night's peaceful sleep! I live in fear of when Cassiopeia shows up and they start getting busy! I mean, listen to this: For the next four-and-a-half minutes, Fyodor lay on his right side, the sound of his snores like the noble growling of a great lion at the head of his pride. In, he breathed with a noble whistle. Out with that majestic, leonine roar." Ron looked over at Krum. "Say, why is this in English?"

"Because you are English. Uncle Fyodor felt that his genius should be visible for anyone, so he enchanted journals to translate into native language of anyone who reads them. I would see that page as Bulgarian."

Ron looked surprised. "That's pretty amazing!"
Viktor grinned. "Fyodor was dark Vizard, and egomaniac, but he was very brilliant." He closed his book. "Come. My eyes glaze over. Is time to get some exercise."

Ron nodded, closing the volume he was reading, and stood to follow Viktor to the door.

"Come," said Viktor. "Follow me out to pitch. You will help me practice, yes? Would be nice to still have skills when season starts again."

Ron crashed to a halt as if he'd met a brick wall. "You w- You w- You want me to play Quidditch with you?"

Viktor grinned. "Why not? You play. Hermione tells me you're quite good keeper."

Ron gulped "She's not exactly an expert on Quidditch."

"This is true," Viktor said with a shrug.

"I mean, I'm okay, playing for a school team, but... But... You're Viktor Krum, for Godric's sake! I'm not Viktor Krum good!"

Krum laughed at this. "Nobody is 'Viktor Krum good,'" he said. "And if I don't practice, I won't be 'Viktor Krum good.' If you were not here, I would be practicing with Balki, my house-elf. He hates Quidditch." He grinned at Ron. "Ron. Make Hermione proud. Give house-elf day off from unpleasant duty!"

Ron laughed aloud. "Well, if you put it that way," he said, following Viktor, "I can't possibly refuse."

"Uh! Twenty-seven!" Slap! "Uh! Twenty-eight!" Slap! "Uh! Twenty-nine!" Slap!

Hermione woke up to the sound of Harry, grunting and counting, and some sort of slapping sound. She rolled over, and saw that he was doing push-ups, actually throwing his upper body into the air with each push, and clapping his hands while airborne. The muscles in his arms and shoulders, chest and legs, stood out in sharp relief, and a fine mist of sweat shone on his body. She watched his biceps and triceps and pectoral muscles shifting beneath his skin like tectonic plates, listened to the firm explosions of breath as he blew out.

"Uh! Thirty-four!" Slap! "Uh! Thirty-five!" Slap! "Uh! Thirty-six!" Slap!

She lay for a long time, watching his body moving, watching the interplay of muscle and sinew, of body and will.

"Uh! Forty-eight!" Slap! "Uh! Forty-nine!" Slap! "Uh! Fifty!"

Harry let himself fall, face first, and lie flat for a few seconds, breathing heavily.

"Well," Hermione said quietly, "that was certainly impressive."

"Thanks," Harry muttered, pulling himself up on his elbows. "I figure, if we're not walking a zillion miles a day, I have to get my exercise some--" He cut himself short as he turned toward her, eyes widening, in panicked fear that seemed to turn toward anger as he cried out. "Oh, my God! Hermione, what-- Did you do it again? To yourself this time? What the hell is wrong with you!?"

"Harry, what are you--"
He was upon her in an instant, grabbing her shoulders, staring into her eyes. "Hermione, you can't keep hurting yourself! You have to stop this! Are you crazy?"

"Harry, I don't under--"

"Don't do that!" Harry's green eyes seemed to glow, his mouth a hard, angry line, and she felt his fingers touching the inside of her thigh, so close, so close, and then his hand was between their faces, blood streaked on his index finger. "It's right here, Hermione! You can't pretend!"

She stared at his bloody finger for a moment, then glanced down at her thigh, seeing a small amount of blood there, and she suddenly understood. She gazed back up at Harry with a broad, sweet smile, and slowly shook her head, moving his hand down from between their faces. "Oh, Harry," she murmured. "Oh, sweetie, no. It's just my period."

Harry stared at her, confused. "What the-- Hermione what are you talking about? What period? Like a class? You're teaching yourself a lesson?"

"No, Harry. My-- Oh, dear." Hermione's mind reeled. This wasn't something they taught in class at Hogwarts; in the wizarding community, sex education was uniformly good, and uniformly carried out within the confines of the family. Hermione tried to imagine the Dursleys teaching Harry about a woman's cycle. That seemed even less likely. "Harry, do you know about pregnancy, and what causes it?"

Harry blinked owlishly at her. "I'm not stupid, Hermione."

"Nobody said you were, Harry. But that doesn't mean you've had a complete education, either. Do you know about how it works, on a... biological level?"

"I know that men have sex with women. I know that we ejaculate, and that stuff has sperm cells in it. I know that they swim up inside a woman and one of them meets an egg and fertilizes it."

"Well, that's all very good. The thing is, Harry, that a woman is born with all the eggs she'll ever have. They're stored in little organs called ovaries. Once a month, one is released, and moves down through a little tube -- the Fallopian Tube, it's called -- and moves into a position to be fertilized. At the same time, a woman's body begins to build up resources to feed and nurture the fertilized egg. Well, that egg has a limited span, and then the woman's body expels it, along with the extra resources, and starts again."

Harry was frowning with concentration, as if being taught an exceptionally complex spell.

"The material being expelled -- the egg and the other stuff -- it's basically blood, Harry. That's what this is." She touched his hand. "It's just a thing that women have happen once a month. We use things called tampons to basically sop up the blood before it leaks out, and otherwise, just bear with it. I guess it can be quite uncomfortable, and it makes a lot of women moody or cranky for a couple of days a month, but I usually don't have much of that. I'm pretty lucky I guess."

Harry was staring at her, wide-eyed with amazement. "So every month, you bleed from your privates? And that's normal? You just mop it up, and go on as if nothing happened?"

Hermione shrugged. "Pretty much, yes."

Harry sat back, and let out a breath. "No wonder girls are mental! If I bled out of my willy every month, I don't know what I'd do!" His eyes suddenly narrowed. "Wait, we've been here more than a month. This happened before? And I missed it?"
"No Harry. My last one ended the day before we got here. I'm just late. That happens sometimes when a woman starts to exercise more."

"Well, I wish you'd warned me. You scared me stupid, Hermione!"

She smiled again. "I didn't know, Harry. Usually, I feel some discomfort, and I know what's going on. I didn't feel this at all, until you showed me."

"Oh, my God." Harry's face fell. "And I reached right down and touched you... There."

Hermione reached out, put her fingers under his chin, brought his face back up to hers. "It's all right, Harry. You were concerned. I was very touched, honestly." She leaned over and kissed him, softly. "Thank you, Harry, for caring that much about me."

Ron grinned fiercely, the wind of his speedy flight pressing his cheeks back, opening his smile into an almost grotesque caricature of himself. The Firebolt 500 was by far the fastest broom in the world, and he found, as they raced after the snitch in Krum's back-yard Quidditch pitch, that he could easily keep pace with Viktor in straight-ahead flight. But Viktor was tough, and wily, and could maneuver his broom with a fluidity and grace that left Ron behind.

"Oh, mate," he called over to Viktor, as he caught up after a truly amazing reversal of direction, "you have got to teach me how to do that!"

"Is all about over-ruling center of gravity!" called Viktor. "You vant to overbalance! Inertia during roll swings broom around, and leaves you basically upright. If you are afraid to fall down, play football!"

Ron laughed. "Okay, let me try that! I wanna get lower to the ground first, though, while I'm learning"

"No, go higher! Higher you are, longer you fall," Krum said. "More time to catch you if you have problem!"

Ron shrugged, and pulled the nose of the Firebolt up, racing dizzily away from the pitch. Krum matched him effortlessly.

"Ready?" Krum called.

Ron nodded, eyes and jaw hard with fierce concentration.

"Okay! Shoulder down! Knees forward. Swing arse NOW, back and to right!"

Ron obeyed the commands, felt himself overbalancing, sliding, he was going to fall! But the broomstick slid around under him, and he leaned forward, and the wind slid his cheeks back again, and he let out a whoop of joy.

Krum was beside him, broomstick guided by his clenched knees as he applauded gustily. "Excellent, Rhon! Dat vas maybe best first try at that turn I ever see!" He flew alongside, patted, slapped his shoulder. "Go again, please!"

And for the next half-hour or so, Viktor ran him through the turn, over and over, and each time, he gained in confidence, pushed the balance a little further, swung the broom around a little faster.
"Will this work on a slower broom?" he asked Viktor.

"I have done it on Cleansweep 15. Is much slower, but still fastest way to turn." He angled toward the ground. "Come. Is time for food."

A half-hour later Viktor was smiling at Ron over individual serving pots of something called "Kevarma Kebop," a savory beef dish, smelling strongly of onion and garlic. They had started with a cheesy pastry called "Banitza," which had also been delicious.

"Honestly, Rhon," he said, "If you keep learning at this rate, you will be ready to try out for your Cannons. You have ability, and great grasp of strategy. Would make for excellent professional player."

Ron was stunned. "Oh, now," he began, but Krum wouldn't hear his demurral.

"No, Rhon, listen to me. You are not ready for professional Qviditch now. But you can be. You have it in you. When you become pro, I will buy your action figure." He grinned. "Will not break arm off, either!"

Ron buried his head in his hands. "I can't believe she told you about that!"

"What?" Viktor looked confused for a moment, then smiled. "No, she did not. I felt it."

Ron looked up at him, confused. "You-- You what?"

"I felt it," said Viktor simply, "when you broke arm off my figure. Is spell that is part of licensing contract. I feel the toys and statues and things made in my likeness -- feel how they are treated by owners, how owners feel about them."

Ron stared for a moment, stunned. "That's... That's mad! So every time a toy Viktor breaks, you--"

But Viktor was shaking his head. "It does not feel like my arm breaking. It feels like piece of plastic somewhere broke, or like someone broke it. Right now, in Sofia, little girl who thinks I am scary has cast me as villain to be defeated by Gilderoy Lockhart doll. In Blagoevgrad, father who lost money betting on Serbia has stomped on son's toy of me. I am only aware of specifics if I think about it. Otherwise, is like, er... Background hum. It keeps me mindful of how fans feel about me. Gives confidence when I do well, when I please them. Reminds me that children admire me. Karkaroff invented it. He was very serious about it. He said... He said we should be reminded that children look up to us. That we should be reminded to be people children could look up to."

Viktor looked down at his plate, and Ron was shocked to see tears in his eyes. "Karkaroff was like my father. He was Death Eater. He believed Muggles are vermin. He believed in purity, believed in discipline, believed in integrity."

Ron sat in silence as Viktor looked up at him. "I leave his warped feelings about Muggles on table. People are people. But purity doesn't have to mean stupid in-breeding. Purity can mean purity of spirit, purity of action, of intention. That is what Karkaroff taught me. That is what Durmstrang taught me: Purity. Discipline. Integrity. Three aspects of same thing."

Ron tried to steer the conversation in a happier direction. "So there's a spell that lets you feel how people feel about you?"

"Close enough," said Krum. "Is spell that lets me feel how people feel about representation of me. Little girl in Sofia doesn't care about Qviditch, about me. She just thinks I look like bad
"How does that work, then," asked Ron. "The spell, I mean."


Ron stared at his host, eyes wide. "Sanguimancy? That's dark, mate. Blood-magic is seriously dark stuff!"

Krum frowned. "Pah. Vhat is dark? Who is hurt? Spell involves only me, cast voluntarily of my own free vill, to help remind me of responsibilities. How is this dark? Magic is magic. Light and dark are in vhether anyone is hurt by it."

Ron stared at his host for a long time, feeling vaguely disturbed. He couldn't argue with him, not really. Who was he hurting? But dark indeed were the magics performed with blood, and they were forbidden entirely at Hogwarts. Ron had learned to think of the whole field as dark and forbidden. "Easier that way," Ron murmured to himself.

"Sorry?" asked Viktor.

"I was just thinking. I've always been told that blood-magic is an evil in itself. That it's just dark magic. So I've never had to actually think about it. Never had to think about what it means, what's right and what's wrong. I just accepted what I was taught. Easier that way. That way, I never have to have the courage to think about right and wrong for myself."

"That is no vay to live," said Viktor.

Ron nodded, not feeling very happy with himself. "No. It isn't."

"Also," said Viktor, "you have elbow in your Kevarma."

Ron looked down at his elbow, resting in the small serving-pot.

"Oh, bugger," he said.

Harry watched as Hermione leaned over and scourgified herself. It was only the second day of her period, and Hermione had told him hers usually lasted three or four, so he knew he shouldn't worry, but seeing his friend bloodied disturbed him greatly, and seeing her bloodied there was infinitely worse. He closed his eyes, remembering the feeling of flesh tearing beneath his fingers.

To distract himself, he looked up at Hermione. "So, back home, you used something to sop that up?"

Hermione smiled, ruefully, shaking her head. Harry'd always been a close friend, the kind she could talk to about anything, but she'd somehow never imagined that she'd be talking to Harry about feminine hygiene. Of course, she never imagined she'd be masturbating with him, either. Her mind returned again to the memory, that first time, his hand reaching for hers as he came, her fingers squeezing his as she did. He had been so sweet, so caring.

"Hermione?"

She looked back at him. "Sorry. A million miles away, there, Harry." She blinked. "Yes, back home, I use things called tampons. Little, sort of cigar-shaped things made of absorbent
material, like a gauze pad. About the size of your thumb, I guess."

He frowned. "Tampons."

Hermione chuckled. "Yes, Harry, that's what they're called."

"Is that one of those words that also means something else? Or sounds just like something else?"

"Not that I know of, Harry," she said, puzzled and amused. He seemed to have sunk his teeth into this like a dog with a bone, and that wasn't the usual with boys and this subject. "Why?"

"I thought it was some kind of swimming aid!"

Hermione was really laughing now. "What!?!?"

"From the adverts! When Aunt Petunia was watching her soap operas on the telly! I saw commercials for tampons, and they were all about women going to the beach, going swimming, going on boats..."

Tears were pouring from Hermione's eyes as she laughed, collapsing back onto the ground, pounding it with her fists.

"Well, and the one with the woman on the roller skates, being pulled along by these dogs..."

"Oh, my God, Harry!" Hermione was practically beside herself, her face red, as laughter roared from her.

"So all those adverts were really talking about a thing you stick in your fanny to sop up blood," Harry said seriously.

"Yes!" she shrieked, howling with laughter. "Yes, Harry!"

He stared at her, wide-eyed, for a long, long moment. "Ron's right," he finally said. "You women really are mental, the lot of you!"

Hermione shrieked again, inarticulate in her mirth, and Harry lay back on the ground, smiling quietly.

"Barking," he said.

The worst thing, Ron decided, about Fyodor Krum's self-adoring journals, was that you couldn't really skim them. The language charm that re-arranged the text into the language of the reader required a certain amount of attention to work. Try to let your eye skim over a page looking for familiar words to pop out at you, and the text would devolve into random scribbles.

And so Ron had had to drag himself through page after page of clever, brilliant Fyodor outwitting government officials and tormenting Muggles. He was towards the end of the third of the volumes he'd grabbed when he finally found mention that Some Muggle-loving British wizard -- oh, how Fyodor hated the British, with their sentimental, blood-polluting namby-pambiness! -- That couldn't possibly be a real word, Ron thought! named Morrison Prince-Hedges, who, while doltish and impure, had interesting ideas about stabilizing dimensional transcendence spells.

"Hey," said Ron, "now we're getting somewhere..."
And they were, although it took another two days to get as far as the actual work being done. Their days settled into a pattern. Four hours in the morning, reading, then lunch, then Quidditch practice in the afternoon, and, after dinner, back to the library for a couple more hours.

It was a grueling study schedule, much more so than Hogwarts, given that there was no variety, just Fyodor Krum's revolutionary new theories on Dimensional Transcendance, but Ron and Viktor -- who pointed out that Durmstrang was more single-mindedly driven than Hogwarts, after all -- were highly motivated, and well-suited to helping each-other. Ron's stubbornness would lead him over the same material again and again until he understood it, while Viktor's focus would hone in on important points. After a week of study, they had a good clear understanding of the magic of Dimensional Transcendence.

"So," said Viktor, looking up at Ron. "Is a stable, closed environment. Can be any size. Your Prince-Hedges' stabilization spell vill keep it viable for thousand years." He half-smiled, "I had never heard of this man, but he was very powerful vizard, maybe as powerful as your Dumbledore. And stabilization spell is Gaian magic. You agree?"

Ron nodded, his face lighting up in a wider smile than Viktor had ever seen from him. For that one brief moment, Ron Weasley allowed himself to celebrate. "They're alive, Viktor! That Gaian magic-- That's the life-force of the planet itself! It'll nurture them, feed them, heal their cuts and bruises--" Tears sprang into Ron's eyes. "I've been living in hope, Viktor. Now I don't have to. They're in there! Alive!" He ran a circle around the library, arms waving over his head, whooping out his joy. "They're alive!"

Krum grabbed him on his next pass, pulled him into a tight embrace, pounding on his back with a large, solid hand. He moved Ron out to arm's length, grinning at him. "Much work still to do, Rhon. Much to study, much to learn."

"Yeah, mate. But we know this much: We're not doing it for nothing. They're in there."

"Thirty-one -- whuff! Thirty-two -- whuff!"

Hermione was smiling even before she'd fully woken up, and the smile widened as her eyes slitted open to see Harry, sitting, not far from her, doing sit-ups. His legs were stretched out in front of him at a forty-five degree angle, and he alternated which of them he reached for each time he sat up. His hair was clumped with sweat, and it shone on his body. The muscles of his legs were rigidly outlined, his toes pointing away from him, his arms and hands as stiff and straight as an olympic diver's as they stretched towards his toes, now the left, now the right. Muscles in his abdomen rolled as he pulled himself upright and lowered himself back, at the same controlled pace, to the ground. Where his legs met, he was erect, pointing at the ground.

"Thirty-nine -- whuff! Morn-ing! Hermione! Forty-one -- whuff!"

It was the fourth morning since her period had ended, and each morning she'd awakened to this: Harry doing some kind of calisthenics. The last couple of days, it had been with two of the most impressive erections she'd ever seen on him.

The exercise looked good on him, Hermione had to admit. So did--
and whose green eyes were so piercing and whose trim muscles moved under his skin as he exercised--

"Oh, Merlin, I'm like Pavlov's dog!" she said.

"Forty-seven -- whuff! What d'you mean -- Fifty! -- Her -wuff?- Mione?"

"Instead of a bell ringing, I start to drool every time I hear you counting."

Harry's eyes snapped up and he stared at her, blushing furiously. "I'm not-- I don't-- I--"

"Just take the compliment, Harry. You're looking very good." She smiled. "Look, I'm sorry, Harry. I sort of tend to get a little more, er... excitable... for a few days after my period. I used to think it was a hormonal thing, but the research doesn't back that up."

Harry half-smiled. "So you don't have an excuse either, then."

"Harry..." She smiled at him. "I'm alone, naked, with a very sweet, very handsome, very naked boy. And we're both seventeen. Just how much more excuse do you think we need?"

He looked unhappily at the ground. "I just... I'm scared, Hermione. After--" He stopped, raised his eyes to hers. "I'm scared."

She looked over at him for a long, long moment, realizing how much she had hurt him, hurting herself. "Oh, Harry. I'm so sorry. You didn't deserve that." She moved over to him, put her hand on his chest, looking seriously into his eyes. "Harry..." Her gaze broke from his for a moment, and she brought it back up, stared seriously into his eyes. "Harry, I'm not... I was pretty messed up about that. I'm not... I'm not in that kind of... That's not how I am now." Her hand moved up behind his neck, drew him to her, drew his mouth to hers. The kiss was slow and gentle, but there was urgency, too, and she opened her mouth against his, her tongue reaching, exploring, as her hand slid down his body, sliding over his chest, across his nipple, each finger in turn rumbling lightly across it, then down across the lean muscles over his ribs.

She broke the kiss, looking into his eyes, and then returned, sucking gently on his lower lip.

Her hand still swept along. The tip of her middle finger traced a light circle around the rim of his navel, and then followed the line of fine, dark hair down from there, her fingers brushing through the coarser tangles below, and finally wrapping around his erection.

"Hermione..." Harry's eyes were wide.

"Shhh..." Her voice was quiet, reassuring, as she began to stroke along the length of him, the skin so soft, the member so hard. Her other hand stroked his cheek. "This is what it's about, Harry," she murmured. "This is what it's for. This is what it's like." She kissed him as her hand stroked faster, leaned down to flick her tongue across his nipple, "Feel the pleasure, Harry. Do you like that?"

"Oh..." His voice caught. "Oh, yes..."

She reached down, brought his hand up to her breast while she stroked. "Do you feel that, Harry? Feel how hard my nipples are? That's how much I want this. That's how excited I am. That's what this is really like." She kissed him again, as her hand increased its pace, and his hips rose up, up to her hand, and he grunted, grunted her name, explosively: "Hermione!"

The ejaculate spurted from him in a gushing arc, splashed over his belly, his side, her arm, her chest. He stared at the line a curved rope of semen had made across her chest, and she smiled at...
him as she raised her hand to her lips.

His inarticulate groan lanced through her, and her heart sang. She felt wanton, and sexual and powerful. She had the power to make Harry groan like that, the power to bring him to orgasm, the power to give him pleasure. The power to take pleasure in him.

She took his hand from her breast, drew in her strength, scougified them both. She'd been thinking a little too much about her reproductive processes to risk sperm now. She brought the hand down her body, pressed it into her center.

Harry's eyes were wide, locked on hers, as she lay back beside him, pressing his fingers into her-- But gently this time, and she kept that eye contact, and smiled at him again.

Again she guided his middle finger to her clitoris. Part of her wanted to explain it to him, tell him the names, tell him the Latin, tell him about sensitivity. She wisely quashed that part of herself, and kept her mouth shut. His fingers felt good on her, so good, so gentle and caring. She guided him around her labia and over her clitoris, but he was a quick study, learning what she liked, and she felt the heat and the rhythm quickening within her. While his right hand stroked her, fingers sliding on her labia, he reached with his left, began caressing her breasts, sliding his fingers across her nipples in a series of bumps that took her breath away.

She reached down to the hand at her crotch, and guided his first two fingers in through her folds. She wanted, so badly, the feeling of his fingers inside her.

His expression darkened slightly, concern in his eyes, and she smiled. "It's all right, Harry. It's good. It's very good."

And that's when they both felt their fingers meet with resistance.

Harry's eyes widened as he looked up at her, and her own were just as wide.

"But it-- We-- I--" Hermione sputtered a moment more, "It was broken! It was--" Her head whipped sideways suddenly, as she looked off into the non-distance. "It's this place! It's this place, Harry! Just the way it fixed your eyes! It healed me." She found herself chuckling with Harry's fingers still inside her. "Harry... It restored my virginity!" The chuckle deepened for just a moment into a low, throaty laugh. "Lavender should come here!"

That surprised a snicker out of Harry, but the merriment left his eyes quickly, as he looked down at his fingers, disappearing into her.

Hermione bit her lower lip, her eyes locked on Harry's. "It's all right, Harry. This is supposed to happen. Go ahead and push with your fingers. It will break, but that's all right. It'll hurt a little. There'll be a little blood. But it won't--" She returned her hand to his cheek. "It won't be like before. it will hurt a little at first, but I'll get used to it. My body's designed for this, Harry. I'll be fine."

She squirmed against his hand, and he pressed, gently, softly. "Keep pressing," she murmured. "This is good." And, in truth, it was good. His fingers felt wonderful within her, the pressure against her hymen was an urgent pleasure, he gazed down in rapt wonderment, pressed further, harder, and she felt the stretch move from pressure to pain, but it was gradual, and milder than it had been before.

The tissue let go with a single, tearing pop, and it burned, and she cried out slightly. Harry's hand froze where it was. "It's all right, Harry," she told him. "The hard part's done."

In truth the pain hadn't left her, but it was trivial, and mixed with the pleasure that flowed in
waves from his moving fingers out through her body, like ripples from a stone thrown in a still pond. His fingers slid deeper, until she felt the knuckle of his ring finger against her mons.

She breathed deeply. "Oh, Harry!"

He was smiling now, and began to slide his fingers out of her, then back in again, in long, slow, powerful strokes. His other hand left her breast, moved down to caress her clitoris as his long fingers slid in and out of her, and she felt herself building, climbing, the pressure growing. The sliding fingers were a individual piece of heaven with her, but the ginger, hesitant caresses of his left hand on her clitoris were more frustrating than satisfying. She reached for that hand, pressed it more firmly.

"A little harder on that one, Harry. Firm, firm..."

He eagerly complied, watching with fascination, his eyes moving from her face to his hands, filled with wonder at seeing those fingers sliding into her.

Her breath began coming in sharper gasps, and while there was still some pain there from her torn hymen, she found she could simply set it aside, as she rode the waves of pleasure.

She moaned and thrust her pelvis up into his hands, crying out, "Harder!"

Again he complied, the sliding fingers thrusting more quickly, the finger rubbing her clitoris pressing more firmly, and she cried aloud, "Oh, that's it, that's right, yes, this is what it really is, Harry!"

And she felt herself spasm around his fingers as orgasm washed over her, and she reached down, clamped her hands over his, holding him in place for the moment while the sensitivity subsided, before gently guiding him in sliding the fingers out.

Harry brought his fingers to his face, breathed deeply of the scent of her sex on his fingers, then slid them slowly into his mouth, his eyes sinking closed into a dreamy smile.

She reached over, pulled him to her, snuggled, cuddled against him, kissed him, so tenderly. "This is what it's about Harry. This."

He smiled over at her, hands gently caressing her back.

"That's not so bad, then," he said.

Krum slammed his book closed with a crash, and backed away from it so quickly that his chair overbalanced, and he fell to the floor.

"Oh, no!" he breathed, as Ron raced around the desk to him. "It cannot be! It can not!

Ron was at his side, now, and reached a hand down to help him up. "Viktor, what is it? What's wrong, mate?"

"Is bad, Rhon. Is vwery, vwery bad." He leaned over the desk, opening the book, flipping through the pages to try to find the passage he'd been reading, then slowing down to try to pay the book enough attention that it would display in his his language. He turned pages more and more slowly, then stopped, re-reading the passage, his face pale. "There," he said to Ron, pointing. "Read this."
Ron leaned over and looked down at the open book. The Cyrillic calligraphy twitched a little, but settled back in its original shape. Ron glanced over at Viktor. "Oi!" He lightly smacked him off the back of the head. "Look away, ya great sausage!"

"Oh!" Viktor looked embarrassed, turned his back on the table. "Sorry."

Ron turned back to the book, saw the Cyrillics writhe and re-form into English.

His eyes moved over the page once, quickly, stopped, went back -- that couldn't be right! -- started again, then a third time.

The apportation was Cassiopeia's idea. It was inspired. The spell to apport people into the space would be self-actuating. The magical energy for the spell was the best part: Cassiopeia had discovered a way to draw energies from pain itself. She called it cruciomancy! She had calculated that, every morning, before she opened her business, she could power it for a day by giving five mudbloods an hour of the Cruciatus Curse! The brilliance! To wring the magic from their unworthy bodies, and the sanity from their filthy minds while properly punishing them for the effrontery of daring to call themselves witches and wizards! Fyodor's blood sang with it!

Ron looked back up at Krum, his eyes wide, his face slack.

"Viktor..."

"Rhon." Viktor's eyes, as he looked at him, were very still, very dark -- even just a little frightening. "You have told me you vill do anything to bring her-- to bring them back."

"There's another way!" Ron's voice was a scream. "There's another way! I won't-- we can't--"

Viktor nodded, a grim smile on his face. "Is good you say dis, Rhon." His voice was just a bit husky, his accent thicker. "It would not be good if I had to fight you to abandon her in there... But this cruciomancy -- this torture of half-bloods -- this I vill not allow."

Ron scowled at Viktor, more than a little angry that he even felt the need to say that to him. "Don't worry, mate. You won't have to. You'll never have to. I couldn't bring them back by violating everything they believe in! If it took that to get them back, they'd have fuck-all left to come back to!"

Viktor looked down, his face flushing. "I am sorry, Rhon. I should know you would not do this thing."

" Fucking right, you should!"

Krum looked miserably at him. "Rhon, you forget. I came up in Durmstrang, under Karkaroff. For most of my schoolmates, this would be a.. What is phrase? A viable option? Karkaroff would not give second thought."

"Well, I'm not bloody Karkaroff, am I?"

Krum was studiously focusing on his shoes. "No. No, Rhon, you are not. And I am not used to being with wizards who value doing what is right more than what works. Fighting to do what is right is hard. Hard habit to begin. Hard habit to break."

Ron managed a sad smile, and clapped Viktor on the shoulder. "Probably not a bad one to keep, though. Come on, mate, let's start packing up books. We need to visit Hogwarts, and see if there's anyone there who can figure out how to get around this..."
Moody looked up from the kitchen table at Grimmauld Place, shaking his head. "'Course it's tosh!" he growled. "That Black woman was a psychotic!"

Ron heaved a sigh of relief.

"Honestly, Weasley, how many ways can we say it? Magic is magic. Wizards are wizards. Makes no difference who yer parents are, boy. It doesn't have to be Muggle-borns or half-bloods: this Cruciomancy would work the same with Draco Malfoy!"

"That's not the bloody point!" cried Ron. "What I need to know is, what can I use instead of Cruciomancy to charge the bloody sign up!"

Moody scowled, looking down at the book, and shook his head. "There's nothing, boy."

"Of course there's bloody something!" cried Ron.

Krum, leaning against the kitchen wall, arms crossed over his chest, looked back and forth between Ron and Moody, and then up, across at Bill Weasley and Remus Lupin.

Bill looked down at his feet, flushed with anger for Ron, but Lupin met his gaze, his eyes sad, and shook his head slightly. Krum's chin lowered and raised, in an almost imperceptible nod.

"The thing is, Ron," Lupin said, "This Cruciomancy is really all just a matter of -- I'm not sure how to say it -- fine-tuning. Cassiopeia Black's work wasn't so much involved in finding a way to power her apportation spell, but making the apportation spell draw its power only from a wizard's suffering."

"Exactly," said Bill. "There's magic in everything Wizards do, everything we feel. It's all energy that can be channeled, can power inanimate magic. The only reason that this Cruciomancy was so strong was that the pain powering it was so intense -- the bitch used Crucius!"

"And for this apportation spell to be powered by it," finished Lupin, "it had to be focused on only accepting the... the cruciomantic charge. So there's nothing else but Cruciomancy that can power it."

"I vould like to see it," said Krum.

Four pairs of eyes turned towards him.

"This thing. This sign. I would like to see it."

Ron caught his eye. Krum's head lowered by a millimeter, and Ron's mirrored it.

"Come on, then," said Ron, leading the Bulgarian out of the kitchen, and towards the stairs.

Lupin and Moody exchanged glances. "What's he want to look at the bloody thing for?" growled Moody. "It's just a damned piece of wood!"

Bill quietly picked up the books from the kitchen table, shrunk them, placed them back into Ron's bag, and quietly left the room.

"Something doesn't feel right," said Moody.

"Oh, no!" Lupin was on his feet, running for the stairs, and Moody quickly followed. "You can't do it Ron," Lupin cried, "it's an Unforgivable!"
Ron and Viktor stood, each taking one end of the sign in their hands.

"On, three, I think, Viktor."

"Da," said Viktor. "Vone. Two--"

"You'll want this, I think," said Bill's voice, from the attic doorway. He held Ron's bag out to him.

Somewhere, down the stairs, they heard Lupin cry, "It's an Unforgivable!"

"You're not going to try to stop us?" Ron took the bag.

Bill shook his head. "They're both Weasleys now. They need you." He gestured at Ron's bag with his wand. "Books are all in there."

He turned away, and his wand was pointed back out the attic door when Lupin and Moody arrived.

"What the hell are you doing, Weasley?" cried Moody, looking back and forth between Bill's wand and Viktor and Ron, holding the sign. "They're going to take it! If they get away with that, they'll--"

"They'll find a way in. They'll rescue Harry and Hermione."

Lupin looked past Moody as well, past Bill, and even past Ron. "You'll have to be the one to do it, Viktor. It's an unforgivable, and he doesn't have it in him."

Viktor smiled grimly at him. "You are wrong, Lupin. Dat is vhy I vill do it. It is not that he doesn't have it in him. Problem is that he does. I vill not have him become what he woudl become. I vill do it." He turned back towards Ron. "Vone. Two. Three!"

And with a crack! Ron, Viktor and the sign were gone.

It was fifteen minutes' journey through International Aparition, Intercity Floo, and local Floo before Ron and Viktor were bringing the sign into one of the many "extra" rooms in Castle Krum.

As they set it on a table, Ron looked narrowly at Krum. "What was all that with Lupin?"

"He is good man," said Krum.

"One of the best," agreed Ron. "One of the bravest men I've ever known. Now what was all that."

"Nothing. He vas telling me what I already know. I am-- I am sorry, Rhon. I vill not enjoy this task."

"Too right, you won't, Mate, because you're not doing it," Ron snapped. "It's an Unforgivable. It's life in prison. You're not risking that in my place."

Viktor snorted. "Don't be prat. You are Dumbledore's man. They do not teach you Cruciatius at Hogwarts."

Ron's voice was very quiet. "You'll have to help me learn it. I won't put this off on you."
"You would rather torture me, is that it? You would be avenged at last for Yule Ball?"

Ron laughed darkly. "That's lame, Viktor. A year and a half ago, I might have fallen for that. Not any more. I know what casting it costs."

"No," said Viktor Krum, his voice quiet and commanding. "You do not. And I would sooner piss on Dumbledore's tomb than see you learn." He stepped over to Ron, placed one large hand on his shoulder. "Lay on floor, Rhon. You would fall anyway."

Ron's blue eyes stared into Viktor's dark ones. "I'm sorry, mate," he said quietly. He lowered himself to the floor, as Viktor tapped his wand to the sign, murmuring Cassiopeia Black's spell. "I'm sorry."

Viktor stood, looking down at him. "Do not apologize to me, Rhon," said Viktor, quietly. He pointed his wand down at his red-haired friend. "Crucio!"

Harry's face spun towards Hermione. "What was that?"

"I don't know." Her brown eyes were troubled as she looked up at Harry. "You felt it, too, though."

"Yeah..." He gazed distractedly off into the distance. "Like... Like a cold wind, that only blew inside me..."

Hermione smiled in spite of the chill she felt. "I didn't know you were such a poet, Harry."

He smiled down at her. "Me neither."

They were walking again, more to pass the time than for exercise. Hermione had mentioned that it seemed silly to make a line of arrows most of the way around the Universe, and then stop just before they were finished. Harry had smirked, amused that he couldn't really argue with the illogical logic, so they'd set out for what they thought was about a week's worth of traveling to complete their circle of arrows.

It was their third day back walking, after more than a week in one place, and now, suddenly, for the first time since they'd been there, they'd felt something that hadn't come from themselves.

Hermione bit her lip, looking forward toward their first arrow. If she had to guess, she'd say they were four or five days short of it, three or four short of completing their band of arrows. Could that cold inner wind have to do with that? A warning? Were they not supposed to complete their circumnavigation? No, that didn't feel right. Her intellect was somehow drawn to the notion, but she'd become aware, through years with Ron and Harry, that intellect was its own kind of trap, just as ignorance and superstition were. Her habitual desire to find patterns could lead her to create them where she couldn't find them. She knew she didn't have enough data points for a true pattern to emerge, and although she felt the allure of the idea, her instincts were pulling her away from it. And if Ron and Harry had taught her anything, it was to respect her instincts.

Still, whatever it was, it was real -- well, as real as anything could be in this world. Harry had felt it, too.

She looked over at him, measuringly. His eyes were toward the ground, lower lip between his teeth, -- Did he get that from me? -- one hand reaching up to touch his scar. She found herself smiling. What a dope, she thought fondly.
"Harry," she said, not unkindly, "I don't have one of those, and I felt it, too."

Harry started, then looked embarrassed. "Oh.... Oh, yeah." He smiled ruefully. "I guess I didn't think of that."

"Not everything is about you and Voldemort, Harry."

His responding laugh was rich and full, and she stared at him, surprised.

"You know," he said, "I keep wanting to think that. The world keeps proving me wrong. Teacher takes an interest in me? Has Voldemort growing out of the back of his head. Book wants to make friends with me? Voldemort. Scary black-robed soul-sucking monsters after me? They go to work for Voldemort. Entered into a frigging world-wide wizarding tournament? Plot by Voldemort. Finally have family, a Godfather that loves me? Killed by Voldemort. Great, foul, greasy git of a teacher makes my life miserable for six years? Oh, this is innocent, he just never got over that my dad was mean to him when he was a kid-- Nope, wrong, my bad, working for Voldemort!"

"Harry!" Hermione was shocked by this sarcastic litany. "How can--"

"How can I joke?" Harry smiled at her again, this time with a certain bitterness behind it. "It just-- It just got to be too much. Somewhere along the way, this whole thing just sailed right over the line into ridiculous. I mean, he's an Evil Overlord, isn't he? Doesn't he have, I dunno, a world to take over, minions to order about, or some such? Instead, he's devoted just this insane amount of time and energy to killing a little boy. He tried it when I was one, and every chance he's had since, and it's cost him time, cost him the lives of followers, cost him devastating setbacks, and for what? To kill some kid who's only his enemy because he made me his enemy! If he'd just taken his damned Horcruxes and moved to Majorca with them, and left me the hell alone, he'd've had the immortality he's so damned desperate for!"

Harry looked over at her, his mouth smiling and his eyes hurting. "It's just a big, stupid, pathetic, sick joke on the two of us, and as much as it hurts, as devastating as it is to me, sometimes... Sometimes I just have to laugh."

Hermione stepped over, wrapped her arms around him, held him and cuddled him for a long time. She wasn't the least bit surprised when the laughter dissolved into sobs. But what did surprise her was that he surrendered to those sobs so completely, collapsing to the ground, his desperate embrace pulling her with him, and she held him as he lay on the ground and wept, kissing his face, rubbing his back and shoulders, murmuring quietly in his ears, just trying to help him through the wracking sobs.

Together they lay on the soft white ground, Harry's sobs slowing, his breath still hitching, but no longer coming in gasps. Hermione smiled sadly. This poor, magnificent boy, so brave, so loving, so caring and loyal. Vindication of Nature over Nurture, Hermione thought; the Dursleys never taught him that! He'd done nothing to deserve the burden he carried, but he carried it with surprising grace, and her heart swelled with affection and admiration for him.

She reached a hand up, brushed aside his fringe of dark hair, and leaned in, softly kissing the lightning-bolt scar as he quietly sobbed.

His eyes flashed open, and he pulled back, staring wide-eyed at her.

"You-- You kissed it! You kissed my scar!"

Hermione smiled at him. "I did."
"Why would you do that?" Harry seemed somewhere half-way between amazed and appalled.

She found her smile widening. "Why wouldn't I?"

"It's disgusting!" Harry cried. "It's like-- it's like a pipeline to that sick fuck!"

But Hermione shook her head. "Harry, I love your scar. It's the symbol of life, not death. It's what shows that you beat him once, and can do it again. It's what shows how you saved my life before either of us could even talk."

"Saved your--" Harry frowned at her.

"Harry, do you think Voldemort would have let little mudbloods grow up to pollute the wizarding world if you -- if this --" she reached up, touched his scar gently "--hadn't stopped him?

"You saved my life that night, Harry. And God only knows how many others."

"No, I didn't." Harry shook his head, his mouth curved in a slight but genuine smile, but his eyes sad. "That was my Mum and Dad."

"Well..." She leaned over to him, pressed her lips again to the jagged line of his forehead. "This is all the thanks I can give them." She angled her head slightly, kissing his closed eyes, tasting salty tears. "And this is how I can thank you for being my friend." Over to his cheek now. "For how wonderful you are with Ron." Then the other cheek. "For being so supporting about me and Ron." The tip of his nose. "For not saying anything when you've caught us snogging."

She drew back a bit, looked long and seriously into those deep green eyes, then leaned in once again, pressing her lips against his, let her head rock a bit toward one side, then back, as their mouths opened to each other, as tongues explored and caressed, and he moaned, ever so softly, into her mouth.

She finally drew back again, the breath quivering out of her. "And that..." she breathed, "that was for how wonderful you've been for me since we've been here."

He stared back at her, his green eyes seemingly alight with a fire of their own, and then his mouth was on hers again, his hands on her breasts, thumbs teasing across her nipples. His mouth moved down, traced light kisses along her jawline as she gasped.

This was new: until now, she had always been the initiator, and he had followed her lead. Now, though, his hands moved on her with insistent confidence, and she felt a pool of heat begin to simmer within her as his mouth moved, now biting softly, now pausing to lick, to suck, along her collarbone.

_Oh, sweet God this was amazing!_ His mouth swooped down as his hand took hold of her breast and angled it up, and her nipple was disappearing, devoured by eager lips, pulled by his suction, nibbled with gentle, playful bites from his teeth. That pool was no longer simmering, but at a raging, roiling, steaming boil, and her fingers tangled into his dark hair, while the other hand grabbed his shoulder, feeling the muscles working under the skin.

He moved his head over, kissing his way across to the other breast, as his hand slid down her body, fingers tracing, feather-soft, across her ribs, over her rounded stomach, the ring finger tracing her navel as hers had his days before, then onward, as his lips and tongue played with her nipple, teasing, taunting, his fingers now brushing low over her abdomen, into the tangle of dark curls. they slid easily, caressingly, across her mons, then onwards, on to her thigh before curling around and
Red sparks seemed to erupt through her skull, like a distress signal fired from her wand in the Forbidden Forest. But this was no trip into the dark of the deep woods. There was nothing here to hurt her. There was the thrill of the riskless unknown, Harry's unbidden hands and mouth traveling over her like the "Mystery Drives" her parents would take her on when she was little, meandering, enjoyable trips that somehow always ended in Ice Cream. She trusted Harry implicitly. She didn't know all the byways they'd be traveling on the tour he was giving her of her own body, but she knew it would be gentle, and she knew it would be fun, and she was pretty sure it would end at least as well as Ice Cream.

His mouth moved down, following the course his hand had plotted, as those fingers started to slide into her. Once again, they met with resistance, and he backed off, caressing her labia, bringing his thumb up to move across her clitoris, and his kissing lips trailed now across her stomach, and down the slope of her abdomen.

The fingers in his hair fisted, and he looked up at her. "Do you want me to stop?"

"Oh, in the name of all that's holy, no!" she cried, and he smiled at her, and returned his mouth to her as he scooted his body further down along her length. He kissed lightly over the tangled curls, reached out with his tongue, and ran it up her labia, then leaned in and gave a slightly sucking kiss where they met. Hermione heard a sharp, high-pitched squeal, and realized it had come from her. Harry smiled up at her again.

"Tell me the names," he said.

"Wha-- what?" Hermione stared down at him, her eyes locking with his intense green ones as he leaned over her damp crotch, a slight sheen of moisture on his lips.

"All I know is 'fanny,' 'twat' and 'cunt.' I don't think those are very nice words. And this--" He leaned down and repeated the kiss at the apex, and her breath hitched. "This is very nice. So I want you to teach me. Tell me the names."

Hermione reached down, took his hand, led it around, her smile wicked. "You can see and feel how I build up into a little sort of a mound there." Harry leaned up and kissed the flesh through the dark curls. "That's called the Mons Veneris, the Mound of Venus. Collectively, the whole exterior is called the vulva."

"Vulva," Harry repeated. He leaned in and ran his tongue up between her and inner and outer labia, and then angled his head, running it back down along that glistening fold, catching it from the other side with the very edge of his upper lip. Hermione squealed again.

"So what are these called, the lips?"

"Labia." Hermione barely managed to squeeze out the word. Good Lord, Harry was incredible! All the more so because he had very little idea what he was doing. His actions were a simple combination of a general sweetness of spirit, a desire to give pleasure, a long-standing habit of physical gentleness towards her, his ability to quickly learn new physical skills, and a genuine curiosity, a desire to learn the ins and outs of her body. Ins and outs, she thought, as his fingers still slid as far as her hymen, and backed away as his mouth worked so busily. Oh, God, yes, ins and outs!

He ran his tongue along the outer side again.
"Labia Majora," breathed Hermione, and then, as he angled his head back over, and ran down the inside, "Labia Minora... Oh, God, Harry...yes!"

"And this?" Harry leaned up again, his lips closing gently over the plump little organ slightly protruding where her labia met each other.

"Oh, Godric, Harry, that's the-- That's the best thing in the world, don't stop, oh!"

Harry did stop though, and smile up at her. "I'm inclined to agree, Hermione, but, really, I want a na--"

"Clitoris!" she cried, pulling his face back down to it, and Harry kissed and sucked and lapped at it some more, his mouth gentle and then firm as she bucked her hips into his face. "Oh, God yes, it's the clitoris, yes, clitoris, oh, that's it! Oh, God, Harry, it's like all the nerve endings in the head of your penis, all compressed into that little nub, and it's kept protected inside my body, so it's very--" a squeal of pleasure erupted from her "--very sensitive!"

He backed off ever so slightly, his lips actually brushing it and his breath, oh, his breath warming it as he asked, "That gets shortened to Clit, doesn't it?"

Hermione's eyes closed as she nodded, then opened again.

"And this?" his fingers pressed at the barrier within her. The faintest brush of the lips. The warm scirocco of his breath, Oh Godric!

"Hymen," she hissed, and his tongue flicked down again onto her clitoris. "Maidenhead! Che-- Cherry!"

Harry's eyes were curious, amused. "Cherry?"

"Yes," Hermione moaned. "For the color of the blood."

Harry's fingers stillled within her, his eyes darkened, and he pulled his lower lip between his teeth.

Hermione shook her head. "No, Harry. Listen. Listen. It doesn't always happen. It's different from one girl to another. Some girls, it's small and stretches enough that it never breaks, there's never blood. Others find it's broken in normal life -- horseback riding is famous for it, but all sorts of physical activity can do it! -- and a lot are like how it was for us last time. Just a moment of pain, a little bit of blood, and it's done. Don't let what-- What I did scare you, Harry." She reached down, laid just her fingertips on the hand whose first two fingers were still nestled in her opening. "Please break it for me Harry. Please. Do it now. I want it to hurt, and be over, so it won't hurt when we-- when we fuck."

Harry's eyes widened at the word, and she smirked at him, her eyes flickering down to the moisture on his chin, to the fingers disappearing into her. "Well, it's hardly the time to stand on ceremony, now, Harry, is it?"

He smiled, nodded, and looked back down to his fingers, disappearing into her, and slowly began to press, as she caressed his arm with her fingernails. As before, the pressure was a pleasure tinged more and more with pain, but she reflected that she was beginning to like the pain, the pain was now part of the pleasure, and she smiled as it built, and then the pop and his fingers were through, and as he drew them back, she saw a tracery of blood on them. He bit his lip again, looking at the fingers, and then waved his free hand, palm down, over his hand, and her crotch.
"Evanesco Haemus Virginis!" he breathed, and there was a warm golden light, and his fingers, still slippery with her juices, had no trace of red.

Hermione's eyes widened, and he grinned back up at her with a kind of triumph.

"Mother of invention," he murmured, before lowering his mouth back to her clitoris.

And it was that, that casual, tossed-off joke, as much as the warmth and delicious softness of that mouth on her that broke her, and her hips arched up, mashing her vagina into his face as she came, and he kissed and licked at her buttocks settled again to the soft white ground, and his exploring fingers slid further in, and she followed them with one of her own, Oh God, that was tight! and pushed his fingers against the spot on the front wall of her vagina that she was sure was there, and it was, she felt it responding, and she managed to gather enough wit to cry out, "Right there, Harry, Oh there, there!" And then the second orgasm thundered through her, a stampede of hippogriffs through her nervous system, and still he licked and stroked, his tongue and fingers seeming to dance on her sensitive skin, and then there was a third-- A third!

She collapsed, boneless, to the ground, and smiled down at Harry. "Get up here," she murmured. "Get up here and fuck me, Harry!"

He grinned as he squirmed up the length of her body. "Who knew you were such a potty-mouth!"

Their eyes locked and darkened for a moment, and each heard the voice in one another's head: Ron would be so proud!

It was almost a vertiginous moment for both of them, staring into one another's eyes, so aware of where they were, what they were doing, how it would hurt Ron.

But Hermione was three orgasms in and empty, and, from his squirming progress, she felt Harry's erection against her thigh, and all thought, not just of Ron, but of life itself, was banished as thoroughly as Evanesco! and she reached down with her right hand.

She had her own bit of wandless magic to perform, a silent spell she'd learned about from Parvati, and practiced with an oddly-phallic Chili Pepper in her room. She placed her right hand against the head of his penis, thumb and forefinger together, and slid it slowly over, those two digits sliding apart to let the head through, then sliding down the shaft of it. The gesture was much like rolling on a condom, and Harry's erection was sheathed in a golden glow.

"What-- What's that?" Harry breathed.

"Protection. It's a sort of semi-permeable shield spell. Fluids pass right through it, but solids, even teeny ones like sperm cells or viruses, are teleported away."

Harry's answering smile was so bright and genuine that Hermione had to laugh as she moved her legs apart, bringing one knee up on either side of his hips. "Have I mentioned," he said, "how much I love magic?"

She reached up, and pulled him down into a kiss, light, and playful, and full of fun. Oh, he was such a wonderful boy! So sweet-natured and open-hearted! She knew what was happening and thought she should, on some level, be afraid. In a moment they'd be moving, just a few inches, and from then on, she'd be a different person. From then on she'd be someone who had had sex. Whatever fingers and mouths had meant about "Virginity," surely this was some sort of rubicon.

"Go slow," she said, her voice tiny, her eyes very, very sure.
She felt the erection poke at her, a little off to one side, and reached down with one hand, to guide him.

Harry's eyes burned into hers, so warm, their green as intense and fiery as a blaze of floo powder, and she felt her labia being pushed apart, so slowly, so gently, and she stretched around him as he pushed his way inside. His elbows on the ground to either side of her, his mouth coming down to hers, his hips between her thighs, and oh, God, the erection sliding slowly into her. *Girls don't come,* she thought. *The first time, girls don't come, you know that, you've already come and come and come, and this is for Harry.*

Still he sank into her, stretching her, filling her, widening her, and she'd never felt anything like this before, and her mother's practical words about how it would hurt, but was worth sticking with because over time it would become wonderful, flared to life in her mind, and were disproven. It wouldn't become wonderful, wouldn't need to become wonderful, it was already wonderful, and she lifted her hips to sheathe him even faster and now she was thinking about Ron, and imagining how she'd feel with Ron sinking into her like this, and *Oh, sweet Lord, yes! This with Ron would be, Oh, God! So good, so perfect,* and finally she felt Harry's pubis come to rest atop her mons, his weight settling over her hips, his green eyes still staring deep, deep into hers, with a kind of stunned reverence.

"I-- I'm *inside* you, Hermione."

She smiled up at him, her heart filling. "Yes, Harry, Yes, you are."

"And... And that's all right." 

"No, Harry, it's *wonderful!*"

That sunny smile burst out across his face, and he laughed, actually laughed with the joy of it. He brought his smile down to hers, kissed her so thoroughly, then raised his head again, and asked, "Do I... Do I, er, *pump?*"

She slid her hands down his side and back, and grasped the round, strong cheeks of his arse. "I think you do, Harry," she said through her smile. "Oh, I really rather think you do."

And then he was sliding, sliding, out of her again, and then back in, each stroke, at first, smooth and measured, as if he had all the time in the world. So controlled, Hermione thought. So gentle, so controlled. *That can't last.*

And it didn't. She saw it in his eyes, as they clouded and almost visibly turned inwards, felt it in his thrusts, quickening, harder, sharper, ever faster, his self control was going, and he was being consumed in the mono-maniacal drive to plunge ever deeper into her, and *oh, God!* it felt so good, so wonderful, and he was sliding and stroking, and she angled her hips slightly, and now, with each thrust, the head of him was sliding over that spot, and Hermione thought, *I didn't tell him about Dr. Grafenberg!* And the laughter bubbled out of her, mixed in with the sounds of pleasure, and with his grunting moans.

She arched into him, and, no, she didn't she couldn't, but she did, with a shattering yell, "*Oh, God, oh fuck! Oh, yes, oh sweet Merlin, YES!*" She came, two distinct and separate orgasms, one deep within her, radiating out from that spot, triggering a second, milder one in her clitoris, and she shrieked wordless joy, and then she was babbling in his ear, "*Girls don't come, Harry, they don't come the first time, they don't!*"

And Harry grunted, and she felt him emptying into her, and he froze there, holding himself.
over her, so still, and she watched as his eyes came back to themselves, and he smiled down at her.

"They.. They don't?" he asked quietly, and she shook her head. His smile widened. "I guess
we did it wrong, then."

She laughed, a delighted, humorous sound, and reached up to stroke his face, feeling him
softening inside her.

Then Harry was laughing, too, and he kissed her again, sweet, playful. "That was brilliant!"
he said. "Oh, God, I wish I could do that with Ron!"

"What?!!" Hermione's eyes were wide with mirth. "Harry, I had no idea!"

But Harry was having none of it. "You know what I mean, Hermione! Christ, that's better
than Quidditch! God, if only there was something that much fun I could do with Ron!"

And her heart filled with affection for this boy, as she pulled him down to her embrace.

**Fun.** The word raced around her head, and she thought she should be troubled by it. Here he
lay, this boy, still within her -- no, there he went, flaccid and sticky and being squeezed out with a
pop -- his arms around her, her hands stroking the plains and rills of his back, and in the end, what
was it. It was an enjoyable physical activity she could share with her friend. It was pleasure and
exertion and affection, and it was good, oh Godric, yes, it was wonderful! But what it was, in the
end, as amazing as the experience had been, what it was, in the end, was fun. She thought the word
should bother her, thought that giving herself to a boy should be a life-changing experience, an
expression of the deepest commitment. But it didn't bother her. He was Harry, and he was her friend,
and she loved him, oh yes, she did, and she'd already promised to live and die at his word, and what
deeper commitment was there than that? But this wasn't marriage, and it wasn't that true deep love
that makes you anew.

This was fun. Oh, sweet Merlin, this was fun!

Hermione looked back into his eyes and smiled.

Ron's eyes swam groggily back into focus, feeling Viktor's massive arms cradling him. He
was used to it now. It was the eighth straight day he'd had the experience.

The first few days, he'd put a lot of energy into trying to put words to the pain. "Swimming
In A Lake Of Flames", "A Million Razor Blades Flaying Me Alive."

But the truth was, nothing he could come up with did justice to the agony of Cruciatus. He'd
thought he had some concept, some understanding from what Harry had told him, but nothing
prepared him for the reality. Every nerve ending in his body simply maxed out with pain. His whole
body, inside and out: every muscle, bone and joint, every nerve and every sinew. If a part of his
body knew how to hurt, it did so, to the best -- to the worst -- of its abilities.

There was no time under Cruciatus, just an endless sea of suffering, infinite and eternal. He
knew that Viktor had set a hard limit of seven minutes a day. Seven out of one thousand, four-
hundred-and-forty, and yet that tiny fraction -- a little less than one two-hundred-and-sixth, he'd
calculated on the third night -- dominated his entire day. He tossed and turned through restless nights
of terror facing it. He rose each morning with sick dread in his stomach, knowing he would face
those seven minutes. He wept, at first for hours, afterwards.

What he couldn't face, couldn't confess, even to himself, was the shameful thought that filled
him as the curse roared through him: *Nothing is worth this!*

...he would strip again -- for the first day had taught them both that what had to be done afterwards would be far more difficult if it had to begin with undressing him. Viktor had suggested that he skip dressing first, or just wear a dressing gown, but Ron wouldn't do that. There was something about entering the room fully dressed that said something for him about control and decision. There was something about removing his own clothing in preparation that gave him the only sense of power and control he had. *Nothing is worth this!* But each day, he proved something was; each day he decided, all over again, to strip down, to lay on the floor, to look Viktor in the eye, and say, "Do it."

Every morning he thought he wouldn't. Every morning, he thought he would balk, thought he would stay standing, stay dressed, simply say, "No," and that would be that. Hell, Viktor had been trying to convince him to skip a day between each session, for more recovery time! No one would think less of him.

But every morning, he stripped, and lay down, looked Viktor in the eye and said, "Do it."

Viktor carried him to the room he'd set up for recovery, laid him gently on the raised bed, and reached for the first carafe of potion. He poured a small cup, lifted Ron's shoulders with one powerful forearm, and held it to his lips.

"Drink," he said.

Ron drank it greedily, hanging limp an Viktor's arm. It was as vile as anything he'd ever tasted, but it made a warm pool in his middle, and the warmth seemed to radiate out through him. "Ta, mate."

Viktor merely nodded as he lay Ron back on the table. The gangly young man's limbs twitched spastically and his skin was splotched with blossoms of redness. Viktor reached to the shelf by the carafe, and dug his finger into the pot of thicker potion. He pulled a gelatinous lump from the pot, and dropped it with a comical *SPLOP!* on Ron's chest, and began to massage it into his skin. He worked with a cool professionalism, spreading the lump of potion across Ron's chest, up his neck. He worked it in to the skin of Ron's face, gently thumbed it over his eyelids, massaged through his scalp and into his hair. Firmly he stroked it down Ron's arms, onto his hands, into his fingers.

Everywhere he rubbed the potion, the livid blossoms of red faded to a healthy, cheerily-freckled pink

Another *SPLOP!* of potion landed on Ron's belly, and Viktor worked it calmly down his abdomen. He concentrated on keeping a detached demeanor as he massaged the potion into the skin beneath the thatch of ginger curls, as his potion-slick hand wrapped around Ron's penis, and slid gently to its end. As it did every day, the organ stood immediately to attention, and as he did every day, Ron blushed. It had been a huge problem the first day, Ron both angry and defensive, and Viktor had had to explain thrice before Ron had believed that he wasn't molesting him, and that the erection was the simple result the capillaries within being healed by the potion, and re-filling with blood.

"Wish I c'd bloody doot m'self," Ron grumbled.

"Vell, so do I," Viktor replied, bringing his lotion-slick hands down to thoroughly coat Ron's scrotum, manipulating the testicles within to keep the pressure from them. "You are *not* the Hogvarts student I wish to touch all over."
"F'you wun't holdin' m'bollocks, I'd kick yer arse," Ron mumbled.

"You woul'd fall on floor."

This won a chuckle from Ron. "Tru'nuff, mate."

Viktor was working the potion into his legs now, his thumbs pressing it hard into the skin of his thighs, working it gently around the kneecaps, massaging it into his shins and the tops of his feet.

Okay, time to turn," said Viktor, moving back up to his side. The potion-born erection hadn't subsided -- wouldn't for about a half-hour, Viktor knew -- so as he rolled Ron, he reached down with his left hand, and flattened it up against Ron's belly before laying him on it. This had been another hard lesson of the first day: Ron's co-ordination was, at this stage of the recovery, unequal to the task of safely doing that for himself as he was rolled. The results had been quite painful.

Another *SPLOP!* of gelatinous potion, and Viktor's strong fingers began working the potion into Ron's shoulders and back, up the back of his neck, into the scalp on the back of his head. His hands worked back down Ron's back again. A good part of this pass was simple massage, easing the tension in Ron's muscles. Another *SPLOP!* in the small of Ron's back, and Viktor's hands worked their way down, over the lumbar region, onward, massaging the potion into Ron's buttocks, which were as round and pretty as a girl's, for all the strength of muscle beneath them.

He paused. Even more than handling Ron's penis, this made Viktor uncomfortable. Still, if the skin and muscle here wasn't treated pretty thoroughly, a lot of elasticity would be lost. That would be bad on so many levels, possibly the least of which was the likelihood of painful skin-cracking and infection.

So Viktor reached back again, sank his spread fingers into the potion-pot, and leaned forward.

Ron groaned as Viktor used the thumb and forefinger of his dry hand to part his buttocks, and then the blunt middle finger, slick and moist with potion, was gently circling his anus.

"Hate this," grumbled Ron.

"Is not my favorite thing, either," replied Krum. "At least it doesn't hurt."

*Almost better if it did,* thought Ron. But the sensation was a disturbingly pleasant one, even more so as the blunt finger pressed into him, rubbing the potion around the inside.

"*Fuck! Fuck!*" spat Ron, hating how good that felt.

"You woul'd prefer to try out for Chudley Cannons wearing diaper?"

"Shut it, Krum," replied Ron as Viktor's finger withdrew.

Krum performed a quiet *Scourgify* on the digit, then a *Tergeo*. Then reached back for another blob of potion. As he began to work it down Ron's left thigh, he spoke. "I have been thinking. Ve are charging sign, yes? Giving it energy to transport you in. Then you must find Harry and Hermione inside. Vhat next? How to get you back?"

Ron grunted. "I've been thinking on that too. I think if you can channel the power of the sign into a summoning spell, it should apport us back out, yeah?" He chuckled slightly. "That tickles, mate."
Viktor grunted as he moved on past the back of Ron's left knee, and started his thumbs working potion into his calf even as they pressed the tension out of the muscle. "Vone problem," said Krum. "I vould have to know where you vere. Vould have to get, er, 'bead' on you."

As Krum worked the potion into the sole of his left foot, Ron looked back over his shoulder at him. "Yeah, I have an idea for that, too. Sanguimancy."

Viktor stopped, regarding him quietly.

"I figure, if you can use it to feel toys and posters, you ought to be able to use it to feel me."

Viktor shook his head. "Is not good idea, Rhon. Sangvuiumancy is irreversible magic. I vould not just feel you until you got them back. I vould feel you forever."

"Yeah, so?" Ron shot back.

Viktor slapped a blob of potion onto the back of Ron's right thigh. "Think it through, Rhon. You vant to be vith Hermione. You vant me to feel that? Vant me in background when you touch her? When you kiss her? Every time you kiss her?"

"You got another way to get them out?"

Victor was silent as he worked potion into, and tension out of, Ron's right calf.

"No," he finally said, working his thumbs down Ron's Achilles Tendon.

"Then what I want doesn't enter into it, does it?"

Viktor worked the potion into the sole of Ron's right foot in silence, and the ginger-haired man dropped his head back to the pillow.

"I vill get your clothes," said Viktor, quietly, and stepped from the room.

Harry woke in heaven.

It was a pretty common occurrence, now that they'd made it back to the first blue arrow.

It had been a little more than two weeks since he and Hermione had first had sex. Two weeks of exploration and remorse, ecstasy and guilt. Two weeks of discovery for both of them.

Hermione had discovered on the second day that Harry was still gun-shy of fellatio. When she had attempted it, he had remembered her blood, remembered the threatening desperation of her hand clutching his testicles, holding him prisoner for her mouth, for that awful parody of intimacy, and he had cringed away.

Her eyes had darkened, and she had cuddled him and kissed him, and they had made unhurried love on the soft white ground.

She'd kept her hands behind her back that morning, ministering to his need only with her mouth, sliding gently along the underside, as her eyes looked serenely into his, the eye contact only breaking as she turned her head to engulf the glans.
He'd come quickly that morning.

Now he was getting used to the sensation, could last longer. Now her fingers would help, and she would play with his balls, sometimes with her fingers, sometimes with her mouth, with lips and tongue and gentle suction, while her hand stroked up and down the length of him.

This was where she was today, as Harry woke.

*Ah, God, that felt so good!* Harry reached down, stroked her hair, and she looked up at him, her brown eyes flashing. She gently let a testicle slide from her mouth, and smiled up at him past her pumping hand.

"Good Morning, Harry."

"Oh, *God,* Hermione, it's a *great* morning!"

She leaned up, and took the head of his penis in her mouth again as her hand stroked along the length of it, and soon her lips and her tongue and her suction were all moving in time with that pumping hand, and he'd exploded tidily into her mouth. Sometimes, she liked to open her mouth and pull away in that last moment, feel him ejaculate onto her face, into her hair. She'd actually seen videos of that, once, in a muggle store she'd wandered into when she'd vacationed with her parents in Amsterdam. She'd thought it looked disgusting, degrading. But she'd had the impulse with Harry, and had tried it, and it hadn't felt degrading. It had felt somehow wild, exhilarating and wantonly primal.

Today, though, her lips were closed around his shaft, and she swallowed, licked her lips, and smiled, as she scooted up to cuddle with him.

"It's okay, you know," Harry told her, as he wrapped one arm around her. "I'm over the trauma. I like it now."

She smiled at him. "I can tell, Harry."

"So, you don't need to, you know, keep, er *selling* me on it."

She smiled at him. "I have to confess, Harry. I haven't been trying to heal that psychic wound for over a week. I've just found that I really enjoy fellating you. It feels so *powerful,*! When I feel you go hard in mouth, when I look up into your eyes and watch you watching yourself sliding into my mouth..."

"Oh, God, Hermione, I just came, and you're going to make me come again, just talking! Are you trying to kill me?"

Hermione chuckled, and then said, in a small voice. "I even like the taste, Harry. A lot. Is that bad?"

Harry laughed, reaching down almost casually to slide his index finger into her. "*God, I hope not,*" he said, bringing the finger back up to his mouth. "*Because I want little dishes of this at the dinner table to dip my chips in!"

"*Oh, my God, Harry!*" Hermione blushed and buried her head in his chest, snorting with laughter.

"*No, really,*" said Harry, smiling. "*It's almost like a salty vinegar, with a slight undertone of smoked honey! Definitely good with chips!"
Hermione's laughter was shrieks now. "Undertone of smoked honey, forsooth!"

"Forsooth?" Harry was laughing now. "What the hell is that? Forsooth!?!?"

Hermione cried out with her laughter, unable to form words, and Harry was laughing with her, not quite as lost to it, but merry.

And then they were silent, sitting upright, looking at each-other, eyes wide, shivering.

"It's worse every single morning," said Hermione.

Harry gathered her into his arms, rubbed her back. "I know."

"How many now?"

"Seventeen. It's happened seventeen times. Always in the morning." he paused for a moment. His joints ached a little, as if he'd just come in from hours out in a February snow. "At least, I think it's morning. Seventeen days in a row."

She cuddled up to him again, and he held her.

"I'm scared, Harry."

"Of that... Whatever it is?"

"No. Yes. Not exactly. Harry, I don't know what that is, but it feels like something from the outside. Something from beyond here. It makes me afraid that the real world is coming back to get us."

"I miss the real world, Hermione. I miss furniture, and food, and, hell, I even miss crapping. I miss people. I miss my friends." He was silent a moment. "I miss Ron."

Hermione didn't answer at first, her breath shuddering out of her. "Oh, God, do I even have to say it? I miss him so much! But, I'm afraid, Harry. Have we ruined that forever? Can I ever even face him again?"

Harry squeezed her gently, petted her hair.

"You see, Harry, the thing is...I think I love you..."

"Well, of course you love me, Hermione! My God, we've been friends since we were eleven! We've been to hell and back together! You, me and Ron!"

She was still against him. "Not like that, Harry. You know what I'm saying."

He sat a moment, quiet, quiet, feeling her breath against him.


She regarded him quietly for several long seconds. "Because of Ginny?"

He nodded into her hair. "Because of Ginny."

; There was another long pause. Finally she gestured vaguely back and forth between them. "Do you think we should stop this?"

And tears began to leak from her eyes. "Oh, God help me, Harry, no. No, I can't!"

The chamber was in the basement of Castle Krum, lit by oily candles whose odd scent hung in the air. Viktor had made the runic marks on the floor, and a geometric shape with seven points radiating away from the center. In the center was a dias, and on it a ceramic knife, its blade marked with runes as well.

Ron frowned at it. "A ceramic knife with runes? Mate, is that really necessary?"

Viktor shook his head. "I am thinking ragged edge of tin can vould do as vell. But candles and septigram are necessary, and ceremonial knife is kept here anyvay." He stepped over to the dias, and Ron took his place opposite. "You are qvite sure, Rhon?"

"Yeah, mate."

Viktor closed his eyes. It seemed to him such a sorry reward for the torture Ron had inflicted on himself.

"Mate." Ron's hand came down on his shoulder. "I know. I know! But they've been alone in that thing for three months, mate. Three months! Here's a way to get them out. I won't leave them to rot longer while I try to find a more... A more convenient way!"

Krum nodded unhappily. He drew in a breath, took hold of the knife, and held his left hand out to receive Ron's right.

Ron laid his hand in Viktor's, and the darker man took a breath, and moved his right hand decisively, cutting a line across Ron's palm. He turned the knife in his hand, held it, haft-first, towards Ron.

Ron took it in his bleeding right hand, and offered his left. Victor's large, blunt right hand came down to it, knuckles nestling into Ron's palm. Ron brought the ceramic blade swiftly across the sinewy palm, and a line of bright scarlet flowed there.

Ron lay the knife back on the dias, and held his bleeding palm toward Viktor above it. The Bulgarian's right hand met his, fingers curled and twined together, and both men intoned the spell they had practiced.

"Frater con sanguia; numquam secedo."

A golden light burst from between their palms, like a miniature sun, trapped between their hands. The glow leaked out between fingers, flowed out along their arms. Their clothing began to flutter behind them as if blown by a warm summer breeze. Ron felt his hair waving behind him as well, as if riding his broom. The golden glow was now a bubble, a foot across, then two, ever expanding to envelope them.

The golden light flooded Ron's senses, burning a comforting fire through him, and he was suddenly aware of Viktor. The sense of him was a magnetic thing within Ron: Viktor was a lodestone, pulling a compass-point within him always towards himself.

Ron concentrated on that feeling, and could sense more from Viktor. The way the inseam of his trousers pressed uncomfortably on a thigh muscle; the cool air of this underground chamber against the back of his neck below his close-cropped hairline.
Viktor grinned at him. "It vill drop into background as your attention goes elsevhere. Think about that Qvidditch turn."

Ron did as he was told, and found his awareness of Krum dropped away, almost entirely. Still, there it was, as Viktor had described it back in the beginning. A sort of background hum beneath his thoughts. Even as he considered this, it flared back into focus, and Krum smiled again.

"Do not try not to think about it. Just think about other things."

Ron nodded, looking distracted.

"Is harder than it seems. Like not thinking about pink elephants in corner of room."

"Yeah."

"So. Are you ready to let go my hand?" asked Viktor.

Ron suddenly blinked at their clasped hands, feeling again the sting of the slice on his palm. He drew his wand in his left, as they released, and uttered a quick healing spell for both of them.

They stood, for another moment, regarding one another, and Ron realized, in a stunned moment, that there were no more preambles, no more preparations. There was nothing else left to do.

"Time for me to go, mate, I think."

Viktor regarded him for a moment with unblinking eyes.

"Yes," he finally said. "Time to go."

The walk back to the room with the sign took only a minute. Ron stood over it, looking down at the bizarre, bogus-Victorian painting.

He looked up at Viktor. "Wish me luck, Mate."

But before Krum could answer, he'd reached for the edge of the sign. For a ridiculous moment, the orange Chudley Cannons shirt and the faded blue jeans seemed to float in the air, before swishing and fluttering to the floor.

Viktor Krum looked down at the slightly sad-looking pile of empty clothes.

"Good luck, friend Rhon."

Harry lay on his side, regarding her face with solemn eyes. As he'd noticed so long ago, waking up after his first night in this place, sleep took years from her face. In many ways, she didn't look so different from the eleven-year-old witch who had stepped into their compartment, looking for Neville's errant toad.

In the corner of his eye, Harry watched her breasts rise and fall with her breath. She was not that eleven-year-old girl. Now she was a grown woman, seventeen and a legal adult in the Wizarding world. Now she was on the front lines of a dreadful war.

Now she was here. Now she was his lover.

And somewhere, a universe away, was Ron.
Harry felt the disgust, the self-loathing, wash within him like a tide. He reached a hand out toward Hermione, wanting to wake her up. If he woke her up, he could draw her to him, put his hands on her, his mouth on her, sink into her. They could be thrusting bodies and sliding skin, throbbing cock and tight little fanny. Passion and pleasure, orgasm and afterglow, her heart beating against his breast, his hands stroking her back, her bottom.

If he woke her up, all he'd have to think about would be her pleasure and his.

If he woke her up, he could lose himself in her sex. If he woke her up, he could forget about the guilt.

When he let himself lay, idle, like this, it ate him. Somewhere, a universe away, was his best mate. Ron hadn't shrugged, gone back to the burrow, returned to Hogwarts. Ron was out there somewhere, moving heaven and earth to get them back.

Harry wondered what his friend was doing, what lengths he was going through.

Going through trying to save your worthless hide, Potter, while you shag his truest love. Oh, you're a great friend, you are.

But that wasn't really the worst of it, was it?

Harry lay on his side, head propped up one hand, watching Hermione sleep. Watching the slight motions of her eyes beneath her lids, watching the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed.

No, that wasn't the worst at all. Because he didn't shag Hermione. He loved her. He remembered Hermione talking about how the sexuality that had surfaced between them in their first couple of weeks there had changed everything between them, forever. I'll never be able to look at you again without knowing how much I can want you. I'll never be able to look at you again without knowing how much you can want me. He remembered how ashamed he'd felt then, how he'd hated himself, for that stupid, low want.

He hadn't known how good he had it.

Because this wasn't want anymore. He was in love with this girl. This amazing, complicated, brilliant girl. This beautiful, loving, tender, passionate girl.

Ron's girl.

He still loved Ginny. He knew that Hermione still loved Ron. But it was what she'd said, and worse than she'd said: He could never look at her again without knowing how much, how fucking much, he loved her. He could never look at her again without knowing how much she loved him.

He did still love Ginny. If they ever got out of this place, he'd be so happy to be back with her. So happy to touch her, to taste her lips. To someday, when she was ready, share with her all the things he was learning here with Hermione.

And he knew, as well, that Hermione's love for Ron was as true, as deep, as it had ever been, knew that she wanted nothing more than to be back in his arms. Certainly he was untroubled by this. He loved Hermione desperately, but her love for Ron, consuming, total, well, that was part of why he loved her. She could give herself to him, so fully, and still, in the end, love his best mate so deeply.

If they could go home, he'd watch her go with Ron, and without regrets... Except that he'd miss her. He'd love Ginny with all his heart, and still, he would long for Hermione.
You're a right bastard, you are, he thought.

Blue. Ron's eyes opened, and all he saw was blue.

He was lying, face-down, on ground that was soft, kind of spongy -- like an exercise matt. A royal blue exercise matt. He couldn't focus on it. Or, if he could, it was so featureless that all he could make out about it was that it was, well... Blue.

He sat up, and saw featureless white rolling away from him, as far as the eye could see, starting with a straight line just below him. Odd, that. He turned to look to his right, and saw the same white behind him, noticed a corner, and realized that he was sitting in some sort of a blue rectangle. Far off in the distance, to his right, he saw more blue, and heaved himself to his feet. So this was as far as Cassiopeia Black had got with her Spa. White with Blue rectangles. Well, two people should stand out from the background here, Ron thought. I just need to figure out which way to go.

The blue at his feet was distracting as he turned, and he realized that, to what had been his left when he first sat up, it widened abruptly, then narrowed to a point.

I just need to figure out which way to go.

Ron heard his thought echo in his head, as he looked down and realized that he was standing in a blue arrow, pointing off towards another blue arrow, far in the distance. And another beyond that, in a long, endless line, pointing off in a single direction.

Ron shrugged and started walking.

Hermione woke under the pressure of Harry's dark gaze. He looked so serious, so sad, as his green eyes regarded her.

She reached a hand up to his cheek. "What is it, Harry."

He shook his head slowly. "Nothing, Hermione. Not really. I was-- I was just... " He drew a deep, shuddering breath, then finished, miserably, "thinking."

And tears swum in Hermione's eyes with his tone. "Ron, she said softly.

Harry nodded. "Ron. And Ginny. I'm a real class act, aren't I? I'm screwing around on the girl I love with her best mate, who's my best mate's, her brother's, love."

Hermione's heart broke within her. Broke for herself, broke for Ginny, broke for Ron. Broke for Harry, eating himself alive with guilt. "This stinks, Harry. I know that. There's nothing about this whole situation that doesn't stink -- except one. Us, Harry."

He regarded her silently.

"We're cheating, and it's wrong, and it's just the most horrible betrayal of the people we love... But we're not 'screwing around,' Harry. We were, at first. At least -- I think we were. But this, you and me... There's something real here, Harry. This is love. I love Ron with all my heart, and if I could get back to him, get you back to Ginny, I'd do it in a heart-beat, and I'd pray he'd take me back.

"But we're here, Harry. We're here today, and we were here yesterday, and we're going to be
here tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, because there's nothing we can do about it.

"We're here, Harry, and we have to live our lives, and I'm not going to turn my back on real love. And neither are you."

She moved to him, moved against him, her mouth reaching needily for his, her hands running hungrily down his body. On some level, she knew: *This is not solving anything.* But nothing she could do, nothing Harry could do, *could solve* anything. But she could lose herself in Harry, lose herself in pleasure, and close out the yammering voice of her conscience for awhile.

Ron had to stop, sit, place his head between his knees, and breath. Viktor's treatments with those potions were amazingly restorative, but he'd still been spending seven minutes a day under *Crucio* for about three weeks, and his stamina was nowhere near what it had been.

He let his head hang, and panted, his breath and his heartbeat loud in his ears, and eventually both subsided to normal. The muscles in his legs were burning, but he wasn't going to waste his time here in one place if he could help it. He had just got to his feet, when he heard it, a tiny sound, distant, nearly inaudible, but it electrified him. He didn't know what it was. He was barely certain that he'd heard it at all. But as soon as he heard it, two thoughts were in his mind: *Hermione!* And *Something's wrong!*

His sense was that the sound had come from ahead of him, so he sprinted toward the next arrow, his eyes fixed only on the blue. He wished he could Apparate, but in such a dimensionally compressed environment, he wasn't at all sure what would happen, and a splinch would help no-one.

He'd been running maybe a minute, when he heard it again, a little louder. A little clearer. An inarticulate cry. *Of pain?* Ron didn't know. But the voice was Hermione's, coming from in front of him. The next arrow was so far in the distance that it was just a dash on the spongy white ground, but Ron noticed, for the first time, a discoloration on the ground beside it, a darkening, still very pale. Was it a body? Was it Harry? Hermione?

*Merlin's Balls,* he wished he could Apparate! Well, his goal was right there, in line of sight. How hard could it be? Ron concentrated on the next arrow, focused on his destination, and reached within himself for the magic. He breathed in, focused, exhaled.

And Disapparated.

Harry had responded quickly, his need as great as her own, his hunger for her body competing with his hunger for oblivion, for the silence in his head, for just the roar of his blood in his ears, singing with the song of building orgasm.

There was no subtlety this time, no clever word-play, no healing beyond the inner silence. This time, they were fucking. It was hard and noisy, almost grimly determined on both their parts, and Hermione was screaming empty, wordless sounds of ecstasy and despair as his thighs made loud slapping sounds against her, and he pumped, and kissed, his lips now on the pulse-point of her throat, his teeth now on her nipple, drawing from her a shriek that seemed to ring like a thunderclap.

He pounded into her, moaning her name, moaning "Hermione, Hermione, Oh, God," while she heaved her hips up to slap against his, and drive him deeper, ever deeper into her, screaming "Harry!"

He reached a hand down between them, his fingers finding her clit, and she shrieked his
name again, "Harry! Yes, Harry, yes, God, Harry, yes!"

"Oh, my God," he groaned, "Oh, fuck, oh, Hermione, so good, Oh, God."

She slammed up against him one last time, and came, her muscles clamping around him, and he continued to pound into her, as she threw her head back, and opened her eyes, to see Ron standing there, eyes wide, mouth moving silently, face stunned, and Harry heard her gasp, looked at her, at her expression, and angled his head up, and he was staring his best mate in the eye as he grunted explosively and emptied himself into Ron's truest love.

"Hello, Harry," Ron said softly.

Viktor was laying the three dressing gowns out on the large table in the back parlour when suddenly he was reeling. He shuffled a half-step back, half-sat, half-fell on the divan. He was experienced in not being overwhelmed by the blood-link, but that experience was with a link to things, inanimate and without feeling. Flooding back to him from Ron was a torrent of conflicting emotions: hurt and disbelief and joy and more in a confusing rush. For a moment, just a moment, he saw through Ron's eyes, saw Harry, moving on Hermione, her head thrown back in climax, her eyes opening into a shock of recognition as Harry's body shuddered, and then he, too looked up, up into his friend's eyes.

"Oh, Rhon," murmured Viktor.

It shouldn't be a surprise, he supposed. A boy and a girl, seventeen years old, alone, together, naked, for three months. What did I think Rhon would find?

But he felt Ron's hurt and heartbreak, his growing anger.

Viktor sank back on the divan, his eyes closing. "Oh, Rhon," he said.

Ron's widened as he materialized, and he took a half-step backwards, unable to gather breath enough to gasp. A million emotions flooded through him at once. Hurt and anger, shock and awe, betrayal and disbelief and and fear and the beginnings of a kind of mourning. Below it all, though, there was a base level that sang with joy at seeing the two people he loved most in the world: they're alive!

For, whatever else they were, this much was obvious, as he watched Hermione's head, thrown back, eyes closed in passion and ecstasy, watched the muscles of Harry's back and arse and legs as he drove himself into her -- Oh, Merlin's balls! -- moaning her name like an incantation: Harry and Hermione were nothing, if not alive.

He stared, his heart crumbling with a physical stab of agony, even as he filled with shock and awe at the terrible, primal beauty of the act, of his friend and his love moving together in a rhythm as old as man and woman.

It seemed to last hours, as Hermione came. How long had he wanted to see Hermione in the throes of climax? How long had he dreamed of her face, of her cries?

Her eyes slowly blinked open as Harry continued to pound into her, and he saw them focus on him, and those gorgeous caramel-brown eyes widened, and Harry was starting to shudder now, and Ron saw his shoulders stiffen, and Harry's head angle up, his eyes locking with Ron's, widening even as his body stiffened and shuddered, his jaw working.
Was it days, that they stayed like that? Was it years, as eyes stared into eyes, locked, uncomprehending, as his friend, his best friend came into the woman Ron loved?

Ron was almost shocked by the sound of his own voice, the words so quiet, so normal: "Hello, Harry."

And then time resumed its normal pace, as Harry threw himself back, up onto his knees, his expression flowing smoothly, instantly and without hesitation from that shock of recognition to a wide, bright smile, sunny and unreserved, of joy at seeing him, as if the motion hadn't just pulled his willy, still stiff and slick with Hermione's juices and his own, out of the brown-haired girl, her own features lighting with her own joy as she started to roll to her side.

"Ron!" their voices cried as one, and each got a foot's purchase in the spongy ground, and they threw themselves on him, laughing, crying out their joy, tackling him to the ground, Hermione kissing his face again and again, as if she hadn't just, literally that second, been fucking his best mate, the best mate who was grinning, pounding his shoulders, and something in him wept, that this, this was what finding them should have been, this joy, this reunion, and that part of his broken heart sang with it.

But his rage, their betrayal, reared up within him.

"Gerroff!" he bellowed, and shoved them, threw them, roughly away from him. "Just how fucking stupid do you two think I am?"

Ron thought it was his words, his tone, that hit them, even as the physical blow that had sent them away from him had not. Harry's face fell, eyes darkening, and he sagged from where he'd been trying to hold his balance, falling on his arse with a loud Smack! Hermione's eyes widened again in comprehension, and she wailed, "Oh, Ron," and tried to moved towards him again, tears springing from her eyes, and he desperately scrambled back, away from her touch, half his heart roaring at him to strike her down, half crying with the need to hold her in his arms again.

Ron saw her desolation as he scrambled away from her, saw Harry see it, saw in the slightest motion of his shoulders, that he wanted to go to her, to comfort her, saw from the stiffness of them his awareness of Ron, saw him stop, freeze where he was, another miserable point in this triangle of suffering. The sides of Ron's heart moved at cross-purposes, part of it screaming for Harry to for Godric's sake comfort her, not to leave her to suffer alone, even as another screamed at her, How do you like it, then?

"Ron." Harry's voice was quiet. "She loves you, Ron, she's always loved you, Ron, always, it's filled her up, it's kept her alive. It's my fault, Ron, it's me, it's not her." He reached, tentatively, for Ron's shoulder. "It's me, Ron. Hate me, hurt me, kill me if you've got to, but it's me, Ron. It's all me. All me!"

Ron stared into those green eyes, mouth working again, muscles trembling. Finally, he found his voice. "You're my friend, Harry! You're supposed to be my friend!"

Tears were pouring down Harry's face, now, too, as his fingers brushed Ron's shoulder. Ron Squirmed away from the touch, but Harry followed. "And I'm a failure at it, Ron, a lousy, fucking failure, but it's all my fault. It's me, Ron, all me. It's not Hermione."

"No, Harry." Hermione's voice was eerily calm, and they both turned their heads toward her.

"You're not a rapist, Harry," she said. "I was down there with you of my own free will."
Ron stared back and forth between them, unable to quite process it, and Hermione turned towards him. It was disturbing, almost frightening. The tears were filling her eyes, flowing down her face at a prodigious rate, while her voice maintained that even, quiet calm.

"We betrayed you, Ron. Both of us. We don't deny it. We don't excuse it. We betrayed--" She took a deep, faltering breath, and her voice broke as she continued, "I betrayed you, Ron, and I'm more sorry than I can possibly tell you. I'll do anything-- anything you want-- but, please, Ron, please, whatever else you do, believe this. Oh, believe this, Ron! We love you. We love you!"

Ron wanted to look away, wanted to spit, to scream, to actually, physically strike her down. But he couldn't move. His eyes were locked with hers, and he couldn't break that contact. When he spoke, his voice wasn't that of his rage. It was almost a whine, full, just full, of naked hurt. "Why? Why, 'Mione? Why did you do it? Why would you do that to me?"

Her breath hitched in a sob, and she tried to form an answer, but Harry spoke, his voice husky: "Look around you, mate. This has been our whole world. This has been our universe, this empty white nothing, where you can only tell the ground from the sky because you're standing on it. This is what we've had, mate, and this is where we've been. Just her, and me, here, with nothing in the whole universe but each other. Here, Ron. Here." Harry's voice was quiet, but the words landed with a kind of moral authority, a kind of ominous intensity. "Alone. Together. Naked." Harry drew a breath. "And we're seventeen years old."

"And that makes it fucking all right, then, does it?" Ron snarled it into his face.

"No, Ron," answered Harry. "It makes it fucking inevitable!"

They stared at each other for a long time, then, silent, before Ron heard his own voice, barely breathing the words: "I know, mate. I know it was."

Harry was thunderstruck. "You do?"

"Yeah, mate. I reckon I do. But you know what? This is inevitable, too! You're my best mate, Harry, and I watched you shagging my girl! How do you expect me to feel?"

Hermione was looking back and forth between them, like a spectator at a particularly fascinating tennis match, trying to take it all in, to process all the levels, all the layers of what was passing between the men she loved.

"Ron...." Harry bit his lip. "Look, mate, if you were in my place...."

A kind of dark amusement lit Ron's eyes. "You mean, if it was me here shagging the woman I love silly? Yeah, you're right, Harry, I probably wouldn't be upset about that."

Harry winced, and tried again.

"I mean, if you were here with the girl I love--"

"You mean, my sister," said Ron, quietly.

"Okay, okay, bad example," blurted Harry. He was quiet for a long time, looking at the ground.

"There are forty-eight of these arrows, you know, Ron."

"Wha-- What?"
"Forty-eight. I made the first one the first morning we woke up here, after a full day's walk. This one, right here." Harry pointed at the arrow beside him.

Ron looked back and forth between them. "You made these arrows?"

"There weren't any landmarks, Ron," said Hermione, quietly. "We needed to have landmarks so we wouldn't walk in circles." She smiled then, a dark smile, full of bitter humor. "Without landmarks, how would we know we were getting anywhere?"

Ron looked over at her, then at Harry. "If this was the first one, why was the one I landed on...." He looked back and forth between them. "You mean...?"

Harry nodded. "We'd been walking for thirty-three days when we realized we could see something in distance, Ron. We didn't know what it was. It was just a disturbance on the horizon. It was three days after that, that Hermione--"

"I began to think that what was on the horizon was blue."

"She conjured a telescope, Ron."

Ron stared at Hermione, eyes widening.

"It stayed solid for more than a minute, Ron. Without a wand. She's fucking amazing, isn't she?" He held his friend's gaze for a long time. "Can you imagine what we thought, what we felt, when we looked through that, Ron? When we looked at what was on the horizon, and saw the back side of this arrow?"

Hermione leaned towards him. "We'd walked in a straight line for a little more than a month. I was so sure that we'd eventually get to... To somewhere. And then we realized. We'd walked in a straight line, and circumnavigated the known universe." She reached out to him, touched his knee. "In just over a month."

Ron was silent, looking from Harry to Hermione and back again. "And that's when it happened?"

"No, Ron." Hermione's voice was soft, earnest. "Some ways, it started long before. But we didn't have intercourse until about three weeks ago." Her hand fell from his knee then, and she looked down at in the ground. "But that's when I knew it would. That's when I knew we'd be here forever. That's when I gave up."

Ron sat back, looking at them, for a long time. "You won't be here forever, Hermione," he finally said. "I'm here to bring you home."

"And after that, Ron?" asked Harry.

Ron swallowed, breathed deeply. "You still want me at your side in this war, Harry, and I'm there. Just say the word. But between us? Between you and me? Merlin, Harry.... I just don't know."

"And Hermione?" Harry asked, his face carefully impassive.

Ron's voice was bitter. "Don't worry, Harry. I won't stand in your way!"

"You wouldn't be in his way, Ron," said Hermione, quietly.

He turned to look at her. "You don't love him, then? It was just a good fuck?"
Hermione shook her head. "You know better than that. Of course I love him, Ron. I've loved him since I was eleven. And I'm in love with him, and I won't deny it. He's sweet and gentle and loving and kind, and I've known his heart inside and out, and I can never ever forget what we've been to each other. I'm in love with Harry. Harry's in love with me." Ron glanced over at Harry, and Harry's eyes held all the answer he needed. "But my true love, Ron, my true love is you. And every day I was with Harry, I loved you more. And every day I live from now on, I'll love you more as well."

She turned to Harry. "Do you think you can handle Obdormo, Harry, without a wand?"

Harry's smile at her was proud, full of love and admiration. He nodded.

Hermione turned back to Ron. "I have to sleep before we go, Ron."

"What?" The words seemed such a non-sequitur that Ron could only frown in puzzlement.

"It's this place, Ron. It heals us in our sleep."


"What?" asked Harry, while Hermione's eyes widened, and she said, "Of course!"

Ron glanced at Harry. "I'll tell you later."

He turned back to Hermione.

She had smiled, slightly, pleased with her new knowledge, and how it fit with what she knew, but she turned back to Ron, and the corners of her mouth turned down. "Ron," she said, "The first time we deliberately touched each other, sexually, I mean, was on the twenty-fourth day here. We'd been--" She paused, drew a breath. "We'd been masturbating together since the seventeenth day. That was my suggestion. I thought that if we... If we relieved the tension ourselves, we'd be able to keep our hands off each other longer. But on the twenty-fourth day--"

Ron looked desperately unhappy and uncomfortable. "Hermione, I really don't think I want to hear this."

"It's important, Ron. I promise you, it really is." She took a breath. "On the twenty-fourth day, we woke up with Harry touching me, holding my breast."

Ron shot Harry a look, but Hermione interjected, "He'd just done it in his sleep, he hadn't meant to."

She drew a breath as Ron turned back to her. "I was very aroused by it, so I told Harry to touch me. To-- To masturbate me." Ron's eyes darkened, and closed. "And I felt so guilty, so awful, I-- I snapped, really. I used poor Harry's hand to... To assault myself with, essentially."

Ron's eyes snapped open, his head turning between her and Harry.

"I shoved his hand up inside me, and forcibly broke my hymen, broke my virginity, with his fingers. I did worse than that, I ripped myself open. It was awful, Ron. Poor Harry was terrified!"

Ron glanced over at Harry, saw his face ashen with the memory. "I wanted to stop it, Ron. I tried to get my hand free. But Hermione wouldn't let me, and when I realized I'd have to fight to get away, I thought it would be worse to do that than let her use me. It was the wrong choice, I think."
"They were both wrong choices, Harry," said Hermione. "I didn't give you any good ones."

She turned back to Ron. "We went back to sleep almost immediately afterwards. I think we had to. I don't think either of us could let ourselves face what had happened.

"When I woke up, Ron, I'd healed inside. I didn't realize how much until later. It was almost a month later that we were sexual with each other again. It was after we'd seen the first arrow, and we'd stopped for awhile. I took Harry's hand again, guided it again, and there was my virginity, as if that first horrible time had never happened at all.

"Harry's taken my virginity twenty-seven times, Ron. But he'll never take it again. I'm going to sleep now, and when I wake up, I'll be a virgin again. I can't undo my experience. I can't undo my memory. But I can undo the physical change.

"Harry was the first man to take my Virginity, Ron, but I swear to you this pledge. You will be the last."

"Hermione..." Ron's voice was soft, almost kind. "I don't know if I can be that with you, Hermione. Not after this."

"Then I'll wait."

"I don't know if I can ever--"

"Then I'll die that way, Ron. If I have to, I'll grow old and I'll die with my hymen intact, and never feel a man inside me again."

The bitterness rose up again in Ron. "Yeah, that'll work, because you made it twenty-four whole days with Harry!"

"Here, Ron," she said. "Here. Here where Harry was all I had. I'll read books and take cold showers and finger myself when I just can't stand it anymore. And if I live lonely, and die a spinster, well, I have nobody to blame but myself."

Ron stared at her for a long moment, and she returned his gaze, her eyes firm and even, and the she turned to Harry.

"Ready?" he asked.

She lay back on the ground, and nodded. Harry reached out, spread his palms above her head, and smiled down at her.

"Obdormo," he said, and her eyes simply closed, and she was asleep.

Harry and Ron sat silent for a long time, perhaps a half-hour, before Ron turned back to him.

"Tell me, Harry," he finally said. "Tell me everything."

"Are you sure you want to hear it, mate?"

"Harry, I don't know if we can ever get back," he said, quietly, and both of them knew he wasn't talking about returning the outside world. "But I know we can't with my imagination building whatever the hell it damned well pleases between us. This is going to hurt. I know about that." he chuckled grimly. "Believe me, I know about hurt!" He looked back at Harry. "But I just have to know, Harry. I have to know all of it."
So Harry told him all of it. Told him of the embarrassment of that first erection, the misunderstanding when she proposed masturbating, and holding her hand as they came. Told him of that terrible morning of the twenty-fourth day, of the blood and his fear and confusion. He told him about seeing the arrows, about Hermione's first period, and how it frightened him.

He told him about the sex. Ron listened calmly, face impassive, as Harry told him what it was like, told him that his first thought afterwards was of Ron. Told him of the awful spiral of guilt and sex. Guilt over having the sex. Having the sex to block the memory of the guilt. He never tried to justify, never tried to excuse. He just told Ron everything he needed to hear.

"How long ago was that?" Ron asked. "That first time. When you felt the cold?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Twenty-two days."

Ron actually laughed at that. It wasn't a happy laugh, but it wasn't as bitter as it could have been. "Well, at least you guys were having a better time here than I was under Crucio!"

Harry jerked upright. "What?!? You were under Crucio?!?!?"

Ron nodded. "I think that was the cold you felt. We were charging up the sign."

"Ron, what--"

"Wait a minute, Harry!" Ron was pointing at Hermione, and Harry turned and looked as well.

Hermione was golden, glowing. She had rolled on her left side, at some point, and brought her right knee up in front of her breasts, and beneath the raised thigh, Harry and Ron could see her pubic hair, and a bit of pink from her labia. Now, from the midst of that pink, shone a beautiful golden light, like the light of sunrise, brighter and brighter, till they were squinting against it, and then then it faded. Hermione made a quiet noise in her throat, shifted slightly, and slept on.

Ron looked over at Harry, a little stunned. "Is..." His voice was awed. "Is it always like that?"

"Dunno, mate." Harry's voice held a similar reverence. "I've never seen it before. We've always slept to-- er... We've always slept at the same time."

Ron's expression hardened, and he drew a breath, but Harry cut off the sharp retort:

"You talked about Cruciatus, Ron. You said you thought the cold we felt was Cruciatus." Harry stared hard at him. "Ron, we felt that cold every day for twenty days!"

Ron looked at the ground. "Too fucking right, you did. Seven fucking minutes a day."

"Who did that to you, Ron?" Harry's eyes blazed, and his voice was cold with rage.

"Forget it, Harry, I--"

"I won't forget it! You may hate me now, and I don't even blame you, but whatever you feel, I'm still your friend, Ron, and I still love you, and if someone put you under--"

"I fucking made him, Harry! We had to. It was the only way to get into the sign."

"The sign? You keep saying that. Ron, what--"
"Belt up, Harry, and I'll tell you. It's like this..."

As Ron finished his story, Harry smiled grimly at him. "You and Viktor Krum?"

Ron felt himself wanting to smile at Harry. "Funny ol' world, innit?" he said. "Look, I can say it. You told me so. Krum's all right. He's a good friend."

"That's..." Harry's voice caught. "That's good," he said. "I'm glad you ha-- I'm glad you have a friend."

Ron looked over at Harry. Harry trying to smile encouragingly. Harry looking as sad, as woebegone, as devastated, as he had ever seen him, even in the wake of Sirius' death.

"Oh, come here, you fucking wanker," Ron snapped. He grabbed Harry, and pulled him into a fierce hug. "I did what I did because I love you. Because I love you both. I didn't go through all that shit so I could lose you now. I'm so fucking pissed off at you I could kill you, and I'll be giving you a right surly bollocking every fucking time you turn around for a while, now. But I reckon I love you too much to give you up now. Still mates, yeah?"

"Yeah," said Harry, with a grateful sigh.

"Oh, thank God," cried a third voice, and Harry and Ron looked over to see Hermione, awake and starting to sit up. "Oh, Ron, if you and Harry lost your friendship over me, I'd never have been able to forgive myself!"

Ron looked impassively at her. "Yeah, well, don't get all excited over it. This isn't over, by a long shot." He looked back at Harry. "I said I'm still your friend. I didn't say you're forgiven."

Harry put a hand on Ron's shoulder. "And Hermione?"

Ron looked over at him. "Don't press your luck, mate. That's on a whole different level."

Harry's eyes held his, for a moment, then lowered.

Hermione drew an unsteady breath, then looked up at Ron. "So, you have a plan to bring us home?"

"Yeah, see I've formed this sort of link thingie, with Viktor--"

"Viktor?" asked Hermione.

Harry broke in, Grinning. "Yeah! Krum! Him an' Ron are mates now!"

"Oh, Ron!" Hermione cried. "All those years, you were so thre--" She suddenly stopped with a choked sound, eyes widening, and blushed like a Weasley.

Ron looked back and forth between her and Harry, and his jaw hardened for a moment. Then he smiled, a small but genuine smile. "Yeah, I'm not blind to the irony."

"Mate, I'm--"

"Don't Harry. It'll only make it worse."

"So, what's this link," Hermione asked, "with Viktor?"
"Oh. It's Sanguimancy."

Hermione gasped.

"Yeah, yeah," said Ron, "but it's just him, an' me, and, well, you two, so we can go, and everybody's willing."

"What was the spell, Ron?" asked Hermione.

Ron smiled. "Frater con sanguia; numquam sedeo."

Hermione frowned. "Brother by blood, never divided," she said. "Blood from the palms of your hands?"

"Yeah."

She bit her lip. "That's a little tenuous for summoning three people though."

"It's all we've got, Hermione," Ron told her.

"No, it's not. We've got me." She chewed her lip some more. "Sanguimancy. That's actually a good thought. But we're definitely going to need a more powerful link."

Harry chuckled. "Sheesh. Gaian magic, Sanguimancy, Cruciomancy... Doesn't anybody just do magic anymore?"

Hermione's head whipped around to him. "Cruciomancy?"

"Shut it, Harry," said Ron.

Harry looked over at him. "Sorry, mate, but no."

He returned to Hermione. "The spell to get us in here was created by Sirius' psychotic aunt, and Viktor's dark-wizard uncle. It works by harvesting the magical energy of witches or wizards under Crucius. That chill we felt? That was Viktor hitting Ron with Crucius to power up the portal enough to get him in here. Seven minutes a day."

"Ron!" Hermione wheeled back around to him. "You have to go to sleep! Right now!"

Ron almost smiled at her. "Easy, there, Hermione. It's okay."

"It's not okay! Ron! Do you know what kind of damage Crucius does to the human body?"

"No, really, Viktor has this potion--"

"Well, thank goodness for the Durmstrang Elixir, of course. Did he give you the internal and the external?"

Ron blushed. "Yeah, both."

"Well, that's a help. but it does nothing for the damage to the liver, kidneys, and spleen. Ron, I need you to sleep. Please. Otherwise, you've taken maybe six years off the end of your life. Please, Ron."

He looked at her a long time. "Yeah," he finally said. "Yeah, all-right." He stretched out on the soft ground, and looked up at her. "Hit me."
Hermione held her hands over Ron's face. "Obdormo!"

When Hermione shook Ron awake, there were tears in her eyes. "Oh, Ron," she breathed. "That was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. You were golden. You were the sun."

But Ron's eyes hardened. "Yeah, thanks, I've seen it."

He started sitting up, paused, took a deep breath. "Wow! I feel great!" He swung his arms around, rotating his shoulders. "Man, I didn't realize what Crucio took out of me."

Hermione smiled at him. "I'm glad it's better, Ron." She put a hand on his knee, and one on Harry's. "Now, I've been thinking about the Sanguimancy, and I think I've come up with a more powerful spell. It will make a stronger connection between us, and I think it will get us all out." She looked over at Ron. "You've got the Blood Brothers connection with Viktor. I take it that you're going to communicate that you're ready, and he's going to summon you?"

Ron shook his head. "You're scary, you are." He looked downcast for a moment, and his voice was a sad whisper. "Brightest of your age."

Her hand stroked his knee, very lightly, and he stiffened.

"Anyway," Hermione continued, "I'm pretty sure that if you did the Blood Brother link with us, the strand would be too attenuated. I think I've come up with something better. It's more complicated, but more powerful. I've never done it, though. I don't... I don't know what it will be like."

Ron looked at her for a long moment. "Hermione, I think I'm well past the point where I'm going to balk at something."

"We need to stand up, then," she said, climbing to her feet, and Harry and Ron joined her.

She stepped up to face Ron, placed her right hand over his heart, and took his right hand in her left. She stared into his eyes. "sanguia profundus con sanguia manus."

She brought his right hand up, pressed it between her breasts, reached for his left. "Now you," she told him.

Ron pressed his right hand over her heart, held her right in his left. "sanguia profundus con sanguia manus."

She turned to Harry, and repeated the placement of her hands. "sanguia profundus con sanguia manus."

Harry reversed their touch, his eyes locked with hers. "sanguia profundus con sanguia manus."

"Now, you and Ron."

Harry turned to Ron, placed his right hand over his heart, took Ron's right in his hand. He smiled at him, filled once again with the joy at seeing his friend again. "sanguia profundus con sanguia manus."

Ron's head ducked in what was almost a nod of acknowledgment as their hands reversed. "sanguia profundus con sanguia manus."
Hermione looked at her boys. "That established that we each recognize that our deepest blood is the blood of our hands. Now, we'll need to share the blood of our hands. I think we can use a variant on one of Snipes ugly spells. *Sectus Minutia* should open small cuts. We'll all have to incant together: *Sanguia Ego, Sanguia Cognatus; Sanguia Cognatus, Sanguia Unum.*"

She looked at Harry. "Have you got that?"

Harry nodded. "*Sanguia Ego, Sanguia Cognatus; Sanguia Cognatus, Sanguia Unum.*"

"Ron?"

"*Sanguia Ego, Sanguia Cognatus; Sanguia Cognatus, Sanguia Unum.*"

"All right. Remember, we're binding ourselves together here. While you incant, your will must be bent to the joining." She held her hands out, palms towards each other. "*Sectus Minutia!*"

Thin slices opened in the palms of her hands. "Ah, drat," she hissed. "It's like paper-cuts!"

Harry chuckled and held his hands towards one another. "*Sectus Minutia.*"

He looked down at his bloody palms."Yeah, that's definitely unpleasant."

Ron followed suit, swore loudly. "I miss Viktor's ceremonial dagger."

"Now," said Hermione, "we clasp hands in a circle."

And each took the hands of the others, bloodied palm to bloodied palm.

"On three?" asked Harry.

"On three," agreed Ron. "One, Two, Three!"

And their three voices spoke together, spoke as one: "*Sanguia Ego, Sanguia Cognatus; Sanguia Cognatus, Sanguia Unum!*"

The light that formed in the center between them was a deep magenta, and it expanded swiftly to envelope them.

And they were one. Their three separate minds merged, the memories, the experiences, the words and thoughts of three lifetimes were one, and each knew both of the others completely. There was no doubt, no reserve, no pretense, no possibility of it. Just one single being with three bodies, three sets of memories, three sets of insecurities and longings and desires. Identities merged and pain merged and heartache merged and love merged and the one being in the midst of that magenta light sang with a knowledge its parts could never have dreamed of, sang with unity and completeness, and three bodies breathing, and three hearts beating, and three minds thinking were one.

One.

And nothing could ever be the same after that.

Then the moment ended, and there were three of them again, and they stared at one another again in a kind of wild-eyed recognition, the memories of three lifetimes echoing in their heads.

Hermione looked to Ron, still feeling the terrible heartache he was feeling. "Oh, Ron. I'm so sorry. So *fucking* sorry!"
But Ron did smile at her, this time. "It's all right, love. I'm here, now. I'm here to take you home." He looked over at Harry. "Ready, mate?"

Harry smiled back at him. "Oh, yes!"

Ron closed his eyes and leaned his head back, reach out along his slender link to Viktor, and told him he was ready to go home.

The three friends stood, swaying dizzily, looking around the nicely appointed room. A large, dark form stepped forward, and Hermione's eyes snapped into focus.

"Viktor!"

Krum was staring directly into her brown eyes, offering her a silken dressing gown. She took it from him, but held it in her hand as she stepped against him, wrapped him in a warm embrace. "Oh, Viktor. It's so wonderful to see you! Thank you for all the wonderful help you gave Ron."

Krum's smile was genuine. He was putting his all into failing to notice that the woman in his arms was naked, but Ron picked up sense through the link that Viktor did notice, and, later, would remember. Well, hell. Who can blame him?

"Is pleasure," Krum told her. "Welcome back to Castle Krum, Herm-own-ni--"

Ron cleared his throat.

Krum blushed. "Er.. Hermione."

"Viktor!" Hermione was chuckling now. "When did you learn that?"

"During second task. But I could tell you thought accent was cute, so..."

Hermione pouted playfully at him, and stepped away, finally pulling on that dressing gown, and a bit of the tension left Viktor's shoulders, He offered another dressing gown to Harry, and another to Ron.

"Come," he said, as they pulled them on. "I have quarters and clothes for each of you, and you are invited for to dine with me before your journey home."

Epilogue

Two months later, Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Hermione was half asleep, when the tap came at her door. "Come in."

The door opened a foot or so, and Ron sidled in, closing it behind him. He stepped quietly over to the bed, and sat down by Hermione.

She froze, there, looking at him. It was the first time they'd been alone together since their return, and she had no idea what to say to him.

They were silent for a couple of moments, before Hermione finally touched Ron's shoulder. "How did it go?"

Ron shook his head. They were silent for a moment more, then Ron exploded. "She's a self-
indulgent little cow!"

"Ron!" Hermione was shocked by Ron's venom.

Ron shook his head, waving a hand to fend off her disapproval. "All right, all right. She is being a right little drama queen, I'll tell you that much, swearing up and down that he's a bastard, and she's never going to forgive him. But I reckon I'm really mad about what she said to me."

He took a deep breath.

"She called me a hypocrite. Said I had a lot of effing nerve telling her to get over it, when I'm treating you like a case of the clap."

"Well, I think case of the clap is a little harsh."

"I don't. That's why I'm so hacked off. I just hate it when that little cow is right!"

"Now, Ron...."

"See, the thing is, though, Hermione, she is right. I've been holding you off at arms length. And, yeah, okay, part of it is because I am still mad. I'm so fucking mad! You know that. You know the hurt I felt when I saw you two." He took a deep breath. "But you know the other thing, too. You know the other thing I felt."

She closed her eyes, seeing, feeling, his memory within her, seeing herself on her back, in the throes of orgasm, Harry's slender body pounding him into her. Saw the wild, terrible beauty of them, together, felt the hurt, the rage, the joy. Felt, buried within it, the arousal and the shame and the fear. They're so beautiful, some part of Ron had thought. They're so beautiful together. How can I possibly measure up to that?

"Ron. This is not a competition. I'm not here for him. I'm here for you."

"Yeah. And I reckon... I reckon it's time I accept that. I mean, you'll always be in love with Harry, won't you?"

She nodded, slowly.

"Yeah, see... And that kind of freaks me out. It kind of scares me. But you know what? You'll always be in love with me, too."

"Yes, Ron! Oh, yes!"

"And you always were?"

Hermione moved closer to him, put a hand on his arm. The sheets fell from her, pooled around her waist. She was naked; sleeping in nightgowns was a habit she hadn't picked back up. "I always was, Ron. Since the troll."

Ron smiled at her. "Yeah," he murmured. "The troll. Right, then. Here's the thing. If that wanker has the guts to love you even though you love me? Well, then I reckon I can work up the balls to love you even though you love him. That's fair enough, innit?"


He kissed her then, long and deep, and his hands came up to caress her breasts, and when
they broke the kiss, he pushed her gently back down on the bed, and threw the sheets aside, began kissing his way down her belly, one hand still reaching up to her breasts.

As he reached the thatch of dark, curly hair, he paused, and grinned up at her.

"Hermione," he said. "Tell me the names."

The End

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