Moments in Love: The Steamy version

by Gandalfs_Beard

Summary

This collection will contain more explicit, lemony versions of some chapters from Moments in Love.
The days and weeks following Harry’s choosing by the Goblet of Fire as Hogwarts’ second Champion were among the worst he had ever faced at Hogwarts. It was almost like Second Year and being the “Heir of Slytherin” all over again.

In some ways the new situation was even worse. It appeared that he had lost one of the friends that he’d counted on the most since he had come to Hogwarts - the first friend that he had ever had. Ron had chosen to disbelieve him in a fit of jealous rage. Harry knew there was no point trying to argue with Ron; he had tried to reason with Ron last night, but their friendship appeared to be damaged beyond repair. Ron had made it absolutely clear what he really thought of Harry.

Harry was still shocked that Ron had taken Malfoy’s taunts seriously and used them against him. He was miserable and angry about it in fact. Harry furiously decided that he was glad that he didn’t have to put up with Ron’s rubbish anymore. If Ron was going to be a stupid prat about things, fine!

But in some ways, things were much better than Second Year. At least Harry had the support of the few other friends who stood with him. There was still Neville. Ginny and the Twins, and Parvati and Lavender all seemed to believe him too. And most importantly, Harry had the support of his best friend - his girlfriend - Hermione. And that made all the difference in the world.

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When Harry woke early on Sunday morning after the choosing, stiff, sore, and slightly chilled, he was surprised to find himself still on the cobbled terrace at the top of the Astronomy Tower. He supposed he would have been a lot colder if it weren’t for the fact that he and Hermione were still huddled together under their robes, arms still wrapped around one another.

Harry felt a surge of warmth as he held Hermione a bit tighter and kissed her bushy head. Hermione stirred, blinking as the fuchsia rays of dawn peeked from behind the mountains. Eyes met, and they both blushed as deeply as the sky, their breath clouding in the frigid air.

“Er...” Harry began awkwardly, his breath caught when he remembered where his hands had roamed before he had stopped them from going too far. Hermione giggled shyly, remembering where her own hands had been, and pressed her lips to his, wishing that Harry had gone a bit further.

“Good Morning Harry!” she said when their lips separated. “Shall we get some breakfast then?”

“Er... Yeah!” Harry croaked, letting out a sigh of relief as he gave Hermione a lopsided grin.

Groaning from the aches of sleeping on cold cobblestone, Harry and Hermione got up and returned to Gryffindor Tower to shower and put on clean clothes before heading to the Great Hall. When Harry spotted Ron’s empty bed, he was glad that Ron hadn’t slept-in as he usually did on Sunday mornings. Harry felt a surge of bitterness as he dressed, realising that he had no desire to see Ron in the Great Hall either - or anyone else for that matter - knowing that all eyes would be on him, most of them unfriendly.

“Wait here!” said Hermione knowingly when they reached the entrance of the Hall. Moments later she returned with a stack of toast and a pile of bacon wrapped in a napkin. “Shall we go for a walk then?”
“Yeah... Thanks Hermione,” said Harry gratefully. “I’ve still got a few knots and kinks to work out anyway.”

“Me too,” Hermione admitted, biting her lip and blushing again as they exited the castle.

“Sorry about that Hermione! After you made me feel a bit better, I... er... I meant to go back when I thought Ron would be asleep.”

“No, it’s alright Harry! I dozed off too...”

When they reached the birches at the edge of the Black Lake, the pair kept moving, munching toast and bacon as they eyed the Durmstrang ship gently rocking in the chilly breeze. It was peaceful by the lake; the ripples on the surface of the water glimmered in the rays of morning sunlight poking through the gaps in the clouds as the ducks played by the shore.

Harry tensed up when he heard footsteps rustling behind them, and turned around uncertainly.

“It’s okay - it’s just me,” said Luna, her big silvery-grey eyes full of concern. “I saw Hermione come into the Hall and leave again. I thought she might be getting you breakfast... I’m sorry about what happened Harry!”

“You believe me then - that I didn’t enter?” Harry peered at Luna hopefully as Hermione smiled.

“Of course I do Harry!” Luna said earnestly, “I saw how scared you looked when your name came out of the Goblet. And I know you’re not a cheater.”

“Thanks Luna!” Harry relaxed a bit and sighed. “You’re probably the only one outside of Gryffindor that doesn’t hate me right now - and even a few of them do...”

“I know! I saw your friend Ron,” said Luna sympathetically. “He looks really jealous,” she continued bluntly, “It’s not just me outside of Gryffindor though. Parvati told Padma what happened, and she believes you too. But I think Cho’s rather gone off you - I saw her chatting up Cedric at breakfast!”

Hermione couldn’t help feeling a surge of satisfaction at that last bit of information, followed immediately by a flush of guilt; Harry needed all the support he could get. For his part, Harry felt quite relieved at the news, as Hermione always seemed to get a bit cross whenever Cho batted her eyelashes at him. Harry supposed he’d even be rather happy for Cedric Diggory if Diggory wasn’t being such a bloody git at the moment.

Luna walked with Harry and Hermione by the lakeshore while they finished their toast and bacon. Feeling full and a bit more cheered, Harry tore up his last piece of toast and scattered it for the happy ducks.

Afterwards, Harry took Hermione’s advice and called Sirius on his mirror. Harry told him about everything: about his name coming out of the Goblet, about finding another horcrux, - even about Ron not believing him. Sirius seemed troubled when Harry brought up his and Hermione’s suspicions that someone in the Ministry might be behind things - someone connected to Malfoy perhaps. Sirius shared a dark look with Lupin before turning back to Harry.

“Unfortunately, that seems quite likely!” Sirius muttered. “I spoke briefly with Moody and Dumbledore last night about the situation, and they both seem to be leaning to the same conclusion. I’m glad Moody’s talked Dumbledore into letting him train you up a bit.”

“Yeah, that part is brilliant!” said Harry excitedly. “He’s going to train Hermione too - we just need
to find somewhere in Hogwarts to practice where we can’t be spied on.”

“Hmm... indeed!” Sirius responded. “Remus and I will give that some thought too. We both know Hogwarts like the backs of our hands...”

“Though, that room of hidden things is certainly a new one on us,” added Lupin as he peered over Sirius’s shoulder with his eyebrows raised. “Even Dumbledore seems quite surprised.”

“I was also wondering...” Sirius looked distracted by a stray thought for a moment, not finishing his sentence. “Right... well, anyway, if we come up with something I’ll contact Mad Eye straight away. Don’t hesitate to call either of us again if you want to chat about anything Harry!”

Following the mirror-call, Harry and Hermione just tried to stay out of everybody’s way, but it proved nearly as hard to avoid everyone as it had the night before. Hermione was stalwart and brought Harry platefuls of lunch and dinner as well, but finding places to hang out where nobody else could glare and make rude comments about him grew more difficult throughout the day.

“You’re going to have to face everyone sooner or later,” Hermione sighed as they sat in the boathouse together eating dinner.

“Yeah... I know!” Harry grumbled after swallowing a piece of steak and kidney pie. “I think I could deal with it a bit better if I didn’t have to share a dorm with a prat who thinks I’m as bad as Malfoy.”

“Are you serious? Ron actually said that?” Hermione looked shocked.

“More or less!” Harry muttered darkly. “Said he reckoned Malfoy was right about me and called me a pampered prince! And he as much as called me a liar!”

“Ron thinks you knew all about the tournament from the start and didn’t tell him, doesn’t he?” said Hermione, remembering Ron’s attitude after the incident with Malfoy on the Hogwarts Express.

Harry nodded glumly and stabbed viciously at another piece of pie with his fork, wishing he had something to wash it down with. He was extremely grateful that Hermione had brought him dinner, but she only had two hands. A cracking sound echoed in the boathouse; Harry nearly choked on the piece of pie and Hermione shrieked.

“D...Dobby?” gasped Harry, his eyes nearly popping out of his head when he spotted the house-elf, who had appeared out of thin air, holding two bottles in his little hands and wearing an extremely odd assortment of clothes. “Is that really you?”

“It is Dobby sir, it is!” squeaked the ecstatic house-elf.

“Wh...what are you doing here? ...in the boathouse, I mean! Hermione and I have been meaning to look for you, but we weren’t really sure where to start.”

“Dobby is looking after Harry Potter sir - but Dobby is staying out of sight like a good house-elf now that Dobby is being paid properly by the Headmaster sir... Then Dobby sees Harry Potter is not sleeping in his bed last night, and Winky tells Dobby that Harry Potter is not showing up for meals...”

“But then Dobby sees Harry Potter’s Miss Granger is taking two plates of food at dinner, and Dobby follows. Dobby is bringing Harry Potter and his Hermione drinks sir. Harry Potter and his girlfriend is being thirsty... it is not good being dehydrated sir!”

Despite himself, Harry burst out laughing as Dobby passed him and Hermione a bottle each of
“Thanks Dobby!” Harry chortled. “That was perfect timing, I was dying of thirst!”

“Is Winky here too then, Dobby?” asked Hermione. “Is she alright?”

Dobby’s face fell.

“Winky is being a very sad house-elf, miss. Winky is not liking freedom - she is not wanting to be paid - though Headmaster offers - and is not liking her clothes. Other house-elves is being ashamed of Dobby and Winky miss - they is thinking that we is bad house-elves. Winky is drinking too much and pining away for her master - Winky is believing that she is a disgraced house-elf.”

“That’s dreadful! Poor Winky,” said Hermione.

“Isn’t there anything we can do to help Winky?” asked Harry.

“No sir! Winky is not being happy without her master. There is nothing to be doing that is helping Winky.”

Harry shared a dejected look with Hermione.

“It’s alright Harry,” said Hermione resignedly. “I know we’ll have to think of some other way to help house-elves. Anyway, it’s more important that we focus on getting you safely through the tournament right now.”

“Yeah... I suppose so!” Harry sighed and turned back to Dobby. “Thanks for the drinks Dobby. I’m glad you came to see me. You can visit me or Hermione any time you like - alright? We don’t care about that house-elves staying out of sight rubbish. You’re our friend... and besides, you’re a Free Elf!”

“Thank you Harry Potter sir!” Dobby squealed happily. “And if Harry Potter or Hermione Granger is needing Dobby, all you has to do is call Dobby’s name sir! Is there anything else that Harry Potter or Miss Granger is needing now?”

A sudden thought struck Harry and Hermione at the same time and they glanced at each other.

“Er... I don’t suppose you know a good place at Hogwarts to train for the Triwizard tournament where the Ministry’s security people can’t spy on us do you?” Harry asked Dobby hopefully.

“But Harry Potter already knows sir!” Dobby replied, his round eyes growing bigger with surprise. “Every house-elf hears that Harry Potter is finding the Room of Requirement last night! We calls it the Come and Go Room sir...”

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Buoyed by Dobby’s explanation of the Room of Requirement’s workings - and a nice cuddle with Hermione in the boathouse following dinner - Harry braced himself for the return to his dormitory. Sure enough, the moment Harry walked into the room, Ron scowled at him and violently yanked his crimson velvet hangings closed around his bed.

“I tried to tell him again that you didn’t enter,” Neville said, giving Harry a sympathetic look. Harry nodded gratefully.

Seamus and Dean both avoided Harry’s gaze. Harry furiously pulled his own bed-curtains closed,
knowing that Ron had been filling their heads with rubbish. He tried to force his anxiety about the tournament and his anger at Ron out of his mind with the memory of the last kiss that he’d shared with Hermione in the boathouse. Fortunately that seemed to work and Harry was soon asleep.

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Harry knew better than to expect things to improve when classes resumed on Monday, but he had by and large resigned himself to it. The Hufflepuffs he understood being upset with him, as Cedric was their Champion, and the Slytherins didn’t need an excuse to hate Harry.

He felt a bit better knowing that at least two Ravenclaws were on his side. Harry glanced at their table during breakfast and noticed Fleur talking to Padma and Luna. Fleur caught his eye and gave him a sympathetic smile. Harry turned a bit pink and quickly refocused his attention on his scrambled eggs and bangers, not wanting to give Hermione a reason to be cross.

Harry braced himself for Herbology with the Hufflepuffs that morning. It was bad enough that he had to face the sour expressions of Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley, but Ron was repotting Bouncing Bulbs at the same tray as him and Hermione as well.

Ron sniggered along with Ernie and Justin’s chortles when Harry’s Bouncing Bulb slipped from his grasp and whacked him on the forehead. Hermione shot Ron a look of outrage and he snorted at her with a disdainful smirk, muttering something about “Famous Potter’s girlfriend” under his breath.

Ron’s nasty smirk turned into a scowl when Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott took a break from repotting their bulbs with Neville, and sharply elbowed their way past Ernie and Justin, ostensibly on their way to get more potting soil.

“Neville told us what happened Harry!” Susan said with a pointed look at the two Hufflepuff boys who were both groaning and holding their ribs.

“And we believe you didn’t do it on purpose Harry,” Hannah added, glowering at Justin and Ernie. “It’s not like these two thickheads have ever been right about you before!”

“Good luck Harry!” said Susan.

“Er... th...thanks!” Harry stammered in astonishment as Hermione beamed gratefully at Susan and Hannah. Ron’s ears turned crimson as he grabbed his pot and went to look for another tray to work at.

Harry was so pleased at having found unexpected support in the House of Hufflepuff, that he almost didn’t even care that his and Hermione’s next class was Care of Magical Creatures with the Slytherins. Ron sauntered off with Seamus and Dean, making a point of ignoring Harry, staying as far away from him and Hermione as possible - which Harry found to be a great improvement over his close proximity during Herbology.

Draco Malfoy swaggered up to the clearing at the edge of the woods near Hagrid’s hut with his goon-squad, his typical sneer plastered firmly on his pasty features.

“Gather round lads, it’s the Famous Champion,” Malfoy pontificated to his little entourage. “Better get your autographs now before he snuffs it in the First Task. I’m betting he doesn’t last 10 minutes before he’s killed... What do you reckon Potter?” he concluded. Crabbe and Goyle chortled sycophantically.

“I think you’d better hope the First Task is worse than the Basilisk I killed in Second Year Malfoy...”
Harry retorted with an air of nonchalance that he didn’t really feel. “You remember it don’t you? The one your daddy set loose on the school?”

“You shouldn’t tell lies, Potter!” spat Malfoy, flushing angrily as the students who were close enough to hear the exchange gasped at Harry’s response.

Harry felt a surge of satisfaction at having siphoned off some of his own fury into Malfoy. But he didn’t need to see the anxious look on Hermione’s face to know that he’d been a bit reckless with his words; he couldn’t prove that Lucius Malfoy had been behind it after all. Harry felt a bit guilty for upsetting Hermione, but he was damned if he was going to let a cowardly little creep with homicidal tendencies like Malfoy get one up on him. At least he’d shut Malfoy up.

“Sorry Hermione,” Harry said quietly as Malfoy and his gang stalked away. “I suppose I...”

“It’s alright Harry,” Hermione interjected with a sad smile as she took his hand and gave it a comforting squeeze. “Under the circumstances, it’s too much to expect you to bottle up all of your feelings with everything you’ve had to put up with.”

That evening after classes, Professor Moody caught up with Harry and Hermione as they left Gryffindor Tower and made their way to dinner. Moody’s eye spun around wildly, making sure that nobody else was in earshot.

“Ah, there you are, you two. Good! I’ve got workout schedules and lessons planned out,” Moody growled. “You’ll both need lots of practice to get you into fighting shape.”

“And we’ve found a place where we can take the lessons and practice the spells,” Harry began excitedly while Hermione looked over the schedules. “Dobby the house-elf told us how that secret room we found works. It’s not just a place for hiding things. It’s magic - it can be whatever sort of room we want it to be... it's perfect.”

Hermione’s face fell when she saw that they’d have to spend at least an hour every day on physical exercises, as well as four training sessions a week - each an hour and a half long, including hand to hand combat lessons. That meant less time for the library.

“I thought this was all going to be about learning spells,” she remarked sadly. Moody grunted. “Toughening up your body and developing speed and stamina is just as important in a fight Granger. The wizard who lasts longer and dodges faster is the one who lives... And sometimes there’s just no substitution for well placed kick or punch. There’s nothin’ better than muggle fighting techniques for throwing wizards off their game.”

Hermione’s features brightened when she realised how sensible Moody’s plan was.

“Anyway, there’s still going to be plenty of spellwork Granger,” continued the grizzled ex-Auror, “You’ll both need to get some advanced charms books and bone up on stunning and shielding spells, and a bit more as I add ‘em in...”

“Oh!” said Hermione, her eyes widening. “We’ve been reading up on those since school-term began.... and some of the other spells like Bombarda and Confringo. Harry and I were planning on teaching ourselves once we’d found a good place to practice them anyway.”

“Excellent! I knew you two were a couple o’ eager beavers!” said Moody, nodding with approval. “We’ll be able to start on practical techniques that much quicker then. Meet me in my office after classes tomorrow - you can show me the magical room then...”
“And just one more thing Potter... I spoke to Sirius, and Dumbledore is on board. You’ll be movin’ into your new quarters after dinner tonight...”

“Wait, what?” Harry gasped; Hermione’s jaw dropped incredulously. “What do you mean, new quarters?”

“I mean Private Chambers Potter!” Moody replied with an ugly grin, his electric-blue eye glancing at Hermione before returning to Harry.

“But why?” Harry frowned at Moody in perplex, his skyrocketing anxiety warning him that certain others might see this as more proof that the Famous Harry Potter always got preferential treatment.

“It’s for your safety Potter!” said Moody gruffly. “From what Sirius tells me, gettin’ into Gryffindor Tower isn’t too hard if you’ve got the passcodes. And nearly every kid in that Tower is a potential security breach as far as I’m concerned... except for maybe one I could mention!” Moody’s eyeball darted towards Hermione briefly again, then refocused its piercing gaze on Harry.

“H...Harry, m...maybe Professor Moody is right...” Hermione nervously stammered, seeing the look on Harry’s face.

“But I don’t want to be treated differently,” Harry muttered angrily through gritted teeth. “People already think I get special treatment as it is...”

“Sorry Potter!” Moody snapped. “But that’s part o’ the price of bein’ a highly valued Target! You gotta learn to live with it! It was hard enough convincin’ Dumbledore and the deal’s done! I’ll show you to your private chambers after dinner... and the less people you allow to access it, the better! Only the most trustworthy! But don’t worry - it’s near enough to Gryffindor Tower for your closest friends to find you...”

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Neville glanced at Harry, his face pink with embarrassment as he helped Harry lug his trunk down the stairs from the Gryffindor Fourth Year dorm, through the portrait-hole, and down the passage towards the spare teacher’s quarters which had been assigned to Harry.

“I dunno Harry,” Neville moaned after Harry told him why he was moving. “I mean... thanks for trusting me, but I’m the one that nearly got you killed last year when everyone thought your godfather was really a mass-murderer!”

Harry thought of the foul looks that Ron had given him just now as he’d packed his trunk, which seemed to verify the notion that the move would only confirm Ron’s worst suspicions about Harry. And then Harry considered all of the ugly looks and remarks that Ron had been giving him ever since his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire. Harry angrily decided that he wasn’t going to miss those at all.

Dean and Seamus had still been relatively civil towards Harry, but he could sense a certain level of ambivalence in them - torn between being pleased that a Gryffindor was one of the Champions and their loyalty to Ron.

“I know,” Harry reluctantly agreed. “But you didn’t do it on purpose Neville. And that’s not the sort of mistake you’d make twice. And besides, you’re a good friend - you’re the only guy in our year who really believes in me...”

Neville’s smile was a bit teary when he said goodbye and left Harry to finish settling in by himself as
curfew drew nearer. Harry sighed and looked around his new surroundings. The private chambers were about the size of an average flat. It had a sitting room with a settee near the fire already crackling in the hearth, a small kitchen with a dining table in the middle of it, a little study, a single large bedroom with its own fireplace, and a gleaming spotless bathroom with a large marble tub and gold spigots.

Harry’s trepidation at having his own quarters began to ebb as a peaceful sort of feeling came over him while he cleaned his teeth and put on his pyjamas. He crawled into the four-poster bed and pulled up the covers. When his head hit his pillow, Harry suddenly realised that there was only one thing missing.

A smile crept to Harry’s lips and the soreness of his scar receded as the potential benefits of having his own private rooms finally began to sink in.

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Harry opened the door to the Room of Requirement after asking it for a place to learn how to fight in. Moody’s roaming eye took in everything approvingly.

The room reminded Harry a bit of the dojos and kwoons in the karate and kung fu films he’d seen when Sirius and Lupin had taken him and Hermione to a martial arts film festival during the summer. It even had wooden dummies, but they were far more detailed and had proper movable limbs.

One wall was mirrored, another lined with all sorts of muggle weapons; Harry supposed the room had just copied what he had seen in the martial arts films. Another wall was lined with shelves full of books - which Hermione was already eagerly perusing - and the centre of the floor was covered with a thickly padded mat.

“Bloody brilliant Potter!” exclaimed Professor Moody. “I can’t say that I have the right skill set to teach you how to use most of those weapons, but I could certainly train you with some of those blades at some point. Though you shouldn’t really need ‘em most of the time with the right spells at your fingertips - mostly just every now and then to throw off a wizard who’s expectin’ a spell when you’re in close quarters.”

“Right then, you two - fall in!” Mad Eye barked. Harry and Hermione nervously lined up at attention and Moody began.

“Now, this’ll be a fair bit different from Defence Against the Dark Arts - the focus of the class here at Hogwarts is mostly defending yourself from dark magical creatures with only a very cursory look at the spells necessary for defending against dark wizards’ curses. We’re not allowed to teach you how to actually fight back good and proper.”

Moody muttered something about the “bloody school board” under his breath, then continued.

“In these sessions I’ll be teachin’ you both how to duel properly, and how to use combat techniques when you’re in a fight for your lives with multiple opponents - which means you’ll be learning how to do some dangerous curses yourselves. But keep payin’ attention in class, because you’ll need to know the spells to fight magical creatures for the tournament, Potter.”

“A lot o’ these lessons will be about strategy and tactics - I’ll be showing you how and when to use those spells to their greatest effect in actual practice - and I’ll also be teachin’ you some more advanced and alternative spells which the seventeen year old Champions will already know...”

Mad Eye lectured for half an hour before setting Harry and Hermione to running around the gym and
performing calisthenics for another hour. He worked them like a drill sergeant and they miserably collapsed in a sweaty heap when they were finished.

“Right! I suppose that’s enough for now then,” Moody chuckled. “I want you both to be practicin’ the calisthenics on your own for an hour after classes every day. I’ll start teaching you spells and combat techniques when we meet again on Thursday, same time, and we’ll take things from there!”

Mad Eye stomped out of the Room of Requirement and left the aching young wizards moaning on the floor.

“Blimey, that was harder than I thought it would be,” Harry muttered, wiping his dripping face on his shirt.

“I’ll say,” groaned Hermione as she rolled onto her front and began to shakily push herself up. “Everything hurts...”

“Hang on then...” said Harry as he gently brushed aside the saturated ringlets plastered to Hermione’s wet cheeks with the back of his fingers. She bit her lip and nodded.

Hermione’s pulse began to race again as Harry started to knead her shoulders. She flattened herself against the cushy mat once more and let out a little sigh of relief as his fingers pressed into the sore spots of her neck, shoulders, and upper back.

“Thank you Harry,” she murmured, feeling some of the tenseness in her muscles melting away. Harry dug his knuckle into a particularly tight knot on Hermione’s shoulder blade and she let out a small moan.

“Are you alright Hermione?” Harry paused, afraid that he’d hurt her.

“Yes!” Hermione gasped. “That feels lovely - perfect... please, don’t stop!”

Harry grinned and continued the massage, his hands reaching the small of her back, pleased to feel Hermione relaxing under his ministrations.

“Ooooh...” Hermione moaned again and trembled as a shiver of elation flooded her senses. “That’s the spot! Where did you learn how to do that Harry?”

“Er... I dunno really. I just know it feels good when I press the bits that I can reach on myself after quidditch.”

“Maybe... I could return the favour?”

“Not enough time really,” said Harry. “It’s almost time for dinner and we really should clean up and change first.”

Hermione’s breath quickened, resolve firming as Harry’s touch sent another shudder of delight through her.

“What if... if Dobby brought us dinner in your chambers?” she asked hopefully. “I haven’t even seen them yet anyway!”

Harry swallowed nervously, suddenly not sure if he should say yes even though he wanted to, uncertain where this was leading. But the fact that Hermione had suggested asking Dobby to bring them dinner seemed significant somehow. Hermione sat up and peered at him expectantly.
“Yeah... alright Hermione!” said Harry in a slightly hoarse voice, leaning in to kiss her. “I... I’d really
like that!”

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Harry sighed when he looked at the clock and saw the time. It was nearly curfew and Hermione
would have to go back to Gryffindor Tower. The massage that Hermione had given him had felt
great, and he wished that he could just cuddle her and fall asleep in her arms. It was a lot cozier in his
new bed by a warm fire than on the cold cobbled terrace at the top of the Astronomy Tower in early
November.

Hermione beamed radiantly and pulled her wind-up alarm clock out of her book-bag, setting it on
Harry’s bedside table. Harry looked at her in bewilderment and anxiety. A bushy ginger tail
twitched, catching Harry’s eye; Crookshanks appeared to be grinning at Harry too.

“Wait... are you sure about this Hermione? I don’t want you to get into trouble. What if you’re
missed and a Gryffindor prefect catches you? Or one of the Triwizard security officials? We were
just lucky not to get caught the night we fell asleep at the Astronomy Tower.”

“I’m absolutely certain Harry!” said Hermione firmly with a golden gleam in her eyes. “I’ve worked
it all out. That’s really why I suggested we change into our nightclothes, not just for comfort’s
sake...”

“I spoke to Lavender and Parvati when I went back for my things, and they’ll cover for me - and the
other girls in my dorm don’t really care one way or another. All I need - if you’ll let me - is to borrow
your invisibility cloak when I leave early in the mornings.”

“Er... Wow!... Brilliant Hermione! You really have worked it all out!” Harry grinned back at
Hermione, his trepidation evaporating. “Yeah... of course you can use the invisibility cloak!”

Feeling overcome with giddiness, Harry swept Hermione into a steamy kiss, his fingers tangled in
her mess of golden curls. Hermione wriggled joyfully as she coiled her arms around Harry. She
pressed herself against him, lit up with the flames of desire. Caresses began to travel, and Harry’s
hands found themselves wrapped around Hermione’s hips.

After a moment of eternity, their lips wetly separated and both of them gasped for air, wanting more.

The large orange ball of fur jumped off the bed and slipped out of the room to give his humans some
privacy. Crookshanks made his way to the heavy oak door guarding the entrance to Harry’s
chambers and was pleased to see a cat-flap magically appear, eager for his nightly prowl with
Hedwig.

Chest heaving, Harry felt a pressing need and was suddenly aware that this time there was no
recourse, no outlet unless he or Hermione took the settee in the living room. Harry swallowed
anxiously, realising that Hermione was straddling his own waist, with nothing between her inner
thighs and his torso except his pyjamas as her nightie had rucked up above her knees. Her scent was
intoxicating; her expression of arousal inflaming him.

And he was all too aware that only a flimsy slip of fabric covered the dampening region between
Hermione’s thighs as the moistness began to soak through his pyjama top, her minty aroma mingled
with a hint of musk. The sight of Hermione’s stiffening nipples poking through the fabric of her
nightie wasn’t helping matters.

“Er... Hermione... maybe I should... er... you know... get up...”
“You... you don’t have to Harry,” Hermione murmured, her arousal finally overcoming her own nervousness. “Couldn’t we... just sort of enjoy ourselves together. We don’t have to... you know... go all the way... I’m not sure I’m ready for that just yet, but... but...”

“You mean...” Harry gulped again as Hermione’s meaning became all too clear. She nodded and smiled shyly, eyelashes fluttering.

“We don’t even have to take everything off. We could just sort of... touch each other?” Hermione squeaked hopefully.

“Er... alright then!” Harry gulped a third time, his eyes widening. A thrill shot through him with a surge of excitement and he felt himself growing stiffer. Hermione climbed off Harry’s waist and nestled beside him, tentatively reaching for the tent in his pyjama bottoms, gingerly clasping his erection and gently tugging at it.

Harry’s own fingers trembled as they slipped under Hermione’s nightie and slid across the satiny bare skin of her lower abdomen towards her knickers. She took Harry’s other hand in her own, and placed it on one of her breasts, giving him a kiss. Harry’s breath quickened as he gently squeezed the firm little globe through Hermione’s nightie and tenderly tweaked the nipple, his other fingers pressing the soaked fabric of her knickers into the cleft between her thighs.

Harry probed Hermione’s humid slit, eventually finding a fleshy little button near the top of her wet valley. Hermione let out a little gasp, electrifying tingles of pleasure rippling through her body. Knowing he’d found the sweet spot, Harry jiggled his thumb against the little pearl in little circles as two of his fingers continued rubbing Hermione’s moist fold.

The thin wet fabric of her knickers was so sheer, Harry might as well have been touching her bare flesh. Hermione moaned as the intoxicating fervor began to sweep her away.

Through the fog of her own ardour, Hermione slipped her hand into Harry’s thick flannel pyjama bottoms to stroke his hard shaft properly. Harry gasped when he felt Hermione’s warm palm directly against the bare skin of his stiffness. His chest rose and fell in short ragged breaths as he began to peak.

A tremor of ecstasy took Harry and Hermione both, and they lost themselves to the churning storm of passion. Hermione squealed Harry’s name and quivered, trapping his hand between her thighs, bathing it in her dewy nectar. Harry groaned and erupted, his stickiness spilling over Hermione’s fingers.

In that moment, Harry didn’t care that he was facing some of his worst of times at Hogwarts since Second Year. Harry’s last thought before he faded into oblivion was that Hermione loved him... and that was all that mattered.
Hermione was furious. This should have been a moment to celebrate. Not only had Harry survived, but beyond all expectations, he was the clear winner of the First Task. But Harry was as miserable as could be. As usual, Ron had spoiled everything - this time with an inappropriately timed, much too late, truly pathetic attempt at an apology.

Ron had been absolutely horrible to Harry for nearly a whole month. And really, looking back, there had been warning signs ever since the World Cup. Harry hadn’t really seemed to notice until after the incident with Malfoy on the Hogwarts Express, but Hermione had seen Ron’s many jealous looks at Harry during the Quidditch Final - especially when Harry and Hermione had been greeting Fudge and all of the VIP’s.

And Hermione had felt a bit uncomfortable herself with the way Ron had looked at her at the World Cup, as if recognising that she was a girl for the first time. But Hermione hadn’t wanted to spoil things for Harry and kept it all to herself. And it had been a real strain for Hermione this term, dealing with all of Ron’s constant needling, his little digs at her, not to mention his utter insensitivity to the feelings of others.

But really, the straw that broke the camel’s back for Hermione had been Ron accusing Harry of being like Malfoy and lying, and not standing by Harry when he had needed his friends the most.

As they made their way back to Harry’s private chambers in silence, Hermione tried her best to keep her fury in check for Harry’s sake. The fire was going strong in the hearth by the settee in Harry’s sitting room.

Hermione made them both some cocoa in the little kitchen and found Harry lying dejectedly on the small sofa. Harry began to get up to make room for her.

“It’s alright Harry,” she said, sitting at the very end. “Lie back down - like this... There, that’s better...” Hermione gently stroked Harry’s messy black hair as he nestled his head on her lap, smiling sadly at him.

She could see how much Ron still meant to Harry - how much Harry missed him - how much it had hurt to let Ron go like that. Hermione hoped that one day Ron would grow up enough for Harry to be able to patch things up with him, but for the moment, she knew that Harry had done the right thing. Harry hadn’t enough to be getting on with. It was going to be hard enough getting through this tournament without having to deal with jealous fair-weather friends.

Harry closed his eyes as Hermione cuddled him, and gradually drifted off to sleep.

~o0o~

Ron sighed miserably as he watched Harry and Hermione walking away from him. He had half expected this outcome, but he had hoped for better.

After seeing the dragons, it had finally occurred to Ron that if Harry hadn’t entered himself, someone might be trying to do Harry in. Under the circumstances, Ron couldn’t really blame Harry for not easily forgiving him. Bloody hell - Ron had even compared Harry to that scumbag Malfoy! Ron kicked himself for being such an idiot, wishing that he’d been able to make Harry understand that sometimes he just couldn’t help himself.
Ron caught Ginny’s glowering eye when she huffed at him as she exited the stands with Dean. Fred snorted at Ron and shook his head, muttering “pathetic” angrily under his breath as he strode away. Ron was reasonably certain that Fred was mostly cross with him because there wasn’t much point in throwing a party in the Gryffindor common room without Harry.

George halted for a moment and raised his eyebrows at Ron, sighing, before giving him a little shrug and following after his twin. If Ron didn’t know better, he’d almost think that George was being sympathetic. Neville couldn’t look Ron in the eye when he walked past with Luna, whose expression was almost pitying.

Someone patted Ron on the shoulder. He looked around to see who it was.

“Ah... Things’ll work out eventually Ron,” said Seamus consolingly. “Leave it alone for now... Come on mate - I’ll let ye beat me at a game of wizard chess.”

“Yes... alright then!” Ron sighed. He gave Seamus a little half-smile, glad to at least have the company of someone who always seemed to understand him without getting all judgmental.

~o0o~

Harry felt much better after a nap. He heard voices, and as he woke up Harry realised that there was a cushion under his head instead of Hermione’s lap. He sat up, realising that he must have slept for several hours when he spied Hermione having tea with Parvati.

“Oh, good, you’re awake Harry!” Hermione smiled at Harry and poured him a steaming cup of tea. “Parvati was bringing back your Firebolt. I hope you don’t mind me letting her in.”

“Oh, good, you’re awake Harry!” Hermione smiled at Harry and poured him a steaming cup of tea. “Parvati was bringing back your Firebolt. I hope you don’t mind me letting her in.”

“Of course not,” said Harry, smiling back. “You’re always welcome Parvati. Where’s Lavender?” he asked before taking a sip from his teacup.


Harry grinned; he glanced at Hermione, thinking that she looked rather pleased with herself. Hermione blushed when she noticed Harry’s perceptive expression.

“Er... so what did happen with Viktor and the others anyway?” Harry asked. “Is everyone alright?” He peered at Hermione anxiously.

“Everyone is fine Harry?” said Hermione quickly to put his mind at ease. “Nobody got badly hurt... Viktor just got some scrapes and bruises when he tried to escape after he used the Conjunctivitis Curse on the dragon. That’s why his dragon went berserk though - just like Professor Moody said it would - and crushed some of its own eggs.”

“Cedric got burned a bit though when he transfigured a rock into a dog,” Hermione continued. “The dragon was distracted for a moment, but then it went after him. He only just managed to snatch his egg before the dragon chased him around the arena - Cedric had to hide behind some boulders until the dragon keepers subdued the dragon.... Pomfrey fixed him up though.”

“And that French girl, Fleur, she almost got burned when she put her dragon in a sort of trance,” Parvati added. “But she managed to put the fire out quickly with water from her wand. She and Krum both tied for second place. Anyway Harry... You were amazing! That was unbelievable... How did you do that?”

Harry glanced at Hermione questioningly, assuming that she would have already told Parvati.
“I thought you should be the one to tell Parvati when you woke up,” Hermione beamed at her boyfriend with pride.

“Oh... er... alright then!” Harry smiled wryly at his girlfriend before addressing Parvati. “I used a rune set which spelled out ‘Dragon Friend’... Mind you, I didn’t know for certain that it would work - I don’t think it would have if I’d had my wand in my hand.”

“That’s why I took my cloak and shirt off and showed that I was totally unarmed,” Harry continued. “Then I bowed to show respect, like Hagrid taught us with hippogriffs last year. Dragons are a lot like people - many breeds are really smart - and they just want to be respected.”

Parvati frowned in puzzlement. “But why don’t all dragon handlers do that then?”

“Because most dragon keepers are like most other wizards,” Hermione began in her ‘schoolteacher’ voice, but there was also an edge of bitterness in her tone. “They see them as inferior creatures and they don’t actually treat dragons with the kindness or respect deserved by all sentient beings. They treat dragons as animals to be locked up in zoos, or as beasts of burden, or as enemies to be subdued...”

“Harry’s absolutely right,” Hermione went on, “The runes wouldn’t have worked by themselves. They only told the dragon that Harry was a friend. If Harry hadn’t acted like a friend - if he’d just tried to steal the egg - the dragon would have still attacked him.”

Parvati gasped in horror as the full implication of what Harry had told her sank in.

“Wait, you mean that Harry was totally unprotected then?” Parvati squeaked. “He put down his wand too?”

“Yeah,” Harry nodded. “I did use a fire protection rune-set as well... just in case. But I was still scared to death that the dragon would just eat me.”

“I can’t believe you did that Harry!” said Parvati. “That’s the bravest thing I’ve ever heard of! You could’ve been killed.”

~o0o~

Draco Malfoy couldn’t believe what he had just witnessed. Potter had approached the dragon - unarmed - and it had just given him the egg as obediently as a dutiful puppy. Draco was very quiet as he made his way back to the Slytherin common room following the conclusion of the First Task, oblivious to the hubbub all around him.

Blaise Zabini entered the Slytherin common room and spied Draco looking lost in thought on the green sofa by the fire. He glanced at Draco’s face, which looked even pastier than usual.

“You might want to lay off Granger in the future, Draco,” said Blaise pointedly, raising his eyebrows.

“Hunh? What do you mean Blaise? Not turning into a blood-traitor are you?” he sneered.

“You should know me better than that Draco,” Zabini snorted. “Just pointing out that you probably ought to watch yourself around Potter in the future... Weren’t you paying attention?”

“Potter had a go at Weasley after he’d finished with the dragon,” Zabini continued. “I don’t think
he’s going to be inclined to dole out any more second chances to people who don’t treat him or his friends right - especially his girlfriend, Granger... And if he can stand up to a Dragon - unarmed - I don’t think he’s going to be put off by anything you can come up with.”

Draco flushed angrily and stalked out of the common room. Zabini smirked at Draco’s consternation; he loved getting a rise out of him. It was just too easy to provoke the smarmy little coward.

Draco heaved himself onto his four-poster bed and stared at the green and silver hangings above, nostrils flaring. For the thousandth time, he wished he’d been sent to Durmstrang where they actually taught students how to perform dark magic and curses - unlike the stupid defence stuff they did at Hogwarts. It was beginning to look like he’d have to start learning the Unforgivables on his own.

~o0o~

Sirius and Lupin had both been delighted and astounded to hear the details of Harry’s encounter with the dragon. Harry grinned at their astonished features in his mirror.

“That is remarkable Harry - and incredibly risky! There was no guarantee that the dragon would accept you,” said Lupin, peering over Sirius’s shoulder into the mirror. “There are very few wizards - even those well-experienced with dragons - who would have dared to attempt such a thing.”

“That’s my godson for you,” Sirius beamed proudly. Lupin raised one eyebrow at Sirius with a mirthful twitch of his moustache.

“Ahem... our godson I mean,” Sirius amended himself, giving Harry a roguish wink; Hermione giggled.

“I’m glad you called, Harry,” Sirius added. “Dumbledore has banned Rita Skeeter from Hogwarts, but I’m still not sure that I would have believed the Daily Prophet’s reports. And if I know Skeeter, she’ll still find a way to muck things up...”

“In any case,” Lupin interjected. “Dumbledore and Mad Eye have been keeping us informed of your general progress, but Sirius and I are keen to keep an eye on things ourselves. We may come up to Hogwarts to watch over the next two tasks in person...”

Following the chat with Sirius and Lupin, Hermione finally managed to convince Harry that he should put in an appearance in the Gryffindor common room. And Harry was glad that she had, as Fred and George had forged ahead with party plans despite the unlikelihood of Harry showing up.

Ron looked up from the game of chess he was having with Seamus, peering wistfully at the crowd of cheering Gryffindors surrounding Harry and Hermione. Unable to help feeling another pang of jealousy, Ron took a swig of his butterbeer and resignedly returned his attention to Seamus and the game.

By the time Harry and Hermione returned to his private quarters, Harry was in the best mood he’d been in for weeks. After cleaning his teeth and changing into nightclothes, Harry cheerfully tumbled into his bed with Hermione.

Burning with ardour, their kisses grew increasingly humid, lips blazing trails across each other’s necks and faces. Hermione imagined Harry shirtless again as his caresses traveled, tingling blissfully at his every touch, showering her own intimate affections upon him. Golden strands of Hermione’s tawny hair damply clung to her pink cheeks as she gasped with passionate release in Harry’s arms, trapping his hand between her thighs.
Giddily flushing with elation, Harry fell back against his pillow panting breathlessly. Hermione lay her bushy head on Harry’s shoulder and snuggled happily under one of his arms, wondering if Harry might be ready to take things a bit further soon.

A few minutes later, still feeling a bit dazed, but quite contented, Harry finally managed to put his thoughts of Hermione without her clothes on out of his head and picked up the egg from the bedside table with his free hand. He peered at it as it glinted in the flickering orange glow of the fire in the hearth, looking for the clue again.

Except for the hinge and the furrow where the two halves met, the egg was perfectly smooth, and as golden as the highlights in Hermione’s tawny-brown hair. He had opened it at the celebration in the common room after much imploring from the excited Gryffindors, but there had been nothing inside except for a horrid loud shrieking sound which reminded him of the screeching wheels of the Hogwarts Express.

“You’ve got plenty of time Harry,” said Hermione with a little giggle, pleased to see Harry’s eagerness. “You don’t have to work it out tonight. Even if it takes us until Christmas to figure out what the Clue is, you’ll still have two months to prepare for the next Task.”

“Yeah... I suppose you’re right Hermione,” Harry grinned. He set the gold egg down again and gave his girlfriend another gentle kiss. Tranquility settled over the pair of them as Harry and Hermione cuddled, and gradually they drifted off to sleep.

~o0o~

The boarded up windows of the deteriorating manor did little to muffle the screams of pain from within. But it was far enough from the village of Little Hangleton, and late enough at night, that only those brave enough to pass through the abandoned and overgrown graveyard at the bottom of the hill after midnight would hear them. A wretched Rat-like man writhed in agony on the floor of a dusty cobwebbed upstairs sitting room with peeling wallpaper.

“Master... please! I beg you... It wasn’t my fault.”

“Beg a little harder Wormtail, and maybe I’ll forgive you.”

Purple lightning arced from the oozing greyish-red homunculus swaddled in black robes on the threadbare armchair, and more shrieks of torment echoed through the once stately home. The hideous dark creature tortured Wormtail three more times before letting up. It waited several minutes for the Rat’s sobbing to subside, considering its options.

The prearranged time for Wormtail’s meeting in Hogsmeade to receive an update on the progress at Hogwarts had come and gone with no sign of Barty Crouch Junior, and the Dark Lord had grown concerned. The Dark Lord had sent Wormtail out again to glean as much information as possible, but Voldemort was most displeased with what he had learned.

“Enough, you miserable fool!” snapped the Dark Lord in a high cold tone. “Get up... Without an agent at Hogwarts I have no means to take Harry Potter’s blood for my own. Are there no others among my followers loyal enough to do my bidding?”

“My Lord,” the rodent-like man groveled, “They believe you to be dead... even Lucius... and... and my word alone will not be enough to convince them to go against Dumbledore to bring the boy to you. They follow the new Minister, and according to my sources, she has not revealed the truth of your continued existence...”
“And what of this... this new Minister... she is one of us is she not? ...a follower of Slytherin - a Dark Witch?”

“My Lord, she is...” Wormtail replied, “but the word among the Death Eaters who remain at large is that the new Minister has her own plan to restore a Pureblood Order in Britain... At one time, before she gained power, she might have joined forces with us.”

“But now...” continued the Rat, “now that she has the Ministry, all indications are that she means to keep it for herself. And as she intends to return the Ancient Houses to their former glory and reinstate the Old Ways, it is likely that very few shall move against her - perhaps even once your return has been made known to all.”

The Dark Lord cursed. He was not at full power and was not yet prepared to fight a war on two fronts. And now it seemed that he had nobody to bring him Potter. The Dark Lord was growing weary of residing in his muggle father’s decaying manor. He had been prepared to put up with it in order to see the competition at Hogwarts through, with the promise of Harry Potter at the end of it. But now that the promise appeared to be unlikely to be met, it might have to be done without the boy.

And that meant that the Dark Lord would be just as vulnerable to the boy's protections - bestowed by the Ancient Magic which had been cast by the boy’s mother in her last breaths - as he had been before. Though Voldemort had to concede that some of the other restoration rituals might prove advantageous in different ways, perhaps even giving him the power to decisively defeat the Old Fool who ran Hogwarts once and for all.

The Dark Lord decided to bide his time a short while more, and see what might come of the Second Task. The plan might be salvaged by then - it was still possible that he might find another to do his bidding and slip them through the increased security protocols at Hogwarts - but if not, the Dark Lord should be prepared to act without further delay.

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“Wake up Harry! Please... wake up!” sobbed Hermione.

Harry emerged from the nightmare in a cold sweat, gasping for breath, his scar on fire. Harry groaned, peering into his girlfriend’s tear-filled eyes. As bad as it was, Harry knew it would have been much worse if Hermione weren’t there. Apparently he had been thrashing around, as the bedclothes were even more tangled than when they had been snogging and messing about earlier that evening.

“Oh thank goodness... thank goodness, finally!” Hermione wrapped herself around Harry, peppering him with kisses and stroking his messy damp hair. “It seemed to go on and on... I couldn’t wake you! It was him again, wasn’t it? Voldemort!”

“Yeah...” Harry muttered, gasping as the throbs of pain ebbed, diminishing with every kiss, “...it was! He was really angry... torturing Wormtail. I think he’s cross because his plan to get me failed... He’s only just found out that Crouch Junior was captured...”

“...but he’s going to try again - make a new plan, isn’t he?” said Hermione worriedly.

“Yeah, I... I think so,” Harry murmured, as he tried to remember the details. “I’m not really certain what... But whatever he does, I think he’s decided to wait a bit - to see what happens with the Second Task.”
Despite his terrible nightmare - vision - whatever - and the pain during the night, Harry felt reasonably good the next morning, far better than he had during the summer when he’d dreamed about Voldemort and Wormtail killing the old man. Harry was left only with the residual itching and occasional twinge which he had grown used to since Voldemort had returned to Britain. Hermione’s presence had made all the difference in the world, and Harry had readily agreed with her that Dumbledore needed to be told at the earliest opportunity.

Harry and Hermione caught up with the headmaster at lunchtime, and Dumbledore had invited them to dine with him in his office. Dumbledore listened intently, thanking Harry profusely when he had imparted all the information that he could recall. The headmaster stroked his long silvery beard as he watched the young pair depart his office when lunch had concluded.

Albus Dumbledore poured himself another cup of Darjeeling. He squeezed in a slice of lemon and stirred in a spoonful of honey, sighing as he considered his many layered quandary. Harry had enough to be getting on with as it was, dealing with the Triwizard tournament and his increasing workload at school. The simplest solution was simply not feasible. It was more than apparent that Harry did not have time to learn Legilimency and Occlumency at the moment.

Dumbledore spent a good long while pondering his conundrum. The only thing which was clear was that Harry’s safety was paramount, and that Hermione Granger was the key to it for the immediate future. But any decision taken now in that regard would be irrevocable - there could be no going back for Harry and Miss Granger - and it would require the express permission of Hermione Granger’s mother.

Taking some heart from Alastor’s perceptive remark the night that Harry had been chosen by the Goblet and had discovered the Lost Diadem of Ravenclaw, Dumbledore glanced at Fawkes and sighed again before taking up his quill and writing a letter to Mrs Granger.

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"Finnegan! Weasley! Will you pay attention?"

Professor McGonagall’s sharp voice cracked like a towel snap, startling Harry and Hermione who were reviewing their work on the guinea fowl which they had just transfigured into guinea pigs.

Harry couldn’t help grinning when he saw that Seamus and Ron had been having a sword fight with a pair of the fake wands which had been invented by Fred and George, instead of correcting their mistakes. Ron’s guinea pig still had a beak, and Seamus’s looked as if it had been through a war-zone.

“Now that Weasley and Finnegan have kindly acted their age,” Professor McGonagall said acidly, “I have an announcement to make. The Yule Ball is approaching - a traditional part of the Triwizard tournament...”

Professor McGonagall launched into an explanation of what was to be expected. Ron’s face fell in horror when she got to the bit about wearing dress robes. Lavender giggled and Parvati valiantly tried to restrain herself from giggling as well; they both turned around to glance at Harry and Hermione when McGonagall made a pointed remark about the Champions opening up the Yule Ball with their dance partners.

Harry felt a wave of relief washing over him, thankful that he didn’t have to look for a date, followed immediately by a flood of trepidation at the knowledge that he would have to dance in front of
hundreds of people.

“Don’t worry Harry,” Hermione whispered, giving his hand a comforting squeeze when she saw him looking like a deer caught in headlights, “I promised I could teach you how to dance, and I will.”

December had begun with another blizzard, and the snow piled even deeper outside the drafty halls of Hogwarts. Nearly everyone in Fourth Year and above had signed on to stay for Christmas, as had many hopeful Third Years.

The Professors began to decorate the castle in preparation for the upcoming festivities, going all out with their guests in mind. Everlasting Icicles were hung from the bannister of the marble staircase, suits of armour were bedecked with tinsel, bows, and red Father Christmas caps. Hagrid hauled in a dozen massive pines from the forest and Flitwick decorated them with thousands of tiny primping fairies.

When she wasn’t shivering in the corridors, unused to the cold, Fleur Delacour was haughtily waving off suitors in droves. It didn’t seem to matter that she had heeded her father’s warning not to tell anyone that she was part Veela, Fleur thought crossly. All the boys seemed to be acting like she was anyway, uninterested in who she was as a person and oblivious to anything she said, with eyes only for whichever part of her figure caught their fancy. Fleur rather thought that Hermione Granger was very lucky to have Harry Potter as a boyfriend, who seemed to treat her kindly and with respect.

Hermione was increasingly irritated by the girls who all seemed to be hovering in the corridors giggling coquettishly whenever Harry walked by, clearly hoping to catch him alone and be the one to convince him that it was time to move on to someone new.

She was glad that they didn’t seem to hate Harry anymore, but Hermione wasn’t certain that this was much better. Hermione wasn’t sure if they only liked Harry now because he’d successfully faced down a Hungarian Horntail, or if it was because Harry had managed to do it without his shirt on.

And Hermione wasn’t the only one who had noticed all of the positive attention that Harry was receiving from the girls at Hogwarts after winning the first round of the tournament. One afternoon, Ron and Seamus squeezed past a group of a dozen or so girls who were unabashedly ogling Harry even though Hermione was on his arm.

Hermione caught the bitter look in Ron’s eyes when he glanced at Harry, and was certain that she heard Ron mutter something like “…of course they’re queuing up for him! He’s just beaten a Hungarian Horntail!” to Seamus.

Harry sighed, spotting the flush of guilt on Hermione’s cheeks.

“Don’t beat yourself up Hermione,” Harry murmured as soon as they had managed to find a quiet, clear passage. “It’s not the same thing at all…”

“But I was feeling jealous,” said Hermione in a small voice, her head hanging down. “And I shouldn’t be, because I know you’d never do anything to hurt me!”

“Exactly!” said Harry firmly, gently cupping Hermione’s chin and lifting it so he could look her directly in the eye. “And that’s why it’s not the same - it’s not jealousy, not really... You’re not blaming me - it’s only natural that you’d feel cross with those girls for trying to waylay me when it’s perfectly obvious that we’re together.”

“Thank you Harry!” Hermione murmured gratefully, her heart fluttering as Harry took her in his
arms and gave her a tender kiss.

They both gave a little start and pulled apart when echoey footsteps in the corridor indicated that they were no longer alone. Spying two very disappointed looking Ravenclaw girls turning around and going back the way they had come, Harry and Hermione couldn’t help but laugh, both of them turning slightly pink.

The weeks leading up to the Yule Ball weren’t all about dodging the girls eager to steal Hermione’s boyfriend though. There was still schoolwork to be done, and they both spent time in the library trying to find any information which might give them a clue about Harry’s Golden Egg.

Some professors like Flitwick had eased up as Christmas drew closer, even letting students play games in class during the last week before the end of term, but not all of them were so lax.

As the Skrewts were enormous and (thankfully?) too dangerous for direct contact, Care of Magical Creatures had more or less become a free period to hang out and chat with Hagrid or play in the snow for a bit. Professor Babbling had been so thrilled with Harry for showcasing the practical usefulness of Runes in the tournament that she had tried to give him a week off from homework, but she was even more impressed when Harry had insisted on keeping busy.

McGonagall and Snape weren’t having any of that nonsense though, keeping their classes’ noses to the grindstone until the very last minute. Professor Vector was just as strict, and Professor Moody would no sooner let his classes skive off than he would wear a tutu.

During their special sessions, Professor Moody had begun teaching Harry and Hermione a variety of explosive blasting spells, and kept them hard at work on their regular calisthenics, but had begrudgingly allowed Hermione to spend the daily exercise routines teaching Harry how to dance.

“I suppose it might come in handy when we begin hand to hand training after Christmas,” the grizzled ex-Auror grumbled.

Harry had been extremely nervous about learning how to dance with Hermione, certain that he was going to be the only champion with two proverbial left feet. But after three lessons in the Room of Requirement’s ballroom setting with his arm around Hermione’s waist, Harry finally began to relax and enjoy himself.

“Stop it Harry, that tickles,” the young witch giggled as Harry nuzzled her neck. “Focus on your feet and listen to the rhythm... 1, 2, 3... 1, 2, 3...”

That particular lesson came to a quick end when Harry’s lips found their way to Hermione’s. After a particularly steamy kiss, they giddily made their way to Gryffindor Tower for Hermione to collect her night things.

They arrived in the common room just in time to overhear a surly looking Ron with singed eyebrows complaining to Seamus over the smoking wreckage of a pile of Snap cards.

“...Fred’s right though, Seamus,” Ron was muttering. “All the good ones will be gone... we should get a move on. We don’t want to end up with a pair of trolls!”

“I suppose not!” Seamus sniggered.

“A pair of what?” snapped Ginny indignantly, glowering at Ron from the sofa where she was sitting with Dean, who was rolling his eyes at Seamus and Ron.

Lavender shared a disgusted look with Parvati. Hermione snorted with mirth, rolled her eyes, and
shook her head as she marched upstairs for her things. Harry palmed his face, wondering if Ron would ever figure out how to talk to a girl.

“I’m glad I’m not going with either of those two thickheads,” Lavender whispered to Harry, “Viktor is really sweet.”

“What about you Parvati?” Harry asked. “Have you got a date yet?”

“My sister introduced me to Terry Boot in Ravenclaw,” Parvati replied, reddening. “I don’t really know him, but Padma says he’s alright. After the Quibbler article came out, he supported you - which is more than I can say about that creep McLaggen...”

“Cormac McLaggen?” Harry muttered, frowning. “The fifth year bloke that hangs out with Towler?”

“Yeah! He tried to ask us both out...” Parvati scowled, nodding.

“I told him I was going with Viktor Krum, then he got a bit nasty when Parvati turned him down flat too,” Lavender explained.

“He didn’t touch you, did he?” asked Harry, his face darkening. Parvati shook her head, her big limpid eyes widening.

“No, and I would’ve hexed him if he had!” she replied assertively.

“Good!” said Harry, just as Hermione reappeared with her bag. Lavender and Parvati gave Hermione and Harry both a hug, whispering goodnight.

~o0o~

The school term had finally ended with the arrival of the Christmas Holidays. Ron was feeling very testy when Pigwidgeon eventually returned from the Burrow with Christmas cards for all of the Weasleys. Glancing at the envelopes, he saw cards for Harry and Hermione as well. Ron scowled as the tiny owl twittered and flitted around the icicle laden bannisters attracting the giggly attention of a bunch of Third Year girls.

“Look at the weeny little owl... it’s sooo cute!” said one of the girls.

“Oooh... it’s adorable!” said another.

“Stupid feathery little git!” Ron hissed, running up the stairs and grabbing Pigwidgeon. “Just bring the letters to me! Don’t bloody hang around showing off!”

Pigwidgeon hooted cheerfully, his fluffy little head poking out of Ron’s fist. The Third Year girls all looked horrified.

“Clear off,” Ron snapped at the girls, waving the fist which held his owl and they all scurried away. Ron caught George’s expression.

“What’s your problem?” Ron sniped at George.

“You know something Ron,” said George as evenly as possible, “you’re a right idiot sometimes! And I’m telling you this for your own good, out of the kindness of my heart, because it’s Christmas... and I’m not Fred!
“It’s no wonder you can’t get a bloody date for the Yule Ball. Every single one of those Third Year girls was a potential date, and you just chased them all off. Which is probably for the best as far as they’re concerned, mind you, given your dimwittedness and your rudeness - I wouldn’t wish you on any girl until you grow up a bit... make that until you grow up a lot!

“I’ll let you think about that for a bit and work out why for yourself though... You won’t learn anything otherwise! But here’s a hint - it’s not actually all about missing the perfect opening the ‘cute’ and ‘adorable’ little feather ball gave you - it’s more or less the same reason you couldn’t hang onto your best friend...

“Now, why don’t you give me the cards for Harry and Hermione... I’m not sure I trust you to look after them properly,” George concluded.

Ron scowled again as he handed over the cards to George, but inwardly Ron was groaning as George’s meaning became all too clear.

~o0o~

One of the nicest things about the Christmas Holidays was that curfew wasn’t as strictly enforced. Admittedly that was usually because there weren’t any prefects, head boys, head girls, and Aurors providing security for the Triwizard tournament hanging around. Still, the Aurors and Filch were the only ones to be concerned about, because the prefects really didn't care as it was Christmas.

As such, Harry couldn’t be happier that Hermione had been able to spend every night in his private quarters without having to worry about the possibility of anyone fussing her at Gryffindor Tower the next morning, no matter what time she rolled in. Christmas Eve had been the best one that he could ever remember having.

After hanging out for part of the day playing in the snowdrifts with Luna, Neville and the rest of their friends, and spending part of the day at Gryffindor Tower, there had been a splendid Feast in the Great Hall - with the promise of an even more magnificent one preceding the Yule Ball. Then Harry and Hermione had spent the evening snuggling by his fire and drinking cocoa as Crookshanks purred on their laps.

Finally, they began messing around in Harry's bed. He looked surprised when Hermione reached her hand under the covers and tugged off her knickers, chucking them to the end of the bed. Hermione smiled at Harry and raised her eyebrows, beckoning him. Grinning, Harry slipped his hand under the covers too, sliding it between Hermione's bare thighs, finding his way to her heated entrance without the impedance of fabric, his fingers delving deeper inside her than they had before.

Hermione returned the favour, slipping her hand inside Harry's pyjama bottoms to gingerly grasp his hardness. After working themselves into a passionate frenzy, they fell asleep entwined in each other’s arms.

Being awoken early on Christmas morning was the last thing that Harry had expected. Spying two goggling green eyes the size of tennis balls staring at him, Harry blinked and reached for his glasses. Hermione stirred awake with a little shriek, blushing furiously when she spotted her knickers at the end of the bed, pulling covers around herself protectively even though she was wearing her nightie.

“Blimey Dobby,” Harry groaned. “What are you doing?”

“Dobby is very sorry sir,” Dobby squeaked anxiously, his own little cheeks red with embarrassment. “Dobby is only wishing Harry Potter a Merry Christmas and bringing him a present sir. Dobby is not expecting Harry Potter’s girlfriend to be in bed with him. Dobby is very sorry to be upsetting Miss
“It’s alright Dobby,” said Hermione, her own voice sounding a bit squeaky. “I... I’m not upset, really!” she fibbed. “M...Merry Christmas Dobby!”

“Yeah... Merry Christmas Dobby!” Harry grinned, shaking his head with amusement. “Don’t worry about it. Just try and be a bit more careful in future.”

“Dobby will sir! Dobby promises!” said the house-elf earnestly. “Dobby will be going now and giving Harry Potter and Miss Granger their privacy...”

“Hang on Dobby,” Harry interjected, reaching for a small parcel wrapped in red and green paper on his nightstand. “Here’s a little present for you... Er... Sorry... it’s not much...”

Dobby squealed gleefully as he tore through the wrapping paper, revealing a pair of purple and gold socks.

“Thank you sir! Socks are Dobby’s most favourite clothes!” the happy house-elf beamed. “How did Harry Potter know sir?”

“Er... just a guess really,” said Harry, feeling relieved that his present had been such a big hit as he unwrapped the present Dobby had given him.

A pair of knitted socks fell out of the wrapping onto the bed cover. Hermione clapped her hand to her mouth, trying to hide her laughter. One of the socks was lime green with a pattern of gold snitches, and the other was scarlet with a pattern of gold broomsticks. Dobby wept with happiness when Harry thanked him profusely and pulled the socks on over his bare feet.

Hermione was still in a fit of giggles after Dobby departed; she kissed Harry and scrambled to the end of the bed to drag their sacks full of presents up with them.

“We’re wide awake now,” she said. “We may as well open them.”

Colourful wrapping paper, sparkling bows, and shiny ribbons began to collect around the bed as Harry and Hermione opened their presents. They were pleased to find among all the presents from others that they had both received the usual assortment of sweaters and goodies from Mrs Weasley.

Harry was thrilled with the book Hermione had given him: *Quidditch Teams of the World, from Albania to Zaire*. Hermione pinned Harry to the bed and snogged him silly when she opened the little jewellery box containing a pair of pearl earrings which matched the necklace that he’d given her for her birthday.

They were still kissing when a flutter of wings startled them. Crookshanks - who was curled up on a cushion by the fire - purred happily to see Hedwig arriving. Hermione reached for the envelope addressed to her with trembling hands, puzzled, as she and Harry had already opened their cards from her mother.

Inside the envelope was a card wishing Hermione a Happy New Year, and when she opened the card, an official looking document fell out along with a letter. Harry gasped as Hermione unfolded the Ministry Parchment. Hermione began to breathe rapidly and she picked up the letter looking for an explanation. Harry’s face turned crimson as he read along with her.

_Dear Hermione,_

_Please don’t be alarmed. You will always have a home with me and your aunt for as long as you_
wish it - I love you dearly. And our home will always be open to Harry as well. If it helps, you may think of the official copy of the Declaration of Emancipation which I signed as an extra Christmas Present.

I signed it at the behest of Headmaster Dumbledore. He came to visit me at the beginning of December, and the poor dear was as red-faced as I’ve ever seen a man to discuss the topic. I must admit that at first I was a bit reticent, but Dumbledore assured me that of all his options for protecting Harry Potter at the moment, this was the most workable.

I don’t quite understand all the ins and outs of the situation, but I know it has something to do with a sort of telepathic dream that Harry had about the dark wizard that killed his parents. Your closeness to Harry is apparently the only thing which will insulate him from certain ill effects of this telepathic connection.

Your emancipation was necessary for Dumbledore to skirt certain school policies preventing the cohabitation of students of opposite genders. You will have to speak to him for greater details, but he thought it advisable for me to contact you first. I did consult with Harry’s godfather Sirius, and he assures me that Harry is free to make his own decisions, being emancipated already, but that he is in complete agreement in any case.

I know how much you love Harry. I do too! I trust you absolutely, and know you to be as responsible as any adult - if not more-so than most. I only ask that you use caution if you engage in any intimacies, as I am much too young to become a grandmother.

Happy Christmas
Love from,
Mum

Hermione giggled nervously and peered at Harry, who was groaning and had his blazing face covered with both hands. Harry couldn’t believe that Dumbledore and Sirius had spoken to Mrs Granger about him and Hermione being “close” and engaging in “intimacies.” Harry was never going to be able to look Mrs Granger in the eye again.

Hermione’s anxiety began to grow in leaps and bounds as she watched Harry imploding from embarrassment.

“Are... are y...you alright Harry?” she asked shakily. Hearing the fear creep into Hermione’s voice seemed to pull Harry back from the brink. Of course she would be just as nerve-wracked as him about everything. Harry didn’t want Hermione to get the wrong impression and start feeling bad.

“Er... yeah... Hermione!” he finally managed, pulling his hands away from his face. Harry gave her a shy little grin. “I’ll be fine... I swear! It... it’ll just take a bit of getting used to your mum knowing about us... er... messing around. This is brilliant... really! ... You’ll be able to do magic outside of school whenever you want now!”

~o0o~

Heads turned and jaws dropped when Harry made his way down the marble staircase to the Entrance Hall with his arm around Hermione’s slender waist. Harry knew that it was because to everyone else, Hermione looked a lot less like a bushy haired bookworm, and much more like a model in her shimmering pearly evening gown. Though as far as Harry was concerned, everyone was just seeing Hermione for the first time the way he always saw her - gorgeous - and more enticing than any Veela.
Hermione’s hair was done up in a chic style, pulled to one side and only partially straightened, leaving delicate golden curls framing one side of her face and tumbling over her shoulder - which she had done because she knew Harry liked her ringlets. She wore only the barest hint of makeup, just enough to highlight her natural beauty, which was set off by the pearl necklace gracing her neck, and the pearl earrings.

Parvati waved when she spotted them enter the Great Hall. Hermione beamed back at her, mouthing the words “thank you,” for helping her style her hair.

Malfoy was stunned when he saw Granger; he opened his mouth, trying to think of something rude to say, but Pansy punched him on the shoulder warningly. The last thing Pansy wanted was a repeat of their humiliating experience. Malfoy closed his mouth again, thinking better of it as Zabini’s words echoed in his mind.

Ron and Seamus were among the many gaping at Hermione when she entered the Great Hall. Ron recalled how nice Hermione’s figure had looked in that dress at the World Cup, but she looked too pretty to be Hermione - she’d done something to her hair - and her face looked different. He wouldn’t have recognised her at all if she weren’t attached to Harry’s arm.

Ron’s hungry expression turned into a scowl when he saw Harry and Hermione being beckoned to the Staff-table with the other champions and sitting next to Viktor Krum and... Lavender Brown?

“Blimey... Lavender and Krum? ” Ron muttered, feeling a sudden surge of anger towards his all-time favourite Quidditch player.

Seamus appeared to be a bit taken aback as well. Like Ron, Seamus had always thought that Lavender was the prettiest Gryffindor girl in their year. Seamus had even dared to dream of plucking up the nerve to ask her to the Yule Ball before dismissing the idea out-of-hand.

Harry felt more than a bit uncomfortable sitting at the Staff-table among the other champions and their headmasters for Christmas Dinner, taking a small amount of comfort in the fact that he was not the only one at the centre of attention. Harry’s feeling of awkwardness went up a few dozen notches when he saw Dumbledore approaching the table, and he began to redden. Hermione turned pink as well when she saw the headmaster.

Dumbledore gave Harry a knowing wink and leaned over to murmur in his ear as he strode past him. “Just do your best to enjoy yourself tonight, Harry.” Dumbledore said quietly, his eyes twinkling. “Any discussions about... things... that you and Miss Granger may wish to have with me, can take place whenever you’re feeling up to it. There is no rush - no rush at all!”

Then Dumbledore turned around to greet the others who were taking their seats at the table. There was a slight edge to Ludo Bagman’s grin when he beamed at Harry before glancing away. But the biggest surprise for Harry and Hermione both, was seeing Percy Weasley taking Crouch’s place next to Bagman.

Harry felt a sudden chill. For a moment when Harry caught Percy’s eye, he had seen a brief flicker of an expression not unlike Malfoy’s as Percy glanced at him and Hermione. Percy Weasley’s demeanor quickly shifted to one of pure smugness.

“I’ve been promoted,” Percy said before Harry could get a word in. “I’m working directly for Minister Umbridge now as her personal assistant. Crouch was taken ill, so she sent me to replace him.”
“Er... congratulations Percy!” said Harry with a stiff smile. Hermione offered her own awkward felicitation, flushing as she remembered the fight she’d had with Percy about Winky the house-elf the last time she had seen him.

All in all though, Harry and Hermione managed to enjoy the Christmas Feast, despite the odd bits of tension with Percy. Cedric and Cho both made small talk and chatted pleasantly to Harry and Hermione, giving Harry the distinct impression that they were both trying very hard to make up for Cedric’s previous behaviour. Viktor seemed to be a bit nervous, but it was obvious that he was very smitten with Lavender as they conversed.

Dumbledore engaged in a bit of witty banter with Igor Karkaroff, concluding with a little joke which made Harry snort with mirth and caused Percy to frown. Hermione thought Fleur seemed very uncomfortable with Roger Davies - the Ravenclaw Quidditch team captain. Harry noticed as well; Roger was too busy ogling Fleur to take in a word she was saying, and she didn’t seem happy about it at all. Fleur began making some mildly disparaging comments about the Christmas decorations at Hogwarts to draw Roger’s attention away from her bosom, to little avail.

Finally dinner was over, and all eyes turned to the brightly lit stage and dance floor at the far end as the lights dimmed in the rest of the Hall.

“Come on Harry,” Hermione said quietly, beaming at him as she took his hand. “It’s time to dance.”

Nervously, Harry let Hermione lead him to the dancefloor as the opening band took the stage, trying to avoid looking anyone in the eye. The Weird Sisters struck up a lilting waltz, and the champions began to dance.

Harry started to relax as other students began to join in. Dean shot Harry a thumbs up and a smirk as he waltzed by with Ginny. Luna dragged Neville from his seat, beaming radiantly at Harry and Hermione when she passed them. She giggled when Neville kept stepping on her toes and apologising.

“It’s alright Neville,” said Luna kindly, “I’m not much of a dancer either.”

Ron and Seamus hovered by the punch bowl, gawking at all the girls in evening gowns as they filed by with their dates to join the dancing. Seamus rolled his eyes when Ron kept scowling at Harry and Hermione, and Krum and Lavender. There were better things to do with their time.

“That got Ron’s attention. He suddenly realised that he was wearing himself out when he should be trying to have a good time. Ron knew he only had himself to blame and that George was right, but there was nothing he could really do about it. And Seamus was right too, Ron couldn’t help feeling jealous, but he didn’t have to make things worse by moping around and letting it eat away at him. It was time to move on. Ron still had Seamus to hang out with... and Seamus had Firewhiskey!

Seamus and Ron ambled out of the foyer of Hogwarts into the courtyard. Snow crunched underfoot, but they were both dressed warmly enough. They found a bush behind a bench which hid them from prying eyes, and leaned back against the stone wall of the castle. Seamus took a hefty swig from his flask and passed it to Ron. He grinned when Ron coughed on the burning liquid.

“Blimey!” Ron gasped, “No wonder they call it Firewhiskey!” It seemed even stronger than he recalled it being at the World Cup.
“An’ there I thought yeh were an experienced drinker Ronny boy,” Seamus chuckled, “Here, have another. It’ll smooth out soon enough.”

As the pair of young wizards shared another sip from the flask, Hagrid and Madame Maxime plonked heavily on the stone bench with a slight cracking sound in front of the bush they were hiding behind. They both silently groaned when Hagrid began to whisper sweet nothings in Olympe’s gigantic ear. It looked like they might be awhile.

The lights had gone down over the dancefloor once it had filled. Harry was suddenly aware that it was a clear night outside the castle when he noticed the silvery moon and stars above in the Enchanted Ceiling. He had a strange sense of deja vu and grinned at Hermione as they gyrated slowly together, both dressed to the nines. Hermione bit her lip and fluttered her eyelashes shyly at Harry, feeling as if she had butterflies in her tummy.

Harry felt much bolder in the dim light and he held Hermione closer as they moved in time to the gentle rhythm. Hermione shivered delightedly when Harry’s lips brushed against her cheek, gradually tracing a path to her lips. The world fell away and time seemed to stop. Blissful peace washed over them both as they kissed, dancing under moonlit starry skies.

Harry was startled when the lights came up as the Weird Sisters left the stage.

“Has it been a whole set already?” he asked.

“Yes... about an hour Harry,” said Hermione. “I think the next band is going to liven things up a bit. They’re supposed to be a surprise.”

Harry was stunned when a vaguely familiar looking rock band took over the stage and the Great Hall erupted into cheers. Hermione seemed equally amazed.

“Wait... is that...? It can’t be...” Harry sputtered. “I thought they were a muggle band.”

“...Siouxsie and the Banshees!” gasped Hermione.

“Oh come on...” said Fred, grinning as he spun by with Angelina, “looking like that - how could they be anything but wizards? Loads of famous Goth and Heavy Metal bands are...

“Course some of them are vampires and werewolves too,” chimed in George, who was dancing with Alicia Spinnet. “You should listen to Wizard radio more. It isn’t all rubbish like Celestina Warbeck...”

As the loud drums and screechy guitars rocked the Great Hall, Albus Dumbledore started to tap his toes and nod his head, his eyes twinkling merrily. It had been nearly two decades since he had frequented muggle nightclubs in London with his on again/off again partner Elphias, but perhaps Albus wasn’t so old after all. Dumbledore raised his eyebrows at Professor McGonagall and held out his hand. Minerva pursed her lips and shook her head disapprovingly.

“I’ll take this dance, Albus,” giggled Madam Pomfrey as she took his hand instead.

Finally rising from the stone bench after a long snog, Olympe stumbled and giggled when Hagrid caught her. The two drunk boys hiding in the bushes behind them breathed a heavy sigh of relief when the two half-giants headed back to the Ballroom.

Thankfully the magical properties of firewhiskey had protected Ron and Seamus from the freezing night. And fortunately for Ron and Seamus, they had arrived just in time to see Siouxsie and the Banshees perform.
Shortly after midnight the Yule Ball was brought to a close. Sweat dripped from Harry’s forehead as he threw back one last glass of punch. Hermione giggled, dabbing her own wet cheeks with a napkin.

The Gryffindor Common Room filled as Fred and George’s after-party kicked into gear. Ron and Seamus were too smashed though, and staggered up the stairs to the dormitory to sleep it off. Giddily, Harry and Hermione made their way back to his quarters, waving off Fred and George’s invitation to stay.

Hermione leaned against the wall of the corridor tipsily as Harry fumbled with the lock on the door to his chambers. Suddenly realising what must have happened, Hermione thought she ought to have a little chat later with the Twins about why spiking a punch bowl intended for use by everyone was more than a bit irresponsible. But in the meantime, nobody had come to any harm, and she was feeling pleasantly tingly.

Grinning from ear to ear, Harry locked the door behind him and picked Hermione up, carrying her to the settee in the sitting room, kissing every inch of her face as she giggled madly. Harry gently lay Hermione down on the settee and flung his dress robes over an armchair before tugging off his black bow tie. Hermione’s eyes widened when Harry took off his white dress shirt and tossed that on the armchair as well.

She couldn’t help licking her lips at the sight of Harry’s bare torso, the sheen of dampness highlighting his rippling abdomen. Hermione felt hot and giddy, trapped in her ball-gown. She stood up again and began tugging at her pearlescent dress, giggling when she remembered the zipper. Hermione turned around as Harry approached.

“Can you give me a hand please Harry?” she murmured hopefully.

Despite himself, and the heady rush of pleasure coursing through him, Harry halted suddenly, gulping, wondering how far they were going to go this time.

“Are... are you sure Hermione?”

“I’ve never been more sure about anything!” Hermione said firmly, her pulse racing.

“Alright then,” Harry murmured, kissing the side of Hermione’s neck as his slightly shaking fingers unzipped her dress, exposing the bare skin of her back.

Hermione’s pearly ball-gown slid to the floor and pooled at her feet. Hermione turned around and Harry’s breath caught to see so much more of Hermione’s enchanting figure for the first time, her pink-tipped breasts rising and falling with every breath, sheer white knickers the only stitch of fabric left on her body. The yearning was too strong and they fell into each other’s arms, the bare skin of their torsos connecting them as never before, lips fervently engaged in a deep steamy kiss.

Sensing Harry’s rising passion as one of Harry’s hands pressed into the small of her back and the other tangled in her golden locks, Hermione was so thrilled that Harry finally felt comfortable enough to take the next step that she decided not to be too hard on Fred and George about spiking the punch bowl...

Hermione undid Harry’s slacks and they slipped to the floor to join Hermione’s ball-gown. She stepped back and took a deep breath to steady herself, hooking her thumbs in the elastic of her knickers.

Then, before she could change her mind, Hermione slowly peeled them down her thighs, revealing
the trimmed triangle of delicate tawny wisps beneath, hoping that Harry wasn’t going to back out now.

“Merry Christmas Harry!” Hermione giggled nervously, as if unwrapping herself as a present for him, knickers dangling from her ankles.

Harry gulped again when he realised that Hermione was expecting him to do the same. They had been dallying with each other for some weeks now, bringing each other off in his bed while wearing pyjamas and nighties. And he thought back to the moment on the Knight Bus when he’d made a bit of a mess in his jeans with Hermione wriggling on his lap - which she had rather seemed to get a bit of wicked enjoyment from. But this was completely different.

Harry’s cheeks burned red-hot, embarrassed to expose his erect thingy in front of Hermione. What if she laughed? Of course, she was already giggling nervously, so how would he be able to tell? In the end that was what decided Harry. Hermione was just as anxious as he was, and he loved her. How could he refuse?

Harry scrunched his face into a grimace and quickly yanked off his boxers. For some reason, despite his discomfiture - or because of it- Harry’s bobbing erection seemed to grow even stiffer under Hermione’s fascinated gaze.

Hermione bit her lip hard in an effort to stop giggling, not wanting to make Harry feel any more awkward than he already did, but she couldn’t stop looking as tingles of arousal shot through her. She had seen pictures of penises in books of course, but this was the first time that she had ever seen one up close and personal. And better yet - this one was Harry’s.

“Er... is it... erm... alright?” Harry asked, cringing, and wondering if it was too small or too big when Hermione just kept staring at it. Hermione snapped out of the spell and threw her arms around Harry, pressing her nakedness against his.

“It’s perfect Harry!” she grinned, giving him a kiss to prove that she meant it.

Harry felt a flood of relief, not to mention another massive surge of excitement when he felt Hermione’s bare skin directly against his own again. A tremor shot through him as he held Hermione’s warm body in his arms. Hugging Hermione without clothes on was even more intoxicating than he had imagined while cuddling and making out with her with their clothes on.

Harry let out a little “eep” when Hermione slid one of her hands down his back and squeezed one of his buttocks, the fingers of her other hand raking across his chest while she nibbled one of Harry’s earlobes. Picking up on Hermione’s cues, Harry relaxed and let his own hands and lips roam, exploring her naked form.

The dizziness attained from the spiked punch at the Yule Ball was nothing compared to the euphoria induced by kneading Hermione’s firm breasts, sliding his hand across the supple skin of Hermione’s taut belly, or cradling Hermione’s bottom cheeks in the palms of his hands. When Hermione flicked Harry’s nipples with her tongue and gave him a devilish look, he took the hint.

This time, the trail blazed by Harry’s humid lips traveled from Hermione’s neck and down across her collarbone until they wetly engulfed the pink summit of one of her little hills. Hermione’s squirming and moans of delight told Harry that he had discovered one of her trigger points. Harry swirled his tongue around Hermione’s hard nipple and began to suck, rolling her other peak between his thumb and fingers as he continued to massage her breasts.

Hermione fell back into the settee, pulling Harry with her, letting out a squeak of elation, grinding
her wetness against one of his thighs, reaching for his burgeoning stiffness. Harry groaned when he felt Hermione’s warm hand wrapping around his erection, gently tugging it a few times. Hermione’s thighs parted as she guided him towards her sopping heat.

“Hermione...” gasped Harry when he realised just how far she intended to go. “Are you sure you want this?”

“Yes...” Hermione panted, beads of sweat forming on her heaving breasts, “I’ve been wanting to... to be with you like this since the World Cup! ... I’ve just been working up the nerve to...”

“What about - you know - protection?”

“There’s a charm for that,” Hermione quickly answered, aching with anticipation, “I did it earlier when I was getting ready for the Yule Ball. I’m ready Harry... but...but only if you are!” she concluded reluctantly.

“Okay then... Alright Hermione,” Harry grinned apologetically at his girlfriend, “I’m ready too then... I just wanted to be absolutely certain!”

“You’re so sweet Harry... I love you so much!” she replied, gazing longingly into his earnest green eyes.

Hermione beamed at Harry and pulled him closer. She bit her lip as the crown of Harry’s stiffness nestled in the warm pink entrance of her moist crescent valley. Girding himself for any signs of distress from Hermione, Harry gingerly pressed forth.

“I won’t break, Harry,” she urged him.

Emboldened by Hermione’s plea, Harry plunged his rigid lance into Hermione’s tight sheath, relieved that her wetness had eased his passage. Hermione let out a little cry of pleasure to feel Harry inside her for the first time. Harry began to thrust, remembering the rhythms of the dances, picking up speed as his confidence increased with Hermione’s every moan of joy.

Hermione’s hips tilted and she folded her legs around Harry’s backside, meeting his thrusts as their timing synced. Harry groaned at the delicious sensation of Hermione’s tightness clinging to his shaft as he pistoned in and out.

Hermione arched, moaning loudly and shuddering as gusts of ecstasy began to sweep through her. Harry felt as if he were soaring through a starry night when the whirlwind of bliss caught him in its grasp and swept him along for the ride. Harry lost himself and groaned again, convulsively releasing his essence into Hermione’s depths.

Hermione clutched Harry tightly, and the last thing she recalled before she faded into oblivion, was Harry deep inside of her, and his beads of sweat against her skin, as he tenderly kissed her and murmured, “I love you Hermione.”
The headmaster’s eyes twinkled as he regarded the pained expression on his deputy headmistress’s features, her furrowed brow and pursed lips a sure sign of distress. The Phoenix on the perch ruffled his carmine and gold feathers and averted his eyes, looking as if he were considering flight to avoid an oncoming storm. The headmaster gestured towards the steaming hot cup of Earl Grey he had poured for the deputy headmistress and the accompaniments on the tea-tray.

“Lemon and honey? Cream and sugar? The lemon-ginger biscuits are also quite nice,” he offered brightly.

“Really Albus,” snapped Professor McGonagall, ignoring the cup of tea and the biscuits, “look what has become of your meddling. Gryffindor will be in an uproar - indeed, no doubt the whole school shall be awash with rumour and innuendo. How can this possibly be of benefit to Mr Potter and Miss Granger...?”

“I believe the proper terms of address are now Mr and Mrs Potter,” said Albus Dumbledore politely, his eyebrows raised. Professor McGonagall let out an angry huff.

“That is my point precisely! First allowing them to share private chambers - then this! How you could allow this to happen - at their age...”

Dumbledore raised his hand slightly and Professor McGonagall quieted.

“You must believe me Minerva. I have only the best interests of Harry and Mrs Potter at heart. Indeed, their formal marriage now puts me in a much stronger position for defending their cohabitation in private quarters to the School’s Board of Governors. Such arrangements have been made in the past for young married couples...”

“Yes, but in the entire history of Hogwarts, only during the sixth or seventh year of the students in question,” Minerva McGonagall interrupted acidly, unable to help herself. “And it is exceedingly rare in any case.

“You know as well as I do that once such an arrangement is formalised, private housing necessarily becomes permanent and the standard rules of House affiliation no longer apply. That is generally not so much of an issue for those who have reached the standard age of majority, and who usually only have a number of months of schooling left - but the Potters are only in fourth year.”

“That is true,” Dumbledore nodded, his twinkle vanishing as he suddenly realised where Professor McGonagall was going with her line of argument. He stroked his long silvery beard pensively when he began speaking again.

“As to Harry and Mrs Potter’s treatment by the student body, I daresay that their new status as husband and wife shall make very little difference at the moment, given the scrutiny they have already endured this year. Many teenagers can be fickle and sometimes unwittingly cruel creatures, but quite frankly, they are no more or less easily swayed by vicious propaganda and the prodding of their peers than many adults.

“There is very little that we can do about the effects of outside propaganda such as to be found in the pages of the Daily Prophet... Regardless, it is our duty as educators to guide our students as best we can to treat each other in a kind and respectful manner and to not succumb to an unruly mob mentality. And it is also up to us as the Order of the Phoenix to protect those who are at greatest risk.
“These are dangerous times Minerva. Voldemort has returned to Britain as you well know, and a possibly competing Darkness is growing within the Ministry itself. And might I remind you that you were quite in agreement with me regarding Harry’s emancipation?...”

Minerva McGonagall inwardly groaned. Indeed, when they had been discussing options for dealing with Harry’s mistreatment at the hands of the Dursleys, she had been very much in favour of pressing Fudge to emancipate Harry on his authority as Minister.

Ultimately, it was the Dursleys’ ignoring of the first Ministry Warning, and the escape of Black from prison which had compelled Dumbledore to follow through and finally make that call. She turned her attention back to the headmaster as he went on.

“It is true,” said Dumbledore, “that I alone am responsible for asking Mrs Granger to emancipate her daughter for Harry’s benefit - his protection - but can you truly be so quick to dismiss her agreement to do so, given Hermione Potter’s exceptional degree of maturity and intellect?

“The choices that Harry and Hermione Potter made were their own entirely, and they made them deservedly so. And can you truly disagree that the Potters are now much safer together, in a wing of the castle not so easily accessible to those with the passwords to enter the Houses - as Sirius himself and Alastor both reminded me?...”

Professor McGonagall flushed, recalling how easy it had been for Sirius Black to gain entrance to Gryffindor Tower. And despite the efforts which had been made since to teach the portraits guarding the Houses not to let in anyone who was not a student or staff member, if the experience with the False Alastor Moody - Barty Crouch Jr - had taught them anything, it was that anyone under the influence of a polyjuice potion with the right passwords could enter Gryffindor Tower.

Minerva McGonagall’s lips grew thinner and her consternation grew deeper as Dumbledore continued to speak.

“...And the Potters have both - even at such tender ages - proven themselves deserving of being treated as adults time and time again. It would be quite unfair for us now to disallow them to make their own choices, legal adults that they now are both, as long as they are kept fully informed of the potential consequences of their acts...”

“Well there you go then,” interjected Professor McGonagall haughtily, arching her eyebrows, latching desperately onto the last, best argument that Dumbledore had just tossed in her lap.

“...Consequences indeed! Mr Potter clearly cannot have known that by his impetuous act, he has made himself ineligible to be Seeker for the Gryffindor Quidditch team for the remainder of his time at Hogwarts.”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore in a small voice. He went on with a sigh, “That is most unfortunate for Mr Potter. However, it is possible that there may be a way around the bylaws regarding Unaffiliated students - Harry and his wife were originally chosen by the Sorting Hat for Gryffindor after all.”

A wry expression crossed Dumbledore’s features as he was reminded of his deputy’s very considerable degree of determination, and a twinkle returned to his eyes as he peered at her over the top of his half-moon spectacles.

“I must say Minerva,” he continued, “that you were quite proficient in finding a means to bend the rules to afford young Harry the opportunity to play for the team during his first year; therefore I shall leave researching a means to allow him to continue playing in your quite capable hands. I have no doubt that you shall...
“And when you do, I expect you to explain to Harry in full that he, as an *Unaffiliated* student, is being granted another rare opportunity - and to this time leave the choice to rejoin the team in *his* hands.”

Professor McGonagall appeared somewhat disconcerted by Dumbledore’s final pointed remarks. As she departed the headmaster’s office, Dumbledore couldn’t help but feel that Harry Potter might yet surprise them both with whatever choice he made.

Dumbledore took another sip from his own teacup and glanced at the parchments on his desk, weighing the pros and cons of some of the other decisions which lay before him.

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The day after the New Year had begun, Parvati and Lavender both giggled excitedly as they helped Hermione lug the rest of her things to Harry’s - no, Hermione corrected herself - *her* and Harry’s private chambers. They had waited until they were certain that nobody else was in the Gryffindor Common Room - especially Ron, uncertain as Hermione was about his possible reaction to the news.

On the one hand, over the holidays Ron had continued to telegraph indications that he wanted to be friends with Harry again. But on the other, judging from the looks Ron had been giving them during the Yule Ball, it still seemed that he had little control over his jealousy.

Hermione peered anxiously at Lavender and Parvati while they helped arrange her things next to Harry’s in the wardrobe and dresser drawers while she filled the bookshelves with her books. Crookshanks sat on the bed grinning at them, flicking his bushy orange tail lazily.

“You won’t tell anyone yet, will you?” she asked.

“Well, it won’t be a secret that you and Harry are married for long, especially as you’re wearing that lovely ring,” Parvati fairly pointed out. “And everyone will be wondering why you aren’t living in Gryffindor Tower anymore.”

“Besides, marriages are recorded by the Ministry and reported in the paper,” said Lavender sympathetically. “By the time term starts, everyone will know.”

“Anyway, even though some people will probably think it’s a bit weird - you both being married so young - at least they won’t be able to say rude things about you two living together *not* married,” Parvati added.

“I suppose you’re both right,” Hermione sighed. “I’m just being silly.”

“And it’s not like you’re the first people to ever get married as teenagers.” Lavender sighed happily with a dreamy expression. “*I* think it’s romantic.”

“That’s because *you* want to run off and marry Viktor,” giggled Parvati.

“Prat!” retorted Lavender, giving Parvati a swat with a cushion.

The last few days of the Christmas Holidays seemed to pass without incident, but as it turned out, Parvati and Lavender were correct; by the time term began, nearly the entire school was aware and the whispers had already begun. But at least the Potters still had their closest friends for support, and the whispers surprisingly remained as little more than quiet talk and the occasional giggle.

Luna, Neville, and Ginny had been at least as congratulatory as Parvati and Lavender. And Viktor Krum, the Twins, and Dean Thomas had all been quite impressed with Harry. It was hard to tell
what Ron and Seamus thought, as they had been a bit more subdued and kept to themselves somewhat since the Yule Ball.

And for those few who were still in the dark when term started, they could hardly miss the fact that most of the professors found themselves stumbling over the proper way to address Hermione in class. Professor Sprout was among the first to keep calling Hermione Miss Granger, and then catching herself and calling her Mrs Potter, but she certainly wasn’t the last. Hermione had blushed furiously as the class fell into a fit of giggles.

“Blimey Hermione!” a crimson faced Harry muttered as they departed from their first Herbology lesson of the year. “Sorry - I never thought about that. If you want to, you can keep your last name - I’m not fussed about that sort of...

“No!” Hermione said firmly, giving Harry a hard stare. “I like being Mrs Potter, and don’t you ever forget that, Harry!

“...Besides, it’s too late for that now. And yes... I was a bit worried at first about what people would think, but then I realised that it didn’t make one bit of difference. Lots of people have been rude and horrible about both of us since first year anyway, but as long as we have each other and our friends, I can put up with anything!”

“I hope so Hermione,” Harry sighed as they made their way through the snowdrifts to Care of Magical Creatures, “because we’re about to have a lesson with the Slytherins.”

But when they reached the paddock in the clearing near Hagrid’s hut, the topic on the top of everyone’s mind seemed to be something quite different. Ron, Seamus, Neville, and Dean were frowning at Draco Malfoy and the Slytherins, who all seemed to be quite gleeful.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked Neville. “Where’s Hagrid?”

“See for yourself,” Neville muttered, passing Harry a copy of the Daily Prophet as the Slytherins continued to chortle nastily. Seamus and Ron averted their eyes shiftily when Harry glanced at them. Hermione frowned at the headline.

DUMBLEDORE’S GIANT MISTAKE: HALFBREEDS AT HOGWARTS

Hermione scanned through the article quickly while Harry tried to keep up.

“So what if Hagrid is Half-Giant!?” she snapped crossly, “It’s just bigotry... they can’t all be horrible - it’s just like the prejudice against Werewolves... Look how Skeeter goes on and on about Lupin as well in the second, third, and fourth paragraphs - and he’s as sweet and mild-mannered as a lamb!”

Ron and Seamus looked at each other and shook their heads in disbelief, unwilling to argue with Hermione, torn between their affection for Hagrid and their preconceptions about brutally savage Giants.

“How did that Skeeter cow find out anyway?” growled Harry, his blood boiling. “I thought she’d been banned from Hogwarts.”

Seamus and Ron looked a bit shiftily again.

“Dunno,” Ron muttered awkwardly, the first words he had spoken to Harry since before Christmas. This wasn’t exactly the way he’d planned to try and get Harry to speak to him again. “Seamus and I overheard Hagrid and Madame Maxime chatting a bit about their childhoods while we were... erm... getting smashed during the Yule Ball. I suppose Rita Skeeter could’ve heard too, but we didn’t see...
“Mebbe she’s got an Invisibility Cloak,” Seamus proffered with a shrug.

“Whatever! Skeeter’s just doing a public service! That should put an end to the Halfbreed Oaf’s teaching career...” sneered Malfoy, “I can’t see anyone wanting their kids to be taught by a savage giant - they’ll be worried that he’ll eat them. Haha...!”

Crabbe and Goyle sniggered sycophantically.

“She’s off Malfoy!” snarled Ron.

Harry briefly felt a moment of kinship with Ron before he remembered that he was still cross with him as well. Harry was about to furiously respond to Malfoy too, but at that moment, a witch with short steely-grey hair and a jutting chin entered the clearing.

“Alright now, that’s enough of that then! It’s time for class to begin...”

“Where’s Hagrid?” Harry interrupted the substitute professor heatedly.

“Too ashamed to show his stupid face I reckon,” Malfoy smirked.

The witch ignored Harry and Draco, speaking briskly and loudly over the both of them. “My name is Professor Grubbly-Plank, and I shall be teaching this class until further notice. This way please.”

The professor wheeled about and led them past the Beauxbatons horses to the far end of the paddock. Harry’s breath caught and the girls all “ooohed” and “aaahed” when they spied the gleaming white Unicorn tethered to a tree, its luminous glow making the glistening snow look dingy in comparison.

Harry was so overtaken by its beauty that his fury at Malfoy and being ignored by the professor melted away. The last Unicorn he had seen had been lying dead on the forest floor, its silvery blood dripping from the mouth of Voldemort’s Shade. Harry blinked back the unbidden tears and stepped towards the Unicorn; Hermione grabbed his hand.

“Harry, no!” she squeaked anxiously, eyeing the Unicorn pawing nervously at the snow-covered ground with its golden hooves.

“Stay back, boy!” snapped Professor Grubbly-Plank. “Unicorns prefer a woman’s touch...”

But Harry didn’t seem to hear as the compulsion drew him closer. The world had gone silent and for a moment it only seemed to contain him, Hermione and the Unicorn. Falling snowflakes stilled and sparkled in midair, frozen in time as Harry bowed and reached out his hand. The Unicorn calmed and bowed its own head.

Hermione gasped and beamed at Harry as he gently petted the Unicorn’s nose and stroked its silky white mane. Still holding Harry’s other hand, she stroked the Unicorn too, feeling a strong urge to kiss Harry and ride off with him into the forest on its back.

Professor Grubbly-Plank quieted and held her breath, eyes wide with shock, afraid that she might break the spell and spook the Unicorn. As she watched the bushy haired girl reach out her own hand to touch the Unicorn, it finally registered with the substitute professor that the irksome boy was Harry Potter.

“Well done Mr Potter!” she said quietly when Harry rejoined the rest of the students with a glowing
Hermione at his side.

As she looked him over to see what could possibly account for the Unicorn’s unusual behaviour, Professor Grubbly-Plank noticed that there was something quite different about Harry Potter’s shining green eyes, something that seemed almost feminine. She snapped out of it with a shake of her head and returned to form.

“Right then class!” she said brusquely, “Now, what you just saw was very unusual. If you value your lives boys, I highly recommend that you keep back! Unicorns can be quite dangerous towards males. Girls, please form a line...”

Malfoy snorted and glowered at Harry and Hermione. Draco felt a nearly overwhelming urge to ignore the Professor’s warning and have a go at touching the Unicorn. If Halfblood Potter and a Mudblood could do it, then he knew he could do it too. He was a Pureblood - a Noble - of course a Unicorn would accept him. But then he remembered his experience with the Hippogriff and thought better of it.

“Big Deal!” sneered Malfoy. “So you touched a Unicorn, Potter! ...Just proves how girly you are.”

Harry raised his eyebrows at Malfoy and smirked. “Yeah, maybe I am. So what?”

Draco felt a surge of bewilderment and anger, unable to conjure a response as Harry and Hermione turned and walked away. After classes finished for the day, Harry and Hermione traipsed back down through the snow to Hagrid’s hut and banged on the door, to little avail.

“Hagrid, open up!” Harry yelled, thumping loudly.

“It’s just us Hagrid!” shouted Hermione.

But the door remained shut, and Hagrid remained silent; all they could hear was Fang barking and whining as he scratched from the other side.

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Worry about Hagrid ate at Harry and Hermione, but when they reached the Room of Requirement for training with Professor Moody, they were distracted by the presence of a girl who looked like she might be in seventh year, though neither of them had ever seen a girl with spiky violet hair at Hogwarts before.

“Right then Potters,” growled Moody, unable to resist grinning at them both and giving them a wink, “before we begin, I’d like you to meet Nymphadora Tonks...”

“But just call me Tonks for now alright,” said the violet haired girl, sticking out her tongue at Moody. “I hate my first name - and Mad Eye bloody knows it.”

Professor Moody chuckled and the Potters took to Tonks immediately, both of them grinning at her.

“Heh, be that as it may,” Mad Eye continued, “Tonks is here for a couple o’ reasons. One is to help continue the trainin’ as it’s plainly obvious to me that Mr Potter’ll be far too soft on his missus to get the job done right when we begin hand to hand fightin’ techniques. She’ll be workin’ with Mrs Potter... And the other reason - the main one really - is that she’ll be keepin’ an eye on you both for the Order. She’ll be movin’ into quarters right next to yours...”

“The Order? What’s that?” asked Harry, suddenly suspicious. “And why does someone need to keep an eye on us?”
“Don’t worry,” said Tonks hastily, glaring at Moody. “It’s not the way Mad Eye makes it sound. I’m Sirius’s cousin - he thought you should have a protection detail on you and Hermione, Harry, given the circumstances of You-Know-Who’s return and the fact that someone in the Ministry with connections here at Hogwarts seems to ‘ave it in for you too…”

“The Malfoys and the Minister,” Hermione hissed.

“Perhaps!” Moody chuckled. “Anyway, Dumbledore agreed, and so Tonks is in. She’ll be shadowin’ you between and after classes. You should both be grateful - she’s put a promising career as an Auror on hold to be part of this…”

Tonks rolled her eyes at Mad Eye and shook her head. “Don’t let Mad Eye guilt you - I’m here because I volunteered for it.”

“...And if Tonks would quit interruptin,’ maybe I could finish,” Moody grumbled. “As I was saying, Tonks finished her Auror training last summer, but she’s also a part of the Order - the Order of the Phoenix that is. Dumbledore started it way back when to fight Voldemort the first time around - your mum and dad were part of it Mr Potter.

“So were Sirius and Remus and half the professors at Hogwarts... and the Weasleys too, among others. Some would’ve thought we might’ve stopped after you apparently finished Voldemort, Potter. But we’ve been keepin’ our eye on things and layin’ low is all. After the business with the Philosopher’s Stone we’ve been on full alert again. And with everything that’s been goin’ on this year, Dumbledore thought it was about time you were in on it too…”

“Sirius!” said Tonks in a loud stage whisper, giving Harry and Hermione a wink.

“Yeah, I s’pose Tonks is right about that,” said Moody, with another gruff chuckle. “Sirius and I kinda pushed the issue a bit with Dumbledore - we figure that given what you’ve both accomplished already, you’re old enough now, and you’ve got a right to be part of it all. So now that bit’s outta the way, I need to ask you if you’ve worked out the Egg yet, Potter?”

Harry swallowed when Professor Moody’s electric-blue eye gave him a penetrating look, glad that he and Hermione had managed to work it out, and not given Moody the chance to berate him.

“Yeah, I got it just before New Year’s,” Harry nodded.

“Excellent Potter! Right - well I reckon we’ll need a swimming pool in here to train in for part of the week then. You might as well swim in place of your regular daily calisthenics for now. But as I said - we’ll also start doin’ a bit of hand to hand, though we’ll focus more strongly on that once we’re past the Second Task now that we’ve got a good idea what this one entails.”

“Er... The only thing is, I don’t really know how to swim,” said Harry, flushing with embarrassment. “The Dursleys never took me swimming whenever they took Dudley, and my primary school didn’t have a pool.”

Tonks scowled, remembering some of the things that Sirius had told her about how the Dursleys had apparently treated Harry.

“That’s alright Harry,” said Hermione, looking sympathetic. “I can show you how to swim. I’m not brilliant, but I know all the basic strokes.”

“Good enough then,” Moody nodded. “Finally, you’ll need to be able to breathe underwater for the duration of the task. I’ll leave you to work that bit out yourself - gotta give you somethin’ to figure out on your own. I’ll give you a couple of weeks tops... Anyway, you can start workin’ on that
tomorrow Potter, today we’ll get you both started on some fightin’ techniques...”

Harry was glad that he and Hermione had kept up a bit with their calisthenics over the holidays, as Moody put them both through their paces before he and Tonks showed them how to do a few basic blocks, strikes, holds, and throws. Moody grinned at them both while they were groaning on the mat at the end of the lesson.

“Heh! Count your lucky stars we’ll only be doin’ that about one lesson a week till after this task is done with. There’ll be a lot more of that coming to prepare for the Third Task. So get crackin’ on swim practice Potter.” And with one final chuckle, Professor Moody stumped out of the Room of Requirement.

When they had finally managed to recover a bit and catch their breaths, Harry pushed himself up off the mat with a grunt as Tonks helped Hermione to her feet.

“Sorry about that,” said Tonks apologetically when Hermione winced in pain as they made their way back to their private chambers to clean up before dinner. “Mad Eye seems to think he’s still runnin’ the Auror Training bootcamp...”

“No, I’m fine... really!” Hermione lied.

“Yeah... we’re used to it now.” Harry groaned again. Every muscle and joint in his body hurt.

Tonks peered at them both wryly as she pulled several vials of potion out of her pocket.

“Here you go then - a couple of pain potions for you both,” she said with a grin. “I got ‘em off Pomfrey before I headed up here with Mad Eye. I knew ‘e’d be a bear about it... He ran everyone through the ringer when he was trainin’ us at the Auror Academy. It really will get easier eventually... after you actually do get used to it...”

“So what’s it like being an Auror?” Harry asked after gratefully swigging the pain potion. A flicker of uncertainty crossed Tonks’ features.

“It’s alright I suppose - I like gettin’ the bad guys...” she replied, “but to be perfectly honest, I’m sorta glad to be out of it and back at Hogwarts. Aurors tend to be a bit of a stiff lot... and me, well... I like to ‘ave fun...”

“How come you joined up then?” asked Hermione, her eyes glazing slightly as the pain potion began to kick in.

“Mad Eye!” Tonks muttered. “He recruited me after I got in a spot of trouble at Hogwarts during sixth year - I couldn’t really say no...” Tonks trailed off. Neither Hermione nor Harry pressed her; it was quite apparent that she wasn’t keen to revisit what was clearly a painful memory for her.

“Anyway,” Tonks continued, brightening, “when Sirius asked me if I wanted to go undercover for the Order and come back to Hogwarts for a bit, I jumped at the opportunity. Most of the Aurors working security for the Triwizard tournament know me - they think I’m doing plainclothes undercover security for them, but really, I’ll just be watchin’ your backs for the Order... I’ll try to stay outta your hair though...”

Feeling cheerful and slightly buzzy from the pain potions by the time they reached their quarters, Harry and Hermione were both intrigued to see the new door in the corridor very near their own. Tonks looked like she wanted to say something else, but instead turned towards the new door, which apparently belonged to her.
“Well, I suppose I’d better let you two get cleaned up for dinner then...”

“Wait,” said Hermione after sharing a brief look with Harry, “why don’t you come in for a bit and have dinner with us? We’re a bit too worn out to go downstairs tonight anyway.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yeah... absolutely,” said Harry quickly with a grin, eager to find out more about whatever it was Tonks seemed keen to talk about.

Dobby was only too happy to bring them all dinner in the Potters’ private chambers. Tonks soon had Harry and Hermione in stitches as she regaled them with stories about her time at Hogwarts, and some of her funnier moments training to be an Auror. They were fascinated to learn that her father was a muggleborn. Tonks peered at Harry sympathetically as she chatted about the favourite bits of visiting her muggle relatives.

“...yeah, I love muggle comic books and movies,” she was telling them, “especially sci fi/fantasy and superhero stuff. I love watchin’ *Dr Who* and *Star Trek* on the telly when I visit my muggle grandparents and cousins, and *Star Wars* is one of my favourite movies...” Tonks seemed to be drawing nearer to the topic she had wanted to talk about to begin with when she gave Harry a conspiratorial look.

“...I’m sorry you had such a rough time of it with your muggle relatives Harry. But Sirius mentioned something you told him about which I thought was interesting. Is it true that when your aunt tried to cut off all your hair that you regrew it overnight?”

“Yeah,” Harry nodded, wondering where Tonks was going with this. “I got in loads of trouble for that, even though I didn’t know how I did it. I still don’t really... I suppose it was just accidental magic... like the time I turned Aunt Marge into a balloon.”

“Hmmm... It’s a bit more than that, I should think,” said Tonks excitedly. “That’s not something just any wizard could do, even accidentally. That sorta self-transfiguration nearly always requires a wand... unless you’re a metamorphmagus.”

Hermione gasped, but Harry looked puzzled.

“A what?”

“A metamorphmagus Harry,” said Hermione, her eyes boggling. “They can transform their anatomy - even make bits into animal forms... though you’d have to be an animagus like Professor McGonagall or Sirius to transform into an animal completely. Mostly though, a metamorphmagus can make themselves look like whoever they want - without polyjuice potion - and they’re incredibly rare...”

“Hermione’s right, Harry...” Tonks eagerly confirmed. “I oughta know... because I’m one myself!”

“And... and you think that **I’m** one too?” Harry gaped incredulously at Tonks.

“You’d ‘ave to be to regrow your hair like that overnight - though you could’ve done it in three seconds flat if you’d’ve been trying... look...”

And before their eyes, as Harry and Hermione gawked in amazement, Tonks’s spiky purple hair lengthened and billowed into long flowing golden locks as her face transformed until she looked like another girl entirely.
“Blimey!” gasped Harry.

“I can teach you how t’do it Harry... if you’d like,” offered Tonks. “You have to be born with the talent, but it still takes a bit of work and practice to figure out how to use it to its best advantage. You can even change gender if you’re good enough...”

“When do we start?” asked Harry, grinning from ear to ear.

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When the Potters saw Tonks the next morning waiting for them in the corridor as they made their way to breakfast, her hair was bubble-gum pink, and she was wearing Gryffindor robes with a badge that said Teacher’s Assistant.

“‘Plainclothes’ Undercover work and disguises is my speciality as an Auror of course,” she said with a grin. “Easier to blend in a bit and shadow you without drawin’ too much attention...”

“Er...” said Harry, as he and Hermione both glanced skeptically at Tonks’s hair.

“Oh, yeah...” Tonks giggled. “Well really, if anything, that oughta make it a bit easier for me to mix with a bunch of teenagers... Most’ll just think I’m a recent Hogwarts graduate trainin’ to be a professor.”

And as it turned out, Tonks was correct and most just accepted her as an older teenager doing postgraduate work. Except for the occasional glances at her hair, the only real questions she got at the Gryffindor table were from a few older students wondering why they hadn’t noticed her in previous years (“...I didn’t colour my hair back then...” was her pat answer), and what professorship she was in training for (“...as a substitute for a bit, until a permanent position opens up. Course... I’m hoping Dumbledore starts a music programme so I can teach you lot how to start wizard rock bands...” was an answer well received with lots of giggles).

Harry took his first metamorphmagus lesson with Tonks after classes and his swim practice with Hermione that afternoon. Hermione had found everything she could in the library on metamorphagi and piled it into her bookbag, making certain that she had plenty of extra parchment, ink, and quills to take notes. Harry raised his eyebrows when he saw Hermione’s preparations, peering at her with bemusement.

“Er... anyone would think that you’re the one taking metamorphmagus lessons, Hermione,” said Harry with a puzzled grin. Hemione blushed slightly, then turned and gave Harry The Look.

“You don’t think that I would miss learning about something, just because I can’t do it myself, do you?” she responded a bit haughtily.

Harry turned pink himself, and looked chastened.

“No... No, of course not! I’m sorry Hermione, I don’t know what I was thinking,” he said quickly. “Of course we’re taking all of our lessons together.”

Hermione’s features softened and she gave him a quick kiss. “It’s alright Harry. Besides, I’ll be able to take notes while you keep your focus on the practical aspects.”

And as Hermione was the only one with any experience swimming, she was the one to ask the Room of Requirement for a swimming pool when they reached the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. Harry was very impressed with the heated pool, not to mention quite happy to see Hermione in a bikini again... and quite embarrassed when he had to adjust his swimming trunks.
Hermione grinned when she saw his goofy flustered expression, secretly pleased that Harry was still easily abashed by the sight of her less than fully clothed. She found Harry’s shyness about such things to be one of his very endearing qualities.

Harry turned out to be a quick study - as with quidditch, dancing, and the basic fighting techniques that Professor Moody and Tonks had begun teaching them both the previous afternoon, Harry picked up the basics of swimming rapidly and with ease once he got over his initial nervousness. Hermione was certain that he would outstrip her own skills within a matter of weeks; which was good, because the Second Task was now less than two months away.

They were both startled when Tonks suddenly appeared while they were in the middle of a giggly water-fight, having lost track of the time. Hermione reddened and felt herself growing a bit warmer when she recognised the eagerly appraising glance that Tonks gave her, so much like the one that Fleur had given her when she had offered up the secret of the Golden Egg. The glance was briefly followed by a goofy flustered expression much like Harry’s before Tonks quickly recovered herself.

“Enjoy the nice hot water while it lasts,” chortled Tonks while Harry and Hermione dried off after clambering out of the pool. “If I know Mad Eye, he’ll be turning this into a mini-replica of the Black Lake in a few weeks.”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing,” said Harry with a grin as he pulled on a t-shirt. “He turned the Room of Requirement into a dragon arena before the First Task.”

Tonks grinned when she spotted Hermione ready to take notes, quill in hand. Though she was slightly disappointed that Hermione had covered up in a fluffy bathrobe. Putting that thought aside quickly, Tonks launched into her lecture.

“Right then! Before we start, I should mention that you probably oughta keep this to yourself Harry. Sirius thinks it’ll be safer for you the less who know that you have this talent...”

Harry glanced at Hermione, slightly puzzled at that for a moment, but then it hit him.

“Of course...” he gasped, “I might need to use it to avoid Voldemort...”

“...or the Ministry.” Hermione concluded, her own eyes widening as the full value of being a metamorphmagus sank in.

“Yeah, precisely,” Tonks agreed, before going on. “Anyway, the lessons won’t really take that long - maybe half an hour at most - as you’ll mostly be practicin’ on your own time, Harry. But it’s very hard to control the morphing process at first until you get used to it, so don’t be surprised if nothing happens this lesson, alright?”

Harry nodded attentively, eager to begin.

“Now, some teachers will probably tell you to concentrate hard,” Tonks continued. “At least mine did, but I find that’s the opposite of what you want to do. What you really wanna do is form an image of how you want to look in your mind, but just allow your thoughts to sort of swim around it. If you try too hard, you’ll just push it away.

“Once you ‘ave an idea of what you want to look like, it’s all just down to a lot of practice. It’s best to start out with something simple, like adding colour to a fingernail... But when you want to get more complex, and change loads of stuff, that’s when things get tricky.”

Tonks gave Harry the opportunity to attempt to change the colour of one of his fingernails. After about ten minutes of wrinkling his nose and furrowing his brow in deep concentration he
remembered what Tonks had said about not trying so hard. He did his best to just picture it in his head in a more relaxed state of mind, but relaxing had never been his strong suit.

Finally, Harry thought about how he felt when he was soaring on his Firebolt or kissing Hermione and was startled when the fingernail he was focusing on turned the same bubble-gum pink colour of Tonks’s hair.

“Brilliant Harry!” said Tonks with a hint of awe in her voice. “Most people supposedly take at least two lessons before they get one fingernail. I did it in about the same time as you, but my teacher told me I was a prodigy...”

Hermione beamed at Harry and gave him a hug.

“It’ll stay that way until you undo it Harry,” said Tonks, “but to undo it is much easier as your body will always want to revert to its natural form. All you really ‘ave to do is just want it to go back to normal...

“Just practice that for a couple of days. If you can manage to change one fingernail within a few seconds, try two, and then three, and so on, until you can manage to do ‘em all in a few seconds. Don’t try anything more advanced just yet, unless I’m around, alright? Promise me...”

“Yeah, okay Tonks... I promise,” Harry reluctantly agreed. Hermione raised her hand.

“I’m not a Professor, Hermione, but alright,” Tonks giggled. “What’s your question?”

“I was just thinking about transfiguring parts of the anatomy to animal forms, and I was wondering how functional some of the parts might be,” asked Hermione.

“Well, that’s a bit far ahead,” Tonks replied, “but really, it all depends on how good the metamorphmagus is. A really good one can picture the internal structure necessary for functionality if they ‘ave access to a good image of how the cells all work. I suppose I could manage it if I gave it a go, but I’ve never really bothered with that myself.

“You’d ‘ave to be really brilliant at imaging it in your head, and be able to follow complicated diagrams. That goes for changin’ human gender too. It’s all cosmetic and superficial unless you can visualise all the internal bits.”

“So what was that all about?” Harry asked Hermione after they had returned to their quarters to get ready for dinner.

“Well... I was thinking about how you might be able to breathe underwater, Harry. At first I thought of Gillyweed, but there’s really no guarantee that it will last long enough for you to complete the task - it all depends on how much you eat, and the potency. So then I thought that perhaps you could actually use your metamorphmagus abilities to develop functioning gills...

“It might be difficult, but well worth it - as you would be able to use either your lungs or gills as needed without having to worry about one interfering with the other, or having to worry about whether your gills would last for a long enough time... or for too long - which could happen if you had too much Gillyweed.”

“That’s brilliant Hermione!” Harry exclaimed excitedly, beaming at his genius wife. “But what about you though? You won’t be able to breathe underwater...”

“I’m not sure,” Hermione admitted ruefully. “I’ve looked through some of the books in the library, but I haven’t found anything else yet... but there must be something - some sort of charm...
“I’ll keep looking though,” she sighed. “In the meantime, we’d probably better study the physical appearance and the effects of Gillyweed anyway. Because if you’re going to keep being a metamorphmagus a secret, you’ll have to make it look like you’re using Gillyweed for the task.”

“That makes sense.” Harry nodded. “There’s another Hogsmeade Day coming up. We can buy some Gillyweed in the apothecary in the village. And as soon as Tonks thinks I’m ready enough, I can start practicing that...”

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The next week flew by in a blur of activity, and Harry found that he was as busy as he had ever been at Hogwarts, even without a full quidditch schedule or studying for exams. But he hardly noticed as his excitement at the prospect of reaching his full potential as a metamorphmagus was only matched by his happiness at being able to return to his private chambers every night with Hermione.

Professor Moody was pleased to hear that Harry had a plan for breathing underwater at their next session, and with the assistance of Tonks he began training the Potters how to fight and cast spells underwater in the pool. Tonks was thrilled with Harry’s progress when he showed up with Hermione at his next metamorphmagus lesson, all of his fingernails - and toenails too - every colour of the rainbow.

Harry was ready to move on to changing hair colour and skin tone as well, and then putting it all together. By the end of his second lesson, he’d managed to make himself as blond as Malfoy.

“Don’t forget to change your eyebrows too though,” Hermione giggled as she ruffled Harry’s platinum mop top. “You look really funny with light hair and dark eyebrows...”

The only thing that really marred the first week was the continued absence of Hagrid. Harry was hopeful that he’d find Hagrid in the village on Hogsmeade Day, and would be able to convince him to return.

When Saturday arrived, the Potters left the castle and set off through the snow-covered grounds towards Hogsmeade. Tonks walked on ahead of them and kept her eyes peeled. Harry and Hermione both waved and grinned at Viktor Krum when they passed by the Black Lake. Dressed only in swimming trunks, Viktor waved back, then dove from the side of the Durmstrang ship into the frigid waters of the lake.

“Blimey! He’s bloody mad!” said Harry, his breath clouding in the freezing air. “There’s still ice over half the lake...”

“It’s probably warmer than where he’s from,” Hermione giggled. “Or at least warmer than wherever Durmstrang is located. I think it must be very far north...”

“Yeah... but there’s still the giant squid if we’re lucky,” said a familiar, rather hopeful sounding voice behind them, followed by a familiar sounding snigger.

Harry and Hermione whirled around and spotted Ron and Seamus trailing behind them. Harry scowled and Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Just ignore them,” she said. “They’re just jealous because you’re Viktor’s friend, and because Lavender’s going out with him.”

Harry huffed angrily and began to walk a bit faster, trying to put some distance between him and Ron. He’d almost hoped the other day in Care of Magical Creatures that he might be able to patch things up with Ron eventually, but apparently Ron was still too bloody self-absorbed to put much
effort in from his end of things. Hermione trotted along beside Harry, trying to keep up.

Once in the village, Harry and Hermione made a beeline for the local apothecary, where Harry bought a substantial amount of Gillyweed. Not only for Harry’s practice though; they still hadn’t found anything else in the library which would allow Hermione to breathe underwater, and they had decided that she should keep a small pouch of it just in case she needed it.

They stopped for a bit in Honeydukes and Harry stocked up on some of their favourite sweets. In Zonko’s they spotted Fred and George whispering and taking notes; Neville and Dean were hanging out together nearby, seeming strangely listless. For a moment, Hermione thought that she and Harry had lost their “secret escort” Tonks as they made their way to Tomes and Scrolls for a browse; but when Tonks reappeared, scurrying breathlessly beside them with a bag of Zonko’s products, Hermione giggled.

“Don’t you dare tell Filch,” Tonks hissed under her breath. Harry chortled at the idea of an Auror sneaking a bagful of banned items into Hogwarts.

Tonks hovered near the front of the bookshop, flicking through comics while Harry and Hermione had a good look around. Harry found an intriguing looking book about Asian monsters and magical creatures written by a Japanese wizard. It had information on several creatures including Yeti and Kappa which seemed to directly contradict *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, but it was much more detailed and Harry reckoned that a Japanese wizard probably ought to know a lot more about Asian monsters than someone from England.

He was puzzled by the Seventeen and Over warning on the cover, but he ignored it and put it in his shopping basket. Wondering what Wizard fairy tales would be like, Harry sidled into the children’s section where he found a book that looked like just the thing: *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. Into the basket it went, next to the book of Asian monsters.

Harry heard a squeak of happiness and looked up to see Hermione squeezing into the narrow aisle to find him.

“Look Harry - I found something that will work in this book...”

“Er... hang on - it’s in French,” said Harry, grinning at Hermione’s excitement.

“Oh... right! Sorry!” Hermione turned a bit pink. “It’s got some newer spells that don’t seem to have made it into the Hogwarts syllabus yet. There’s a spell in here that translates more or less into ‘Bubble-Head Charm.’ It’s perfect for breathing under water, Harry!

“Well, perfect for me at least...” Hermione dropped her voice to a whisper. “You should probably stick with the plan though - the flippers will make swimming much easier and faster...”

“Excellent! ... Bung the book in the basket then, and I’ll buy it for us,” Harry responded eagerly.

“Maybe you can translate some of the other spells as well, so that I can learn them too.”

“Of course I will Harry,” Hermione beamed.

The shopkeeper gave Harry an odd look when he rang up the book of Asian monsters and checked Harry’s wand on his scale, muttering something that sounded like “emancipated and married at your age?” under his breath and shaking his head. Harry, his face flushed with irritation, stood with Hermione and waited for a few more moments near the door while Tonks purchased a small stack of comics and glared at the shopkeeper as he rang her up.

“You know, you two really *aren’t* the youngest who’ve ever got married,” Tonks muttered once
they were outside the shop. “Back in the old days, some folk even got married as young as twelve and thirteen - when hitting puberty used to be considered the age of adulthood. Bein’ a teenager is a relatively modern invention…”

“It’s weird, I thought more students at Hogwarts would be having a go at me and Hermione,” said Harry, “but it seems like it’s mostly the grown-ups that get fussed about us being emancipated and married.”

“That’s because when you’re a teenager you want to be treated like an adult, and when you’re a grown-up, you want to forget what it’s like bein’ a teenager,” said Tonks wisely. “Me... I don’t care... I’m still just a teen at heart anyway.”

Tonks commiserated with the Potters for a few more minutes when a shop caught her eye. She whispered something in Hermione’s ear. Hermione reddened and giggled.

“I’ll be right back Harry,” said Hermione with a shy grin as Tonks led her towards the shop.

Puzzled, Harry looked up at the name of the shop on the sign - Dezzie’s Delicates - and turned pink when he realised what they’d gone in to have a look at. Hermione was blushing furiously when she came back out of the shop clutching a bag, and couldn’t meet Harry’s eye for a while.

The Potters both kept an eye out for Hagrid as they made their way through more shops - even the wizard supermarket - without any luck. Harry and Hermione eventually found themselves in the Three Broomsticks for lunch. Hagrid wasn’t there either, but Lavender and Parvati were. They both gave Harry and Hermione warm hugs and invited them to lunch together.

Luna and Ginny, who were having a “girls’ day out,” waved at them from a table nearby where they were sitting and giggling. Harry grinned back at the two third year girls, now understanding why Neville and Dean had both seemed a bit put out when he’d seen them hanging out together in Zonko’s.

Tonks pulled up a seat at the bar and kept watch; her eyes narrowed when she spotted Rita Skeeter and her photographer ogling the Potters from the other end of the bar. Tonks spied Ludo Bagman in a shadowy corner of the pub with a load of goblins and rolled her eyes, knowing that he was either paying off a gambling debt, or putting a new bet down, or both at the same time.

Hermione had spotted Ludo Bagman too, and pointed him out to Harry. Bagman seemed to have just noticed that Harry was in the pub as well; he gave Harry a shady looking smirk as he pushed a bag full of something which clinked and jangled towards the goblins.

Bagman’s attention was caught by a pair of redheads who had just entered the pub. He sighed.

“Er... sorry about that business with the Leprechaun Gold at the World Cup, lads,” Bagman said quietly to the Weasley Twins as the satisfied goblins left the table. “My mistake... got it mixed up with my own... Here you go then, this should cover it…”

Fred goggled at George in happy surprise when Bagman shoved a bag of heavy coins into his hand and hurried quickly out of the Three Broomsticks before anyone else could try and collect from him. Harry grinned and gave the Twins a thumbs-up, having overheard the exchange. Lavender and Parvati giggled when Hermione gave the Twins a half-smile and shook her head. Hermione was glad that Fred and George had got their due, but felt that they’d been a bit reckless to gamble their entire life-savings to begin with.

The grin slid from Harry’s face when the flash of a camera went off after the Weasley Twins had
departed. When she saw who it was, Hermione turned livid.

“My, my, my, what a happy looking little gathering,” beamed Rita Skeeter, her eyes hungrily devouring the delicious scene of Harry sitting at a table with three girls.

Lavender and Parvati both shot daggers with their eyes at Skeeter. Hermione glared as the heavily made up reporter approached the table and Harry shot up from his chair furiously.

“Come to make more trouble, have you?” Harry snarled. “Why can’t you just leave us all alone!”

“You horrid woman!” Hermione shrilly snapped as she stood up next to Harry, trembling with rage.

“You’ll do anything for a story! It was bad enough that you went after Harry and me, but what did Hagrid and Lupin ever do to you?”

The whole pub was watching in silence now; Rosmerta stood behind the bar absentmindedly wiping a glass. Lavender and Parvati shrank back in their chairs.

“Now, now, deary,” said Skeeter, her voice hardening as her eyes glittered icily behind her bejeweled spectacles, “You shouldn’t talk about things a silly little muggleborn can’t possibly understand. It’s nothing personal - just a matter of looking after the public interest...”

“And what ‘public interest’ are you serving right now then? We’re just trying to have some lunch in a pub!” Hermione fumed.

Rita Skeeter’s eyes darted towards Harry and she smirked at him nastily.

“Come along,” she said to her photographer, tugging on his sleeve. “We’ve got enough for now.” As she turned to leave, Rita Skeeter stumbled and fell to the floor with a shriek. She peered angrily at her broken scarlet fingernail. Skeeter’s photographer helped her to her feet and she whirled around, glowering at the Potters and their friends, looking for signs of a wand.

Harry looked back at Rita innocently and she stormed out of the pub. Tonks winked at Harry from the bar and surreptitiously slid her wand back into the sleeve of her parka.

“Sorry about all that,” said Harry, flushing guiltily at Parvati and Lavender who both still looked a bit frightened. “I can’t seem to avoid attracting attention...”

“It’s not your fault Harry,” Parvati said quickly. “You don’t have to apologise.”

“Rita Skeeter’s just absolutely horrible!” Lavender added with a firm nod.

Hermione looked as angry as Harry had ever seen her as they walked back up to the castle, perhaps as enraged as the time she’d broken Malfoy’s nose, or the time she’d lit into Ron after he’d gloated about Moody killing the spider.

Harry was still furious himself - the way Rita Skeeter had sneered the word “muggleborn” at Hermione, she might as well have called her a Mudblood - but Harry’s anger was tempered by his feelings of guilt for having drawn Skeeter’s attention to begin with.

Hermione had had enough. She marched through the snow up to Hagrid’s cabin and began hammering on the door with both of her gloved little fists. Icicles fell from the eaves as the hut shook.

“HAGRID!” she bellowed as Fang barked from the other side. “COME OUT! ... WE KNOW YOU’RE IN THERE! ... WE DON’T CARE IF YOUR MUM WAS A GIANTESS! WE’RE YOUR FRIENDS! ... YOU CAN’T LET THAT LOATHSOME WOMAN DO THIS TO
YOU! GET OUT HERE RIGHT NOW AND STAND UP FOR YOURSELF...”

The door of Hagrid’s cabin swung open with a creak and Hermione tumbled backwards into Harry’s arms, shock and embarrassment all over her face at the sight of Dumbledore’s serene features gazing down at her...

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Harry leaned back against the side of the marble bathtub, breathing in the soothing fragrance of the perfumed bath-oils and sighing in contentment as Hermione leaned back against him in his arms, foam and bubbles swirling around them as steam rose from the hot water. They both felt much better as the heat penetrated their bodies and their knotted muscles began to unwind.

The Potters had both been cheered that Dumbledore had refused to accept Hagrid’s resignation, and that Hagrid had finally relented and tearfully agreed to return to work after they both impressed on the half-giant how much they had missed him. But they were both still as tense as could be after they’d departed from Hagrid’s cabin.

Hermione had suggested a nice hot soak in the tub together, and Harry had readily agreed. But apparently Hermione had some other ideas for stress relief on her mind as well, and soon the kisses and caresses had become as steamy as the atmosphere in the bathroom. One thing had led to another, and washing each other’s backs had led to a watery romp when Hermione reached between Harry’s legs to “wash” his stiffening erection.

Dripping locks of tawny hair clung to Hermione’s face as she giggled when Harry turned around to return the favour and began to playfully squeeze her breasts in the name of soaping them, gently tugging on her nipples with one hand while his other hand slid between her thighs. Then Harry grinned at her and reached for a pouch sitting on the tray next to the marble bathtub.

“Hmmm... this looks like a perfect opportunity to test a little bit of this out,” he said impishly, as a surge of boldness came over him.

“Wait... what are you planning on doing with that, Harry?” Puzzlement crossed Hermione’s features when Harry took a tiny little pinch of Gillyweed from the pouch.

“You’ll see...” Harry grinned again as he stuffed the pinch of Gillyweed into his mouth and his head dropped beneath the foam and bubbles.

Hermione gasped when she felt her impetuous husband’s kisses trailing up her inner thighs as he gently pushed them apart. She bit her lip and moaned, quivering with elation when she felt Harry’s lips pressed against her twitching entrance, and his tongue seeking out the fleshy pearl hidden in her fold.

For nearly ten minutes Hermione writhed and splashed, emitting little squeaks of joy as Harry continued to lavish his fervent attention on her slippery sheath with his tongue without coming up once for air.

“Harry!” she squealed, her thighs gripping his head as the cascading ripples of pleasure took her.

Finally Harry’s drenched, grinning head emerged from the water as his gills receded. Hermione was still trembling in the throes of bliss when Harry slid his length inside her, and the frothing water churned as he proceeded to rock her to climax again and again.

A squall of euphoria tipped Harry into the abyss of ecstasy as Hermione’s clenching tightness
gripped his plummeting lance. Surging bathwater spilled over the side of the tub and sparks of magic flew when Harry erupted, spilling his essence into Hermione’s depths.

Hermione showered her wet husband with little kisses as the tide of passion gradually ebbed, taking the tension of the day with it. She settled into Harry’s arms peaceably with a happy little sigh as he lay back against the side of the tub.

Dazed as they both were in that moment, neither one of them noticed the ghostly head of a bespectacled teenage girl slipping back through the marble tiles of the bathroom wall.
Despite a bit of a rough night for poor Harry and having woken to comfort him several times when the nightmares took him, Hermione was awake early the following morning. She lay facing her husband, watching his gentle features and listening to his peaceful breathing as he slept. The clock ticked on and breakfast time drew nearer. Hermione could hardly bear the thought of waking Harry and seeing his face taut with angst once more.

A crest in the blankets caught Hermione’s attention out of the corner of her eye, and a sudden naughty idea came over her. She’d never tried it before, though Harry had pleased her more than once in such a manner. Hermione thought that it was perhaps long past time to reciprocate, and surely Harry’s morning would be off to a good start.

Hermione gulped nervously as she continued to consider her plan. Then, before she could change her mind, she burrowed under the covers head first.

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Harry drifted along peaceably, swathed in a blank fog of oblivion which was much preferable to the intensely disturbing content of his dreams. But a delicious feeling asserted itself, and the exceedingly pleasurable images which arose were bathed in a luminous silvery glow, accompanied by recognisable whiffs of mint and parchment.

As his eyes fluttered open, Harry thought he might still be dreaming when he realised that he was as warm as could be, despite the fact that the covers had fallen away. The sight of bushy golden-brown hair strewn across his abdomen and the moist warm sensation which encapsulated his morning stiffness was also an indication that he must still be asleep and having one of the best dreams imaginable.

But Harry began to wonder when the golden locks fell away from Hermione’s face as her head bobbed up and the lips wrapped around his erection drew back towards the tip. Dream or not, Harry couldn’t get over the heavenly feeling as Hermione continued to suck and swirl her tongue around his shaft. He began to lose himself to the cascading ripples of ecstasy.

Unable to help himself, Harry jerked and groaned, releasing himself into Hermione’s mouth. Hermione’s eyes grew big and round as her mouth filled with Harry’s stickiness. She gasped as she pulled away from the still erupting penis.

In utter shock, Harry peered at Hermione as he jerked several more times, strands and gobs of his essence landing across her crimson cheeks and trickling from her lips.

“Hermione,” he gasped and sputtered as she bravely swallowed what was still in her mouth, “I’m so sorry... I thought... you... I was dreaming...” Harry was stunned when Hermione grinned at him.

“Don’t be sorry Harry,” she giggled nervously, still looking mightily embarrassed, not quite meeting
his eyes. “I knew what would happen eventually. It’s only fair - you’ve done the same for me after all - and I wanted to - for fun - and... and I just thought it would be nicer than waking to an alarm clock...” Hermione trailed off as she looked for a hanky to wipe her dripping face, glancing at Harry anxiously.

“It... it was alright, wasn’t it?” she beseeched.

“Er... yeah!” said Harry, breaking into a broad grin. “It was brilliant! I loved every bit of it. Much better than an alarm clock!”

Hermione let out a huge sigh of relief and beamed at Harry, a wicked gleam in her eyes.

“Oh good!” she said, “Because I mean to practice that a lot more until I get it perfect, Harry.”

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Harry and Hermione were both yawning when they met Dora in the corridor on the way to breakfast. Dora was slightly puzzled, as the Potters seemed in much better spirits than she thought they might be if they’d been woken by Harry’s nightmares.

“Er... Did you two get enough sleep?” asked Dora sympathetically.

When Hermione turned slightly pink and Harry glanced away, Dora did her best to hide a little smirk, guessing that Hermione had thought of creative ways to comfort Harry.

At breakfast, Harry and Hermione ignored the letters which arrived by owl post. Many of the letters which had been arriving since the Witch Weekly article had been rather rude and nasty. Though quite a number of young women and even a few young men had sent exceedingly friendly letters along with very racy pictures of themselves - many of them nudes - which had made the Potters both blush furiously.

Still yawning, Hermione tried coffee for the first time in her life when Harry introduced her to it. Her face crinkled in disgust, not noticing when Seamus fished some of the unopened envelopes from across the table.

“Urgh... that’s revolting Harry. How do people drink this?” she asked.

“It’s an acquired taste... usually acquired due to necessity like now, when tea just isn’t strong enough to do the job,” Harry replied with a grin. “I had to make Uncle Vernon’s coffee every morning - he usually took it black. And yeah, it’s horrible like that.”

“You need sugar and cream, Hermione.” Harry added several heaping spoonfuls of sugar and a lot of cream. Hermione took another sip

“Oh, that’s much better... Thanks Harry.”

“Yeah, with enough sugar and cream, it’s alright. It’s a bit like chocolate in that way... cocoa is horrid until you add the sugar and milk.”

Hermione looked surprised. “Really? I didn’t know. I love chocolate. But I try not to eat too much because, you know... dentist parents!”

“You love MILK chocolate,” insisted Harry. “Have you ever tried a proper dark chocolate?”

Hermione shook her head.
“It’s very bitter without the milk...” he added.

Hermione’s ears pricked attentively; Lavender, Parvati and Neville also listened in while Harry told them about baking with cocoa and how to make it taste nice as they finished breakfast. Harry had never really talked much about cooking for the Dursleys before, and Hermione began to understand why Harry was so good at potions when people just left him alone. Ron and Seamus both looked across the table at Harry with great interest to hear him talk about making food.

“Yeah, I used to help Aunt Petunia make breakfast and dinner every day,” Harry told Ron when he asked. “I actually didn’t mind helping with that - it was better than washing Uncle Vernon’s car or washing his underwear and doing all their cleaning...”

It was pleasant being friendly with Ron again, and Care of Magical Creatures had been much better now that Draco Malfoy and Crabbe and Goyle were no longer taking it. Hagrid introduced the class to some fluffy black creatures with spade-like feet and long snouts which looked a bit like anteaters to Harry.

“Righ’ then,” said Hagrid, “These’re Nifflers - clever little creatures and jolly useful little treasure detectors they are. Yeh find ‘em down mines mostly. An’ watch out for yer valuables - they like sparkly stuff...”

Sure enough, Pansy Parkinson gave a little shriek as one leapt and tried to gnaw her bracelet off her wrist. But she calmed down when she realised that it was more cuddly than dangerous. Ron’s interest was piqued when Hagrid went on.

“Anyway, I’ve buried a load o’ Leprechaun Gold an’ there’s a prize for the one whose niffler digs up the most coins. Don’ bother keepin’ the gold though, it’ll disappear after a bit...”

Ron ended up with an enormous bar of chocolate when his Niffler dug up the most gold coins. He was a bit disappointed that it was only Leprechaun Gold, but he happily shared his chocolate with Seamus and offered some to whoever else wanted a bit. Ron seemed relieved when Hermione gratefully ate a piece of the chocolate, as if her acceptance was the seal of approval for a somewhat repaired friendship with Harry.

Harry nearly spat his piece of chocolate out laughing when he spotted Seamus gawking at one of the steamy photos that had obviously come in one of the envelopes he’d nicked at breakfast. Ron peered over Seamus’s shoulder, his eyes boggling at the picture of the naked girl.

“Blimey - she’s a real looker, that one is,” Ron muttered.

“Ye got that right mate,” Seamus agreed.

Neville glanced at the photo quickly, then turned beet red and looked away. Hermione rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t help smirking a bit at Ron’s gormless expression. Seamus hurriedly shoved the picture back in his robes when Hagrid wandered over.

“What yeh got there Seamus?” asked Hagrid curiously

“Er... nuthin’...” Seamus mumbled, turning scarlet.

“But that’s just a silly picture which came in the post,” said Hermione quickly to save Seamus from trouble. “At least it’s better than the horrible letters some people have been sending me and Harry since that stupid article Rita Skeeter wrote about our supposed ‘harem’ for Witch Weekly.”

“Aah! Righ’...” said Hagrid sympathetically, “got some of ‘em letters meself after she wrote that
Draco Malfoy seemed lost in his own little world, brooding as he strolled through the grounds with several of his friends. His father had seemed agitated for the last day or so, and had told him to keep a close eye on Crabbe and Goyle, and to report if they said anything odd. But his father hadn’t told him why yet, and Draco hated it when his father wouldn’t let him in on all the details of his plans straight away. The voice of one of Draco’s friends cut through his rumination.

“I overheard a Hufflepuff close to Diggory saying that Potter fought off a sea-serpent,” said Theodore Nott with a slight hint of awe in his voice. “D’you think that’s true Draco?”

“How the hell should I know, Theo?” snapped Draco, wishing that everyone would just shut up about bloody Potter and the Triwizard Tournament.

Even half of Slytherin seemed obsessed with Potter - especially many of the girls. Draco was beginning to wish that he and Pansy and Millicent hadn’t done that stupid interview with Rita Skeeter.

“I just thought... Your father - being friends with the Minister...” Nott trailed off nervously, seeing the look on Draco’s face.

It had been nearly a week since the Second Task, and Draco Malfoy still couldn’t get over the fact that Potter had survived yet again. Though Draco wasn’t privy to the details, he knew that his father and the Minister had planned something a bit extra for Potter alone to ensure his demise, but somehow Potter kept getting lucky. There was no other explanation.

Draco kicked a rock and sent it skittering as he tried to mollify himself with the knowledge that his own practice with the Unforgivables was coming along nicely. If Potter managed to make it through this tournament alive despite all, Draco would simply have to get him and the Mudblood alone somehow and settle things once and for all himself.

“Oi, Draco... over there!” hissed Nott, “Look who it is.”

Draco’s eyes narrowed when he spied Greengrass sitting alone on the steps near the boathouse, a ball of fury burning in his gut. She had made him look bad in front of Potter and that French bitch.
It stung even more as he recalled how Daphne had turned down his generous offer to take her to the Yule Ball, saying that it would upset Pansy. But Draco was no longer so interested in Pansy, with that pug nose of hers; now that he was older, he knew he deserved a Pureblood as good-looking as himself. Draco had then tried to ask the French slag to the Ball, but she’d blown him off with a look that suggested she thought him lower than a sea-slug.

Glancing around the grounds, Draco assured himself that there were no witnesses this time - other than his henchmen, Crabbe and Goyle, and his friend Theo, who was always game for anything. People almost never came down to the boathouse during the week. It was time to teach Greengrass a lesson.

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Wormtail was beside himself, giddy with glee, drunk on his newfound empowerment. For the first time in his life he felt truly respected. He could have gone anywhere after vanishing into the night when he’d escaped Snivellus’s greasy clutches, forged a new life for himself in another country if he’d wanted to.

But Wormtail was more certain than ever that his decision to seek out the Dark Lord and restore him to full strength was the best one he’d made since turning against his so-called friends and that old coot Dumbledore thirteen years ago.

The Professors at Hogwarts, especially McGonagall, had always made him feel inadequate. Just because Wormtail valued fun more than he valued homework didn’t mean that he was inept. He had always managed to pull out Acceptables and a few Exceeds Expectations at the last minute. It hadn’t been Wormtail’s fault that schoolwork was boring.

Padfoot had never really appreciated him; he was always mocking Wormtail’s hero worship of Prongs and treating him as an inferior. Wormtail had always suspected that Padfoot only tolerated him because he was James’s friend.

And Prongs, though he had always seemed happy to have Wormtail’s admiration, Wormtail wanted more than James’s appreciation. He wanted what James had.

James had always seemed to be able to afford to buy the nicest things and the best snacks from the food trolley on the Hogwarts Express. Everything Wormtail owned was rubbish and all he had were mouldy homemade sandwiches; his parents could barely afford his schoolbooks and his wand.

And James was everything that Wormtail wanted to be. James had been famous for his natural abilities as a Quidditch Player, and he’d always been top of every class without seeming to even break a sweat. And James always got the girls - except for Lily Evans who thought James was an arrogant bullying prat for hexing that greasy swotter, Snivellus Snape, the one who always had his head buried in a book about potions or dark arts. Of course Evans was never around to see what Snape and his mates got up to. If she had only known.

Prongs and Padfoot had been notorious pranksters, beloved by all. Even the Professors had seemed to smile indulgently at those two while doling out the detentions; meanwhile shaking their heads sadly at Wormtail, as if he would amount to nothing.

Then somehow, in sixth year, Prongs had settled down and swallowed his pride. He was “turning over a new leaf.” Those had been Potter’s own words when he had angrily dressed Sirius down for his nearly deadly “pranking” of Snivellus Snape, and Lily Evans had overheard the shouting match.

Wormtail flushed jealously again as he remembered how the girl he had always daydreamed of the
most while wanking had quickly fallen for James after realising that James had grown up finally, saving Lily's once best friend from certain death.

Sirius had eventually calmed down after his fight with James, agreeing that he had stepped over a line which should never have been crossed. He had apologised profusely to James, and then also apologised even more abjectly to Snivellus. Sirius too, “turned over a new leaf” that year, and he had even apologised to Wormtail.

But things had never been quite the same between any of them after that. Despite James’s claims of friendship and loyalty, Wormtail knew that James had sensed Wormtail’s desires for Lily and kept him at arm’s length after she had become his girlfriend, and later his wife. And Sirius and Remus had grown much closer to each other, though they were careful not to advertise their affections for one another and Sirius had continued to date girls on occasion.

Wormtail was the odd one out.

After Hogwarts, the Marauders had joined the battle against the Dark Lord’s reign of terror. But Wormtail had always known it was a futile endeavour. The Dark Lord was Superior in every conceivable way. Not even Dumbledore could stop him.

Nearly from the beginning, Wormtail had come to understand that he was on the wrong side. Under the Dark Lord’s rule, Wormtail would no longer have to put up with being the useless, pathetic sidekick. He could have all the gold and women he wanted - even Lily as the spoils of war if he so chose. Lily had been nothing... a Mudblood. She would beg to be one of Wormtail’s whores after James was dead, he had thought at the time; she was clearly long shot of Snivellus.

Wormtail had hoped, but he hadn’t been able to believe his luck when Padfoot had bought his offer to be Secret Keeper. Sirius had foolishly insisted to James that Peter should be the Potters’ Secret Keeper, and James had naively accepted. The Dark Lord had rewarded Wormtail handsomely for his services and made him a Death Eater when Wormtail had presented him with the opportunity to capture or kill the Potters.

That had been Wormtail’s chance to finally get the Glory, Women, and Gold that he so richly deserved. And if Lily were foolish enough to stand in the Dark Lord's way, what did it matter! There would be plenty of other mudblood slags who would beg to have Wormtail if they wanted access to wands under the Dark Lord’s Rule - and Wormtail could take any muggle girl he wanted at any time without fear of retribution from the Law.

Then everything had gone to hell when the Potter Brat had apparently killed the Dark Lord in some sort of outburst of Accidental Magic. Terrified that he would be caught at the scene, Wormtail had fled with his Master’s wand and hidden it before framing Padfoot as the Potters' betrayer.

Wormtail had then sought out a suitable home in which he could hide undiscovered as a Rat, and had come to find much food and solace in the House of Molly, as the pet of one of her many sons, Percy Weasley. For many years Wormtail grew fat, and reveled in his access to the comforts of Hogwarts, right under the unwitting nose of the Cat Mistress of Gryffindor - Minerva McGonagall. The irony was not lost on Wormtail. Ineptitude indeed; Wormtail had shown her the true meaning of the word.

But it was only when Wormtail had returned to Hogwarts as Ronald Bilius Weasley’s pet, that Wormtail had come to learn that the Dark Lord still lived on after a fashion.

It didn’t surprise Wormtail that the Potter Brat had chosen a Brainy Mudblood as his father had. She had many of Lily’s qualities, including an innocent, natural beauty - though she looked nothing like Lily. Wormtail had felt the stirrings of jealousy once again as he watched the Potter boy’s
relationship with the girl unfold.

When the Potter scion and his own mudblood whore had helped Padfoot, Moony, and Snivellus uncover his true identity, Wormtail had decided to take it as a sign that the time was ripe to find his Master and return him to Power.

And now, it was all paying off. Wormtail grinned at himself in the mirror as he adjusted his robes. Tonight, with MacNair and Avery as his bodyguards, Wormtail would offer the Werewolf what he had wanted the last time around, a chance to be a Death Eater. And when Fenrir Greyback accepted, Wormtail, as the Dark Lord’s Second, would have a Lycan Pack at his disposal.

~o0o~

“Oi, Greengrass...!”

Daphne looked up, startled to see Draco Malfoy and his goon-squad approaching. She cursed inwardly and shivered, wondering why Draco and his father couldn’t let well enough alone.

“Go away Draco!” she snapped with as much courage as she could muster. “I want to be by myself, and I told you to stay away from me.”

“What’s the matter Daphne?” sneered Malfoy as he drew uncomfortably close, “Is that any way to treat your future husband?”

“Stop it! Don’t touch me or I’ll scream...”

“No, no!” said Draco unctuously, “You wouldn’t want Theo to hex you, would you?”

Daphne shivered again and gulped, seeing that Nott already had his wand out. “You... you wouldn’t dare...” she muttered nervously, her own hand twitching towards her wand.

“Just try it,” hissed Draco, stepping even closer and grabbing her wrist, “and I’ll make sure you’ll regret it. Don’t you see how nice I’m being? I just thought we should get to know each other a bit more... intimately before we get married...”

Tears rolled down Daphne’s cheeks when Draco’s other hand snaked around her waist and drew her right up against him. Crabbe and Goyle chortled as Nott leered at her.

“I... I’m n...never marrying you - you c...creep,” she whimpered through chattering teeth. “M...my dad said he t...turned down your father’s offer flat...”

“Don’t be like that Daphne! We could be so good together!” Draco whispered, pressing his lips against Daphne’s and slipping his hand under her skirt. “But if not, you can just have a bit of fun with the lot of us right now... and then I’ll leave you alone for good...”

Daphne sobbed and tried to pull away as Draco stroked her inner thigh, heading for her knickers.

“GET OFF HER MALFOY!”

Draco spun around with Daphne still tightly in his clutches, his pallid features hardening. Nott, Crabbe and Goyle whirled around to see who had caught them all out.

“Potter!” spat Draco, whipping out his wand. “You and your Mudblood Bitch should keep your noses out of what doesn’t concern you.”
Hermione trembled with rage, waiting for Malfoy to make the first move, her wand aiming right between his eyes. But Harry was livid. He was done playing games with Malfoy. Without a word or a second thought, a red bolt of magic flew from Harry’s wand and struck Malfoy in the chest.

Draco collapsed to the ground, out like a light. Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle turned around and ran for it, as fast their feet could carry them, terrified that they might be next. Daphne stood stock still, as frozen as a statue for a moment, before it sunk in what had just occurred.

The Potters were both stunned when Daphne suddenly flung herself on Hermione, sobbing. Hermione held the weeping blonde girl, gently rubbing her back.

“It’s alright Daphne!” she murmured, “It’s alright now!”

Dora finally reached the Potters, out of breath. She had been jogging at a distance behind them, keeping an eye peeled.

“I saw everything!” she gasped. “You lot alright?”

“Yeah!” growled Harry, “But I think Malfoy will have a bit of a headache when he wakes up...”

~o0o~

Dumbledore had no twinkles or sparkles in his eyes; just bags under them from worry and lack of sleep. The Order meeting last night had run late, and he couldn’t have slept even if he’d tried. He looked up when Professor Snape thundered into the Headmaster’s office in a swirl of robes.

Snape stumbled and nearly fell when he slipped on the sherbert-lemons strewn all over the floor. He caught himself and noticed in surprise that the chalice which usually held them lay shattered on the rug near the Headmaster’s desk.

“My apologies Severus. Please watch your step.”

Dumbledore waved his wand. The sherbert-lemons and broken crystal vanished. He motioned to the armchair in front of his desk.

“Please, be seated Severus. Now, perhaps you can tell me what has brought you here in such a state.”

Snape’s jaw clenched, and a vein his temple throbbed.

“Headmaster, one of my students... Daphne Greengrass has requested to be... resorted. She no longer wishes to remain in Slytherin House. And speaking quite frankly... I cannot blame her.”

“Are you willing to grant her request Severus?”

“I am. Though I fear she will be in danger no matter which House she ends up in. I know how... lasting House prejudices can be.” Snape flushed and Dumbledore peered sadly at him.

“Indeed!” the headmaster sighed. “Why don’t you tell me what brought this on!!”

Professor Snape swallowed. The circumstances were well outside his zone of comfort for open discussion.

“Miss Greengrass - she was reluctant to speak of it. But from my own... gleaning, I have determined that she was the victim of an assault by Draco Malfoy - an assault with... sexual overtones. He was accompanied by several other Slytherin students in his year. Nymphadora Tonks also reported the
incident to me, but unfortunately she was not close enough to the scene to provide any details beyond harassment.”

Snape raised his eyebrows as he continued. “Potter... he put an end to it, apparently with a rather strong Stunning Spell. Pomfrey told me that Draco showed up with a headache, asking for a pain potion.”

“I see!” Dumbledore’s forehead wrinkled and he sighed again, counting his fortunes; despite having eliminated another horcrux and gaining an unexpected ally within the last forty eight hours, the balance appeared to be weighing in the negative. “Am I to take it then, Severus, that Miss Greengrass’s absence from my office means that she is unwilling to press charges?”

“Yes!” The vein throbbed painfully again in Snape’s forehead. “I have reason to believe that she is too afraid to, given the current... political climate.”

The Headmaster sighed once more, his eyes catching the letter which he had received that morning on his desk. Dumbledore understood the political climate all too well, as he had just been given notice that he had been relieved of his position as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. The new Minister was fast gaining allies, and the damage done by Skeeter’s articles had finally taken its toll. Dumbledore had hoped to contain the fallout at Hogwarts. But it appeared that things were escalating rapidly.

“Very well! Without any official charges I am forced to leave things in your hands Severus. I would hope that you can see fit to dole out appropriate punishments. Sexual Assault cannot stand at Hogwarts. Detentions and loss of House Points are hardly effective measures fitting to such crimes. If it were up to me, the culprits would be expelled immediately and placed in the custody of the DMLE.”

Professor Snape nodded curtly as Dumbledore continued.

“You may inform Miss Greengrass that she has my permission to leave Slytherin. Unfortunately, once the Sorting Hat has made a decision, it cannot be undone. The magic which gives it life will not permit it. Miss Greengrass will be unaffiliated. Therefore I have no choice but to give her private lodgings next door to the Potters. Do you believe that this will be acceptable to Miss Greengrass?”

“Yes,” said Snape, nodding. “But I believe that she is too afraid to go back to Slytherin for her things. She is currently in my office awaiting my return.”

“Some house-elves will be dispatched to retrieve her belongings, and I shall send Minerva to direct Miss Greengrass to her new quarters. If you would please bear with me a moment Severus...”

Dumbledore turned to Fawkes and nodded.

The scarlet and gold phoenix appeared to understand, and vanished in a brilliant flare of light. Then the headmaster returned his attention to Snape.

“Now, regarding my earlier comments about appropriate punishment. No doubt the culprits belong in Azkaban, and I am sure that Filch would be delighted to offer you his services, but please try to remember that this is an institute of education, not a Penal Colony. Until such time as I have the authority to remove these students. You will have to find some suitable measures of discipline beyond points loss and detention.”

Snape groaned inwardly as he departed the Headmaster’s office. If it were up to him, Filch would be a Very Happy Squib right now. He met Professor McGonagall coming up the spiral staircase when he was halfway down and he paused.
“Severus?” she began questioningly.

Snape peered inscrutably at McGonagall.

“The headmaster will explain...” he said, then continued on his way.

~o0o~

Snape stared coldly at the four students sitting in front of his desk. They had all been sitting there in silence under his stony gaze boring into their souls for half an hour. Professor Snape felt physically ill at what he saw inside them.

Finally, in an icy, even tone, Snape spoke.

“Draco, Nott, Crabbe, Goyle: your wands are hereby confiscated...”

“But sir...” Draco gasped in shock; it had been bad enough for his wand usage to be restricted, but this was beyond the pale. The others just looked confounded.

“SILENCE!” Snape bellowed. “You will keep your mouths shut until I have finished. The headmaster has long put up with the schoolyard taunts and the occasional playground scuffle, but sexual assault is not tolerated at Hogwarts...”

“What?... I never...” Draco tried again, stunned at the unfair accusation.

“QUIET!” Snape shouted again. “Don’t bother lying to me Draco. I know the truth, and I know that each and every one of you were directly involved.”

“If Daphne Greengrass had openly come forward to press charges, you would no doubt be looking at a lengthy sentence in the Junior Wing of Azkaban. Consider yourselves... fortunate. Also, you are quite lucky that the Headmaster is not given to corporal punishment, or you would find yourselves in Mr Filch’s hands. And believe me, Filch’s ideas of punishment are very... Slytherin.”

Something wasn’t adding up to Draco. If Daphne hadn’t said anything, then how could Snape have enough proof of anything to punish them - and Draco had barely even touched Greengrass. How anyone could possibly construe that as sexual assault was ridiculous. Potter! It had to be! Potter had been spreading filthy lies! Draco just knew it!

Draco glared at Snape as the Potions Master continued his tirade.

“As I was saying before Draco so rudely interrupted, in lieu of the punishments you so richly deserve, your wands are hereby confiscated until the end of term. You will all be confined to Slytherin House for the duration of term - except for between classes - this means at mealtimes too... And when I say ‘end of term,’ I mean the end of the school-year. This also means that you are banned from all Hogsmeade visits.”

“Draco... you are permanently suspended from the Quidditch team. As long as I am Head of House, you will never again play for Slytherin. And if the rest of you have any ideas about joining the Quidditch team, you can just put aside that little fantasy. As for your brooms, they will all be confiscated until term ends as well.”

At this, Draco couldn’t help himself.

“But SIR, that’s not fair...” he uttered in dismay before his tongue locked up and he began gurgling incomprehensibly.
“To continue.... if I hear that you are harassing any of the other girls in Slytherin House, or any other female students between classes for that matter, I will do my utmost to convince the headmaster to hand you over to Filch. **DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR!?**” Snape concluded with a roar, banging his hand loudly on his desk for emphasis.

The four Slytherins all glowered murderously at Snape, but one by one, they cast their eyes down and muttered, “Yes sir.”

~o0o~

She had been surprised but relieved that the headmaster had agreed so easily. She had understood why she couldn’t actually be resorted, and she was frankly glad that she wouldn’t have to endure the scorn that she would have likely received in any of the other Houses.

As Daphne began unloading her trunk into her new wardrobe and dresser in her new quarters, she hoped her sister Astoria would eventually understand why she couldn’t stay in Slytherin. But at least her sister was safe. It was clear to Daphne that despite her reticence to speak openly, that Professor Snape had more than an inkling of what had happened. He had promised Daphne that he would keep an eagle eye on Astoria.

Tears trickled down her cheeks as she put her little photo of Astoria on the bedside table next to her alarm clock. Daphne wished again that she was strong enough to openly accuse Draco - but she was terrified of Lucius Malfoy. She had heard the rumours that he was a Death Eater, and she knew that he was close to the Minister.

As far as Daphne knew, if she said anything, Mr Malfoy could murder her entire family and get away with it. She hadn’t even been able to bring herself to tell Astoria what Draco had threatened to do to Daphne along with his friends. Though Daphne wasn’t entirely certain why - it’s not like her sister would have gone around blabbing - the idea of talking about it just seemed too humiliating.

Daphne wished for the umpteenth time that Astoria had joined her, but her younger sister had balked at leaving her friends in Slytherin behind without a good explanation. Feeling miserable, and alone, Daphne flung herself on her new bed.

Just as the throes of misery began to set in, a knock on the heavy oak door of her chambers startled Daphne. Puzzled, she clambered off the bed and wiped her tears away on the sleeve of her robes. She slowly opened the door and gasped when she saw who was visiting.

Hermione Potter glanced at Daphne, giving her a nervous smile as Harry fidgeted beside her, also doing his best to smile warmly.

“Er... we thought you might be feeling lonely,” said Hermione. “Perhaps... erm... would you like to join us for dinner?”
The kiss deepened, fingers tangled in Hermione’s sodden golden ringlets, Harry’s anxiety began to dissipate. What did it matter if they were both naked in the Room of Requirement? The only way that anyone could enter and discover them would be to ask specifically for a jaccuzi which looked like an Enchanted Fairy Grotto. The chances of such an occurrence were vanishingly small.

Harry let himself go, his passion rising, lips tracing a path to Hermione’s neck, fingers disentangling and roaming southward. Hermione let out a little moan of pleasure, pressing her slippery wetness against Harry. He leaned back against the side of the jaccuzi, her hardened nipples poking him in the chest as she straddled his legs. His hands slipped under the surface of the steaming, turbulent water, sliding down Hermione’s back, encircling her slender waist.

Hermione responded in kind, her own hands traversing Harry’s chiseled torso. She bit her lip and let out a keening sound, grinding her entrance against Harry’s thigh.

This certainly hadn’t been Harry’s original intent, but there was no going back now. Harry cradled Hermione’s bottom cheeks, giving them a gentle squeeze before lifting her onto his pulsing erection.

Hermione let out another moan as Harry’s length slid into her wet channel. Harry gasped. His head began to spin as he thrust, meeting the gyrations of her hips as she rode him. The gasps and moans echoed in the steamy, glittering Fairy Grotto.

Eddies and currents swirled in the bubbling cauldron and sparks of magic began to fly as the fervor grew, and the pair started to lose themselves in one another. Harry’s last coherent thought before he was swept away completely by the tide of bliss was of how much he loved Hermione.

Hermione dug her nails into Harry’s back and cried out ecstatically as she felt Harry releasing his essence into her depths. Magic arced like bolts of lightning, and the chamber trembled and rocked as they climaxed together.

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Minerva McGonagall frowned, passing the letter from the Triwizard Commission back to the headmaster. Professor Dumbledore put the letter down and reached into his desk.

“I think we’ll be needing this,” he said, pulling out a bottle of Dragon Barrel brandy.

He then poured a snifter each for his deputy headmistress and the Potions master as well as himself. Neither of the professors accompanying the headmaster raised any objections. The angry deputy headmistress took a big gulp from her snifter before speaking.

“So,” fumed McGonagall. “There is no way that we can prevent the Third Task? ...nor at least have some say as to what sorts of creatures and magical obstacles are to be employed?”

“I do not believe so,” Dumbledore sighed. “It seems quite clear that we have been forestalled from having any input ourselves. We can only be thankful that the Skrewts bred for the task at the insistence of the Triwizard Commission have been killing each other off. Hopefully, there will be few left by the time June arrives.”

Snape and McGonagall both snorted at the notion that Hagrid needed encouragement from an outside agency to breed dangerous creatures. But indeed, at the beginning of the year the Commission had given Hagrid the eggs produced by breeding a Manticore with a Fire-Crab,
knowing that Hagrid would be all too eager to raise them, despite Dumbledore’s own reticence.

“And what of the Acromantulas?” McGonagall wondered aloud. “Perhaps Hagrid’s friend Aragog will have some sway?”

Snape rolled his eyes.

“Don’t be so naïve Minerva,” the Potions master sneered. “Even if Aragog so commanded, without his presence to stay them, the Acromantulas chosen by the Ministry for the Third Task will not obey his command when the blood of wizards calls to them. We must face facts - there is little we can do unless the Champions signal for help.

“The Warding Charms placed around the Maze by the Commission will prevent any teacher or headmaster from entering the Maze unless we are directly called upon to provide aid.”

“But we know less than half of what the Champions will be facing in the Maze,” snapped McGonagall. “Albus, surely the Commission can give us at least an inkling of what else they have in store for the Champions.”

The headmaster sighed again. “Alas, Minerva, our hands are tied. You know as well as I do that the Ministry is in unscrupulous hands. The best I can do is to ensure that all of the Champions and their mentors are as informed as ourselves. I shall confer with Olympe and Igor on the morrow...”

At that moment, one of Dumbledore’s delicate instruments began to whir and oscillate wildly, emitting sparks and a puff of smoke. The lanterns flickered and a slight tremor shook the office. Fawkes ruffled his feathers and uttered a little squawk. Snape’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Good Heavens!” exclaimed McGonagall. “What on earth was that?”

“I do not know,” answered the headmaster, looking as perplexed as his staff-members. He clambered out of his seat quickly and examined several of his contraptions, including the one which had sparked.

“There appears to have been some sort of magical power surge in the castle,” said Dumbledore after a moment. “However, there is no sign of castle breach, nor of Dark magical attack. Is anyone running an experiment at the moment? Flitwick perhaps?”

“Not to my knowledge,” replied McGonagall.

“If I may, Headmaster, perhaps we just experienced the effects of an outburst of accidental magic somewhere in the castle,” suggested Snape. “As unusual as it may be, on occasion, teenagers can still be given to such events.”

“Hmm...” Dumbledore stroked his long silvery beard pensively. “You may be onto something Severus. Such has indeed occurred in the past; however, this particular outburst must have been remarkably powerful to have shaken the entire castle...”

~o0o~

“Bloody Hell Hermione! What was that? What happened?” Still dazed and feeling quite giddy from their playful watery escapade, Harry peered at his wife expectantly. Hermione giggled nervously as the euphoria of passion began to ebb.

“I... I’m not sure Harry, but if I had to guess, I’d say it was an accidental release of magic... I suppose it’s something that must happen to wizards occasionally when they have intercourse - especially if
Harry looked perplexed. “But everything shook Hermione - the castle shook, like an earthquake - and there was a flash - like lightning. Even when I was angry and blew up Aunt Marge like a balloon, I’ve never had such a strong burst of accidental magic.”

Hermione peered at the churning water and the crystalline stalactites of the Room of Requirement’s Fairy Grotto, an idea forming in her whirring brain.

“Hmm... well there were two of us for one thing, amplifying the magic exponentially,” she began, turning slightly pink. “We both... erm... peaked at the same time. Also, perhaps, in the water - maybe it’s like when an electrical charge is introduced to saltwater. It’s possible that it may have conducted the magic - further amplified it - and released it into the castle walls.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know Harry. I’m just speculating - I can’t be certain.”

“Right!” Harry nodded, gulping anxiously. “Well, that makes as much sense as anything I suppose - let’s get out of here...”

Harry fervently hoped that there had been no damage, and that they could avoid getting into trouble. Hurriedly, the Potters dressed and fled the Room of Requirement. Harry’s wildly thumping heart began to slow when it seemed that there were no panicking hordes in the hallways of Hogwarts, and everything seemed intact.

But all hopes of forgetting about the incident completely were dashed when they found themselves in the Great Hall at dinner. They arrived late. Seated at the Mingling Table already were some of their friends. Under normal circumstances, Harry would have been happy to see Ron, Seamus, and Dean among them. But they appeared to be deep in discussion regarding an unusual occurrence.

“...and me and Seamus were playing wizard chess by the window...” Ron was telling Dora and Daphne.

“And I was losing as usual,” Seamus interjected.

“...and it rattled so hard I was sure it was going to break,” Ron continued.

Dean rolled his eyes. “It wasn’t that hard...”

“I didn’t notice it at all,” Neville chimed in.

“Nor I,” said Daphne. “I was in my room and I didn’t feel a thing. But I did see the lights flickering.”

At that moment, Ron noticed Harry and Hermione taking their seats.

“Oh, hi Harry, Hermione,” said Ron excitedly, “Did you feel that castle-quake?”

“Er...” said Harry as he flushed.

He glanced at Hermione, whose cheeks had also taken on a rosy tinge. Fortunately, Harry was saved from answering by the arrival of the Feast. He breathed a deep sigh of relief and began to tuck in. Hermione was equally glad of the distraction that the food provided. Dora eyed the Potters with amusement, supposing that they had been too occupied to notice the quake.

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The evening was cold and dry. A peacock strutted in the moonlit gardens of an opulent Wiltshire estate, its cry piercing the night. Inside the manor, a bitter Warlock brooded. Lucius Malfoy scowled as he sipped his brandy, wondering where he had gone wrong. His narrowed eyes lit upon the empty armchair near the fire where his wife should be seated.

Lucius was still puzzled as to how Narcissa had discovered that he had transferred funds into their son’s private vault at Gringotts. It was unlike her to check on the finances - a fact that he had been counting on. In any case, that had only been the beginning of the row. One thing had led to another, and somehow the argument had turned from their son to what Narcissa had termed as Lucius’s own “questionable choices” in the past - a clear dig at his days as a Death Eater.

“...and where are you now while our son follows in your footsteps?” Narcissa had shouted, “Spending your days at the Ministry hatching new plots and schemes to undermine Dumbledore.”

“And why not?” Lucius had angrily retorted. “Finally, we have a competent Minister of our persuasion, dedicated to doing whatever is necessary to put an end to the dilution of our bloodlines. Why shouldn’t I be doing all I can to help find a solution to the Mudblood problem once and for all?”

His next words had just slipped out, unintended, in the heat of anger. He had wished he could take them back the moment he’d said them.

“...Carrying on like this, anyone might think you a Blood Traitor!” Lucius had snapped at his wife.

That had silenced Narcissa; but at what cost? She had stared at him coldly for a moment before turning on her high heels and storming from the parlour. Several minutes later, Lucius had heard her furious footsteps echoing through the manor, and then the front door slamming shut.

And now he sat alone, nursing a brandy snifter which needed refilling. Lucius supposed he should have seen this coming. Narcissa had been slipping away - growing more and more distant since the Quidditch World Cup. And if he were being honest with himself, the warning signs that they were drifting apart had been apparent since the Chamber of Secrets business.

Pouring himself another brandy, Lucius Malfoy’s scowl grew deeper when he recalled the argument which had stemmed from the loss of the House Elf. He had been forced to reveal his own hand in the opening of the Chamber to his wife. And his promise that Draco - as a Pureblood - had never been in any danger had fallen on deaf ears.

“...and what of the other students at Hogwarts,” Narcissa had shouted then. “They are just children...”

“Just children,” his wife had called them. Just children? Had Narcissa forgotten that Mudblood children eventually grew up to breed even more filth? Perhaps it was for the best that Narcissa had fled to her ancestral home, empty though it was. And perhaps his harsh words - Blood Traitor - had not been so far off the mark.

~o0o~

Harry’s dreams that night were fitful. Feeling her husband restless beside her, Hermione woke several times. After the third time she gave Harry a little shake.

“Harry, are you alright?” she asked. Harry woke with a start.

“Th...thanks for waking me Hermione...” Harry rubbed at his burning scar, his face clammy and
pale. “Yeah... yeah, I’m alright. It’s not too bad...”

“It’s Voldemort again, isn’t it?” Lines of worry creased Hermione’s brow. “Is he doing something horrible?”

“No - it would be worse if he was,” Harry replied. “I’m just getting flashes - glimpses of him and Wormtail and the others. They’re making plans.”

“To come after you again?” asked Hermione.

Harry shook his head. “Not yet. Voldemort wants to build up his forces and... and revenge himself against some of the Death Eaters who didn’t rejoin him. I don’t quite remember all the details, but I know that he’s sending Crabbe and Goyle - their fathers I mean - to recruit Giants.”

“Should we wake Dumbledore and tell him? Or can it wait till morning?”

“Anytime tomorrow should be okay,” said Harry. “It’s nothing urgent really.”

“Alright then,” said Hermione, giving him a little kiss. She put her arm around him and snuggled closer, laying her bushy head on his shoulder. “Would you like some hot cocoa - to help you go back to sleep?”

Harry grinned as the soreness in his scar began to ebb, catching a whiff of her minty fragrance. He gave Hermione a kiss on her forehead.

“No thanks, I’m feeling loads better already.”

Harry felt even better the following morning, having fallen back to sleep in his wife’s arms. He awoke to see the golden highlights of her hair gleaming in the sun pouring through the window. Feeling refreshed and lighter, Harry remembered more of what he had seen in his dreams. The knowledge kept him slightly distracted throughout the day while he attended classes. When lessons were over, Harry eagerly made his way to Dumbledore’s office with Hermione.

When the Potters entered, they caught Dumbledore peering wistfully at a little ancient sepia photograph of a young girl with fair hair. In his hand, the headmaster clutched a ring with a cracked gemstone - the horcrux which they had discovered and killed several days ago. Harry and Hermione both felt a bit awkward, as if they had interrupted Dumbledore in a private moment of great personal importance.

But if Dumbledore felt put out, he did a good job of hiding it. The look of melancholy in his eye was quickly replaced with his usual twinkles.

“Ah, Harry, Mrs Potter - please be seated,” said Dumbledore warmly as he returned the ring to a drawer in his desk. “I had been meaning to speak with you in any case Harry. But first you may tell me what is on your mind.”

“Thank you sir,” Harry responded politely, doing his best to restrain his curiosity about the picture on Dumbledore’s desk. “I had another dream... er... vision I mean - last night.”

“I take it the matter is of no great urgency then,” the headmaster keenly observed.

“Yeah... I mean no... er, well, I suppose you can judge for yourself, but at least it wasn’t anything dreadful anyway. It’s just that Voldemort was making plans and I thought you should know what he’s up to.”
“Indeed Harry - please continue.”

“Yes sir. Anyway, apparently Voldemort means to build up his forces before doing much else - he’s sending Crabbe and Goyle somewhere to look for Giants for one thing. And MacNair is supposed to be capturing Mountain Trolls - like the one which almost got Hermione first year. And he’s sending Avery out to recruit criminal types - hooligans and such, I think.

“Wormtail’s already got some Werewolves on their side. Who he really wants though, is the Lestranges and some others - but they’re in...”

“Azkaban,” said Dumbledore quietly. “That means that eventually Voldemort will seek to take Azkaban by force to free his most loyal former supporters.”

“Er... right!” Harry agreed. “But he’s got to wait a bit until he’s got a big enough army to do it. And in the meantime, Voldemort’s planning to go after some of the Death Eaters on the outside who didn’t return to him.”

“Yes, I expected as much...” Dumbledore nodded. “Those who defy Voldemort do so at their own peril. There are ways for the cautious to protect themselves of course, though some may be feeling overconfident, lulled into a false sense of security by Voldemort’s defeat and long absence. Those shall no doubt find themselves caught off-guard, much to their dismay.

“Well Harry,” he continued, “I must thank you for the update. There is little I can do to prevent an attack on Azkaban given our current situation with the Ministry, other than to warn Madam Bones that such may occur. We shall have to leave that in her capable hands, though I fear that it will not stop an eventual prison-break. Dementors have an affinity for Dark wizards, and may be swayed to join Voldemort’s cause.

“Now, to that which I had intended to bring to your attention. I had been planning on having Professor Moody reveal the latest information regarding the Third Task, but as you are here in my office, I may as well tell you myself...

Dumbledore told Harry and Hermione what was known, which was less than what he would have liked. And by the time the meeting with the headmaster adjourned, Hermione was infuriated by the sparsity of the information. Harry thought that if she were any angrier, flames might shoot from her eyes.

“Giant venomous spiders,” Hermione huffed under her breath as they made their way to the Room of Requirement for practice, “I can’t believe it Harry...”

“And Blast-Ended Skrewts,” said Harry helpfully. “Don’t forget those.”

“But that’s not even the half of it,” Hermione said crossly. “This is no joke Harry. You have to be prepared for anything. We have no idea what else you’ll be facing. For all we know, they could set loose a horde of Inferi in the Maze.”

Harry sighed, seeing how worked up Hermione had become at the idea of him facing swarms of deadly unknown creatures and obstacles. He began to feel bad when he realised that Hermione was taking it so hard that she was on the verge of hyperventilation. They had been planning on practicing with their patronuses before meeting up with Daphne for their workout, but that was starting to look like a dim prospect.

Then it hit Harry - Cheering Charms - that ought to get them both in a good mood again. At least good enough to try experimenting with their patronuses.
“Hermione please,” Harry implored. “Everything will work out - we’ve got months to train. If you’d like, I can do a Cheering Charm on you.”

“I’m sorry Harry,” said Hermione apologetically when it struck her that Harry was doing his best to take things in stride. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I just hate this stupid tournament - I can’t bear the thought of losing you. Yes, a Cheering Charm sounds nice.”

Harry performed the charm, and Hermione began to feel much better. Hermione returned the favour, and soon they were both feeling a bit giggly by the time they reached the Room of Requirement. Happiest memories at the forefront of their minds - and they had many to choose from - both Potters conjured their patronuses.

A sublime joy swept through Harry and Hermione when the etheric stag and doe burst from their wands for the first time since they had chased away the Dementors in third year. Harry was absolutely stunned at the intensity of their radiant luminosity; they were much brighter than he recalled, nearly blindingly so. The Room of Requirement was flooded with the pulsing light, and their bodies tingled with seraphic ecstasy as the magic swirled around them.

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The headmaster looked up from his desk when he heard it - the whirring of one of his delicate silver and gold instruments. Fawkes uttered a questioning trill as he eyed the equipment warily. Dumbledore half expected sparks and a puff of smoke again. But something was different this time; there was no quake and the lights were stable.

Regardless, according to the instrument readings, it was clear that another powerful outpouring of magic of extremely high frequencies was occurring somewhere in the castle once again. But this time the magic was under control - directed in some sort of application that seemed vaguely familiar. The most curious thing was that as before, the location of the surge could not be pinpointed.

Dumbledore was quite keen on solving this mystery, but he had to consider his priorities. The school certainly was in no danger from the mysterious magical outburst - on the contrary, the surges seemed to have only strengthened the school’s defences. For the timebeing, the headmaster had more pressing concerns that did indeed present a danger to not only the school, but the entirety of Magical Britain.

For one thing, his most immediate and important decision was whether or not to send Hagrid on a dangerous, quite likely fruitless mission with minuscule chance of success. Dumbledore had to weigh his options carefully. Quite simply, beyond the fact of friendship, he couldn’t afford to lose his Care of Magical Creatures professor at this critical phase of the Triwizard tournament.

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The weeks leading up to Easter passed more quickly than Harry and Hermione thought possible. Schoolwork and training kept them both too busy to worry about things. There had been no sign that Voldemort had made anymore significant moves, and Harry was pleased that he hadn’t had to endure the stress that came whenever Voldemort was personally involved in a kill.

Daphne seemed to be getting on reasonably well, having been adopted as a friend by Parvati and Lavender. Fleur seemed to find Daphne’s presence pleasing as well. Hermione was thrilled to find herself regularly in three-way dinner conversations in French, as Daphne had spent some summers at the French Riviera also. And gradually - with Dora’s help - Daphne was building up her strength and enduring Professor Moody’s workouts and training sessions.
Much to Ron’s delight, Harry managed to find some time to hang out, play a few games of chess, and do a little flying together with a few other friends as well. Ron couldn’t believe his luck to finally meet Viktor Krum properly.

All in all, with Hermione at his side, Harry was feeling happy - happy enough to almost forget that a dangerous Dark wizard and the Minister were both plotting against him. Only one thing in that time served as a reminder of the circumstances which loomed over Harry’s life.

One day, nearly two weeks after that fateful day upon which Voldemort had restored himself, Snape approached Harry at the end of Potions. Harry wondered if he’d done something wrong, because Snape looked almost as sour as he had through much of Harry’s first year at Hogwarts. In fact, the Potters had both noticed Snape’s increased moodiness the past two weeks and chalked it up to his being disturbed by Voldemort’s renewal.

After everyone else had left the dungeon, Harry and Hermione sat there before Snape’s desk, anxiously awaiting some sort of reprimand - for what, they did not know. The tension grew in the silence; finally, as if it hurt, Snape spoke.

“Potter,” he began sharply before catching himself and moderating his tone, “...Harry - what I am about to tell you is for your ears only. I have allowed Mrs Potter to stay because she is your... spouse.

“Let me begin by saying that I am unaccustomed to discussing matters of personal interest... with anyone. However, there are certain facts which concern us both - facts which you deserve to know. Our fates are entwined more than you can possibly imagine...”

Harry felt a strong urge to point out that he had an inkling that Snape had known his mother, having gleaned at least that much from Voldemort’s mind the afternoon that Voldemort had sent out the signal to his Death Eaters. But Hermione must have sensed Harry’s urge, because she gave him a gentle nudge. Harry decided that perhaps it was better to simply let Snape speak uninterrupted.

“At one time,” Snape continued, “when I was a student at Hogwarts, I knew your parents. Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew were also known to me. We had a sordid history which I have no desire to relive in detail. Suffice it to say that your father and his friends - I loathed them, and they loathed me.

“Your mother however, was a different matter altogether. For many years, we had been... friends. I regret to say that I took that friendship for granted... and lost it. Indeed, I have many regrets - not the least of which is that eventually your parents married...” Snape couldn’t help himself, saying that last part with a sneer. He halted a moment to recover himself, then began again.

“Now, I should say that what happened next, were the further indiscretions of a young and foolish man. During my youth at Hogwarts, my friends were nearly all followers of the Dark Lord, and I - like them - joined him upon my graduation... another act I regret to this day.

“You are aware - I believe - of the Prophecy and that the Dark Lord came to learn of it. What you may not know, is how that came to be... My greatest regret of all...”

“Harry...” Snape paused again, a flicker of pain and sorrow in his eyes.

“It was me,” he continued, so softly that it was almost a whisper. “I overheard part of the Prophecy, and relayed it to the Dark Lord. It was only... only when I learned that your mother - that Lily... that she would be targeted by the Dark Lord that I switched sides. I begged Dumbledore to save her... but it was too late... the deed was done...” Snape trailed off, a muscle twitching in his jaw, his dark eyes glistening.
Harry was flabbergasted. The rest of the story he knew of course; Wormtail had betrayed his parents, deliberately selling them out to Voldemort. But he couldn’t believe that Snape himself had been the one to tell Voldemort about the prophecy. If he hadn’t, Harry’s parents might be alive today. Harry didn’t know what to feel - nor what to say. Hermione took his hand, biting her lip, struggling to contain her tears.

Snape managed to speak one last time.

You had to know!” he croaked. Then Snape stood up abruptly and strode out of the classroom in a swirl of robes.

Harry still couldn’t believe it. It took him several days to recover from Snape’s stunning revelation. But recover he did. One thing Harry was sure of, was that Snape had been very brave to reveal his part in things. Snape could have gone to his grave in silence and Harry would have been none the wiser. Another thing that Harry was sure of, Snape had loved Harry’s mother very much.
Chapter 17: Moody Blues Part 1

Chapter Notes

Yes, I know it's out of sequence. I have been reediting some chapters, to clean them up and dial up the eroticism.

Ron scowled, wondering if it was his imagination, or was Hermione hanging all over Harry even more than she ever had before? Hermione seemed to be sitting even closer to Harry at mealtimes, if possible. And they seemed to have their arms around one another more often than he could recall, even when she wasn’t crying about something.

Ron had always thought that she was just one of those sorts of girls who was huggy-kissy - ick - and it had simply been another annoying Hermione Granger thing to him - like her bossy know-it-allness. Ron had been infuriated when she’d been all over Harry at Christmas. Harry was supposed to be his best friend, not Hermione’s.

It had been more than apparent that they’d grown even closer since the summer following the end of Second Year. They always seemed to take each other’s sides in arguments against Ron - though admittedly, Scabbers had ended up being a creepy murderous wizard and the “Grim” had been Harry’s godfather. But there was something else which was aggravating about it now which Ron couldn’t quite put his finger on. The way Harry’s arm had been around Hermione’s slender waist at the World Cup when she was wearing that clingy dress - Draco Malfoy’s taunts in the woods.

Ridiculous! As if Ron would actually like a bossy know-it-all with bushy hair and big front teeth. It’s not like she was a Veela.

Though, he had to admit, Hermione’s cleverness had come in handy - when she had deigned to climb off her high horse to help him catch up in time for final exams in the classes which they shared before the end of Third Year. Harry had offered to help Ron with his homework as he usually did, but Hermione had insisted that Harry had enough to be getting on with and that she would have more time to spare to help Ron as she was much faster at reading and writing.

And somehow, Hermione had always seemed easier to talk to than other girls - when she wasn’t being such a bloody annoying bossy know-it-all! And then that dress - Hermione had looked completely different...

Bloody Hell! What was wrong with him? Had Malfoy been right? All that Ron was sure of, was that he wasn’t sure what annoyed him more now: the fact that Harry seemed to like Hermione more than he liked Ron, or the fact that Hermione seemed to like Harry more than she liked Ron.

And even worse, Ron wasn’t even sure why, except that he felt sort of hungry every time he thought of Hermione in that dress... and angry when he thought of Harry’s arm being around her waist.

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Harry heaved his and Hermione’s trunks onto the luggage rack in their compartment on the Hogwarts Express, oblivious to the expression on Ron’s face. The rainy weather seemed somehow fitting to Harry’s gloomy mood. He had a strange sense of foreboding which he supposed was due in
part to the fact that Amos Diggory’s head had popped up in the Weasleys’ fireplace that morning.

Mr Diggory was Cedric Diggory’s father, and a Ministry employee who worked for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. And Harry had taken a dislike to the man when he had sensed that Mr Diggory harboured some sort of ill-will towards him, and when Mr Diggory had treated Winky the House-Elf so poorly. But that wasn’t what had stirred Harry’s ominous feelings.

Harry was concerned about Alastor “Mad-Eye” Moody - the ex-Auror whom Harry and Hermione had both met at the World Cup; he had a very strong suspicion that Mad Eye would be taking the open Defence Against the Dark Arts position this year at Hogwarts. Mr Diggory had brought a message early that morning for Mr Weasley that the ex-Auror had got in a spot of trouble with the Ministry which only Mr Weasley could sort out. According to Mr Diggory, Mad Eye Moody had attracted the attention of muggle police when he’d caused a commotion over some sort of false alarm regarding a non-existent intruder at his house.

“I dunno Hermione...” Harry had muttered after Mr Diggory’s head had departed the Weasleys’ fireplace with a piece of toast in his mouth. “Mr Diggory thinks Moody was just being paranoid, but I don’t think I believe that. Doesn’t it seem a bit coincidental t’you that this would happen just after the Death Eater attack at the World Cup and just before Moody’s due to leave for Hogwarts? What if...”

“...someone really did try to attack him?” Hermione had continued, her eyes widening as her breath had caught. “I think you’re right Harry - If Mr Moody’s a friend of Dumbledore’s, and fought with him against Voldemort the last time, then the Headmaster very likely hired him to take the Defence of Dark Arts position this year to help keep an eye on you because...”

“...he believes that my dream is real - that Voldemort’s back and plotting again to kill me. Yeah, exactly!” Harry had gone on with a nod. “Maybe Voldemort found out about Moody somehow and sent someone to try and stop him from going to Hogwarts.”

“Harry... what if it’s something worse than that?” Hermione had gasped, a horrible thought suddenly occurring to her.

“What d’you mean Hermione? What could be worse than trying to kill Moody?”

“Harry, what if Voldemort tried to Imperius Mr Moody to kill you at Hogwarts?”

“Blimey Hermione! You’re right...” Harry had frowned thoughtfully for a moment. “But somehow I think Mr Moody would be hard to Imperius. If that book on curses we found in Number Twelve’s library is right, strong-willed people have a chance of throwing off the Imperius Curse. And Mad Eye seemed like a pretty tough-minded bloke. Maybe...”

Another horrible thought had niggled at the back of Harry’s mind, and Hermione had given voice to it.

“...Maybe Voldemort sent someone to replace him Harry ...” Hermione had gasped, “...with polyjuice potion. Oh Harry, we’ve got to have Dumbledore check Mr Moody thoroughly when we get to school - before he can do anything to hurt you!”

As his thoughts returned to the present, Harry took Crookshanks’ basket from Hermione and stowed it next to Hedwig’s cage and Hermione’s trunk on the luggage rack above their seats, he caught an odd expression on Ron’s face which put thoughts about Mr Moody out of his mind temporarily. Harry wondered if Ron was still upset about the second hand dress robes which his mother had
bought for him in Diagon Alley.

Harry thought it was a crying shame how quickly Ron’s good mood had evaporated. Ron had seemed very happy the last few days of the summer holidays - showing off the quidditch moves that he’d been practicing from the book which Harry had given him as a Christmas Present, on the broom which Sirius had given him to make up for breaking his leg. Ron was very intent on making the Gryffindor quidditch team this year.

Ron had even bitten his tongue and stayed out of the furious argument that Hermione had had with Percy Weasley about Winky when Percy had insisted that a high ranking Ministry Official like Mr Crouch deserved “unswerving obedience from his servants.” Hermione’s enraged retort that Winky was a slave, not a servant, had been cut off when Mrs Weasley had brought Ron his “new” dress robes to pack yesterday.

The row between Ron and his mum had been epic when he’d seen the vintage maroon robes with lacy frills at the collar and cuffs. Hermione had hidden behind The Standard Book of Spells: Grade 4 - the 4th Year Charms book from which Harry and Hermione had both learned the Summoning Charm at the beginning of Third Year - trembling when Ron had thundered up to his room and slammed his door, bellowing about how everything he owned was rubbish.

The whistle blew and the Hogwarts Express lurched into motion with a hiss of steam as its wheels screeched, distracting Harry briefly from ruminating on Ron’s moodiness. Harry caught Hermione in his arms when she staggered, and they both quickly sat down. The heavy rain pelted at the windows as the train departed from King’s Cross.

Harry glanced at Ron again and considered telling him what he and Hermione had surmised about Moody before leaving the Weasleys’ house earlier that morning, when they were rudely interrupted and heckled by Draco Malfoy and his thuggish cronies, Crabbe and Goyle. Harry sighed and rolled his eyes. He was getting used to this little ritual exchange with Malfoy on the Hogwarts Express at the beginning of every school-year.

Ron’s mood went from bad to worse after Malfoy tormented him about the maroon dress robes - which Ron had thrown over his owl’s cage to shut Pigwidgeon up. And it didn’t end there. Malfoy seemed to have some inside knowledge regarding the upcoming event at Hogwarts precipitating the necessity for dress robes.

“...So what about it Weasel-boy? You planning on entering then? It’s your chance to show Potter up and get the girl... there’s gold involved too you know?”

“What are you on about Malfoy?” snapped Ron, his face reddening.

“What? You don’t know? Your father and brother work at the Ministry and you don’t even know? I suppose they’re too low level...” Malfoy chortled gleefully. “They’re probably not important enough to be told that sort of thing...” he continued as Crabbe and Goyle sniggered sycophantically.

“Clear off Malfoy...” Harry growled warningly, unwilling to admit that he didn’t know something that Malfoy did. Unfortunately, Malfoy seemed to know exactly which card to play to really get Ron’s goat and he barreled on, talking loudly over Harry.

“I expect Potter will enter though - he never misses a chance to show-off! I’m surprised Potter didn’t tell you though, Weasleby - considering that he’s such good chums with the Minister after all....”

“...Though I suppose Scarhead’s worked out what a worthless peasant you are and decided he’d rather hog all the glory to himself!” Malfoy concluded, smirking malevolently as he beckoned
Crabbe and Goyle to depart.

“Bloody git!” fumed Ron, his face purple with rage. “I wish he really had been sent to Durmstrang.” Ron slammed the compartment door so hard that all the glass shattered, and he shot Harry a dark look.

“Reparo,” muttered Hermione.

Harry was taken aback and speechless, momentarily uncertain who Ron’s look of fury was directed at. Hermione must have had an inkling though, because she jumped in as soon as the shards of glass had become whole windowpanes and returned to their proper places.

“Ron,” she said quickly, her voice full of concern, “You know Malfoy was full of rubbish don’t you? Obviously some sort of event must be happening at Hogwarts this year, but Harry doesn’t know any more about it than you do.”

“Er... yeah... sure,” said Ron uncertainly, not meeting Hermione’s eyes. “Yeah... I mean you would’ve told me... right Harry?”

“Of course I would’ve Ron!” said Harry. “Malfoy’s just a liar!”

Harry was extremely relieved when Ginny and Luna found their compartment and joined them. When the witch with the lunch trolley showed up, Harry purchased a pile of meat pasties and cauldron cakes, and drinks for everyone, hoping some food would cheer Ron up. Ron did lighten up somewhat, but his moodiness seemed very persistent.

When Seamus, Dean, and Neville ambled by after lunch had been demolished, and poked their heads in to say hello, Ron followed them back to their compartment. Luna and Ginny glanced at Harry and Hermione, then peered at each other knowingly.

“Thanks for lunch Harry,” beamed Luna. “It was lovely.”

“Yeah... thanks Harry,” said Ginny, smiling. “We’ll see you both later Hermione. You may as well make the best of the peace and quiet the rest of the day,” she finished pointedly.

Hermione pursed her lips into a funny little half-smile; Harry turned slightly pink and grinned. As soon as Ginny and Luna had gone, Hermione drew the curtains across the windows to the narrow corridor and locked the door.

“Just for now,” said Hermione as she snuggled under Harry’s arm.

“No arguments here,” Harry let out a huge sigh of relief as the residual tension drained away, leaning in to meet Hermione’s lips with his own as he gently stroked Hermione’s cheek.

They spent the rest of the afternoon cuddling, occasionally sharing humid kisses, and eventually dozed off peacefully in each other’s arms, feeling safe in the knowledge that Hermione’s windup alarm clock was set to wake them an hour before they reached Hogwarts. Crookshanks purred on their laps and Hedwig hooted softly as the rain grew heavier and the train trundled ever northward.

Ron left it until the very last minute to return to their compartment as the Hogwarts Express rounded the last bend. He seemed to be in a much better mood. For his part, Harry was feeling much happier as well, though he was still anxious about what would happen when Mr Moody reached Hogwarts.

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After the Sorting, everyone dug into the feast. Harry kept peering up at the Staff Table at the empty seat which was surely Mr Moody’s, barely touching his dinner.

“WazzamatterHarry?” mumbled Ron cheerily through a huge mouthful of steak and kidney pie and mashed potato as Parvati and Lavender eyed him with horror.

“Er...” Harry wasn’t sure exactly what to say, as he still hadn’t had a chance to reveal his and Hermione’s suspicions to Ron, then he decided to just make a bit of a joke out of it. “...Just hoping the new Defence teacher isn’t another one of Vol... er... You-Know-Who’s minions out to kill me this year.”

Ron nearly snorted his mashed potato out of his nose in laughter. Hermione picked at her own food for a bit, before turning to Harry looking troubled. But Hermione’s lack of appetite appeared to be due to a different reason altogether.

“Harry, Sirius said that that he’d sent his house-elf Kreacher to Hogwarts, and Winky said that Dobby works here too. Do you think that house elves made all of this food?”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. He hadn’t really thought about it before. But the idea that his dinner had been made by slaves began to make the few bits of roast beef and mashed potatoes - which he’d only just managed to get down - churn in his stomach.

“Er... I don’t know Hermione... I... I suppose perhaps they do though!”

“They do indeed,” proffered Nearly Headless Nick, who had been eavesdropping silently behind them and peering longingly at the feast. “Hogwarts has well over a hundred house-elves you know.”

“But... but Dumbledore pays them right?” said Hermione, “Like Dobby? And surely they get sick leave and pensions and... and paid holidays?”

Nick chortled at the hilarious notion of house-elves getting holidays.

“Of course not! And they’d be very offended if anyone offered,” the ghost responded, guffawing with great amusement.

Ron began to snigger loudly, accidentally spraying Harry with bits of Yorkshire Pudding. Hermione’s face turned livid, and Ron quieted to a grin. But Fred chuckled, and spoke up.

“They like it Hermione...”

“...they live to serve...” continued George.

“You KNEW?” gasped Hermione, quivering in outrage.

Fred and George looked at each other uncomfortably, realising suddenly that they had just stepped into a mine-field, not to mention that they were on the verge of inadvertently exposing one of the secrets of their successful parties.

“Well... yeah! But...” Fred started to say before quickly shutting up again.

Harry could see steam beginning to come out of Hermione’s ears, and he put his hand on hers.

“Hermione, why don’t we look into it later. I’m not very hungry anymore either, but let’s not spoil everyone else’s dinner, alright.”
“Maybe it *should* be spoiled...” she muttered angrily, glaring at all of the Weasley brothers, “*slave labour.*”

Neither she nor Harry ate another bite. Ron tried to tempt them both with the delicious looking desserts, chortling wickedly, but gave up trying when Harry glowered at him.

“Give it a rest Ron...” Harry growled when Ron waved a delicious smelling apple crumble under his nose.

“Suit yourself then, more for me,” Ron smirked.

After the feast, everything else was put out of their minds. Dumbledore had made his usual speech, but this year he had a bit more to add. Ron’s face fell when the Headmaster announced that the school’s Quidditch season had been canceled.

“But I’ve been practicing all summer to get on the team,” Ron moaned angrily.

Fred and George looked equally appalled. Harry peered at Hermione and raised his eyebrows, knowing that this must have something to do with whatever Malfoy had been on about. But the furious murmurs filling the Great Hall morphed into noisy excitement and cheers when Dumbledore pronounced that the Triwizard tournament would be occurring this year for the first time since 1792, having been reinstated by the Ministry’s departments of International Magical Cooperation, and Magical Games and Sports.

“D...d...death toll?” Hermione sputtered when Dumbledore got around to explaining why it had been canceled centuries ago, glancing at Harry with alarm and squeezing his hand under the table.

Harry grimaced and rubbed his forehead. Most of Hogwarts seemed unfazed though, and Fred and George were positively thrilled... until Dumbledore proclaimed that the rules had been changed to prevent students under 17 from participating.

“Still, I reckon we could work out how to get past whoever the impartial judge is,” said Fred.

“Perhaps a couple drops of Aging Potion?” George proposed.

“Yeah... that’d be brilliant,” Ron murmured, a distant look in his eyes. “A thousand galleons...”

Ron’s daydream was interrupted by a flash of lightning from the enchanted ceiling and a loud of peal of thunder. The buzz of excitement faded into gasps of shock and surprise at the intimidating and thoroughly drenched figure who had just limped into the Great Hall with heavy thumping footsteps.

Harry’s heart began to thud a bit harder and faster, and Hermione clutched his hand a bit tighter. Harry swallowed nervously, but took some comfort in the fact that Dumbledore had promised to check Alastor Moody thoroughly for Imperius Curses and Polyjuice Potion.

Several girls and First Years squeaked with fright as the carved out features of the ex-Auror’s heavily scarred face stood out clearly in stark relief with every flicker of lightning. Moody lurched and clomped his way to the Staff-Table, dripping all over the marble floor. Harry frowned when Dumbledore introduced him to the school as if nothing were amiss.

“I expect Dumbledore doesn’t want to tip him off just yet, until the students are safely out of the way, and until he’s sure that there’s no way Moody can escape - just in case, Harry,” Hermione whispered.

“Oh, yeah... I suppose that makes sense,” murmured Harry.
Harry couldn’t think of anything else all the way back to the Gryffindor Common Room. Everyone was talking about the Triwizard tournament, but Harry didn’t hear a word that anyone else but Hermione said. She hugged him as long as she felt safe to in the Common Room without raising anyone’s eyebrows before saying goodnight.

The aching emptiness in Harry’s gut as he changed into his pyjamas and clambered into bed had nothing to do with lack of food, and everything to do with the lack of his Hermione to cuddle. Harry rubbed at his twinging scar again, steeling himself for a wretched night of tossing and turning.

“Earth to Harry...”

“Oh... er... Sorry Ron! What were you saying?”

“A Thousand Galleons Harry!” said Ron, yawning sleepily, “I think I might enter - if Fred and George work out how to do it... You’re going to give it a go, aren’t you?”

“Er... honestly Ron, I’m really not that interested in competing...”

“Yeah...right!” Ron sniggered, “Sure you’re not...”

“No, really,” Harry muttered. “I don’t know enough spells for one thing. I don’t need the money, and I’ve already got more fame than I care for. I’d just like a nice peaceful year at school for once...”

“Whatever you say Harry...”

~o0o~

Harry felt as dismal and grey as the clouds floating across the Enchanted Ceiling of the Great Hall the following morning. Hermione peered at him sympathetically as they dug into breakfast.

“Did you have nightmares again Harry?” she asked quietly. Harry reluctantly nodded, hating to seem needy and pathetic.

“Moody’s not up at the Staff Table though,” said Harry pensively. “I wonder if that means anything...”

“I see you’re both eating again,” said Ron with a grin. “Is the Hunger Strike for House Elves over then?”

Hermione gave Ron a withering glare and Harry rolled his eyes, but neither one of them was in the mood to take the bait. At the end of breakfast, Ron departed with Seamus, Dean, and Neville for Divination. Harry and Hermione both got up, ready to leave for Arithmancy when Professor McGonagall approached them, bearing a grave countenance.

“Potter, Granger, the Headmaster would like a word with you both in his office,” McGonagall’s features softened slightly. “I have already informed Professor Vector that you shan’t be in class today. Not to worry though... she assured me that she would not be assigning any homework today.”

“Oh no!” said Hermione, sounding disappointed.

“What’s this about Professor? Does this have anything t’do with...?” began Harry.

“Not here Mr Potter!” McGonagall interjected. “It’s best that Dumbledore explains everything in private. Though... I suppose it would be remiss of me not to say at least how very proud and grateful I am to have you both as my students. Now run along... don’t keep the Headmaster waiting.”
It was with utmost trepidation and anticipation that Harry and Hermione made their way through the castle to Dumbledore’s office.

“Cockroach Cluster,” said Harry to the gargoyle statue guarding the Headmaster’s office.

The gargoyle leapt aside; Harry and Hermione stepped onto the foot of the stone spiral staircase which carried them up like an escalator to the entrance of the office. His heart pounding in his ears now, Harry took the brass door knocker in his hand and knocked three times on the glossy oak door. Harry and Hermione both gasped in shock when it opened to reveal two unexpected visitors already in Dumbledore’s office.

“Ah... welcome Harry, Miss Granger! Please, do not be alarmed,” said Dumbledore calmly. “This is the real Alastor Moody... and you are both well acquainted with Cornelius Fudge of course.”

“Hello Harry, Miss Granger!” Fudge smiled wanly at them both; he had the air of defeat about him.

“Potter, Granger... Good to see you both again!” growled Moody, who looked more than a bit exhausted and out of sorts. “Can’t thank you two enough, really!”

Dumbledore conjured two poofy chintz armchairs for Harry and Hermione, and they both took a seat next to each other. Hermione reached out and took Harry’s hand, biting her lip.

“Well, perhaps the good news first,” began the Headmaster, his eyes twinkling. “Though it is no doubt quite apparent as Alastor is now with us, and none the worse for wear...”

“Except for a bit o’ wounded pride perhaps,” the scarred ex-Auror grumbled.

“Indeed,” Dumbledore continued, looking slightly abashed himself. “And it is all thanks to Harry’s apparent prescience and the ingenuity of you both. Last night, based upon your cogent analysis of the situation, after the feast professors Flitwick, McGonagall, Snape, and myself confronted the imposter - for indeed he was polyjuiced - and apprehended him with little struggle, having caught him unawares. Alastor was released from confinement in the bottom of his own trunk...”

“Who was the imposter?” Harry interjected, unable to help himself.

“Ah... There is quite a tale to tell regarding the identity of the imposter, but to begin with, I must say that I find myself humbled by you both. I daresay that the imposter may have gone unnoticed for quite some time before discovery, as I had not considered the possibility that Voldemort could have learned of Alastor’s appointment here at Hogwarts and sent an agent to capture and impersonate him.”

“And as it turns out - as unthinkable as it was - the imposter was none other than Bartemius Crouch’s son - Barty Crouch Junior...”

“You’re joking!” gasped Harry.

“The son of the head of International Magical Cooperation?” squeaked Hermione.

“The very same - yes!” Dumbledore nodded. “And believe me, his story is even more remarkable than you can imagine - as it was believed by all that he had died in Azkaban. And as incredible as his own personal tale is - given the elder Crouch’s history - the story of how Barty Crouch Junior came to be discovered in the home of his father and recruited by Voldemort is even more convoluted - and his plan to kidnap you stretches the very boundaries of credulity...”
Having been given the rest of the first day back at Hogwarts to themselves, relieved of their classes by Dumbledore, Harry and Hermione found themselves sitting on boulders by the edge of the Black Lake, still processing the shocking information revealed in the Headmaster’s office as fat raindrops began to fall again.

“I know I should be happy Hermione, but it’s a bloody shame that Crouch Jr couldn’t reveal where Voldemort and Wormtail are hiding right now,” said Harry bitterly as he picked up a pebble and threw it in the lake with a plunk, not caring as the rain began to splatter his glasses and pepper his robes with wet spots. “…I suppose Voldemort must’ve obliviated him - or maybe used some sort of secret-keeping spell - to keep his location secret until it was the right time for Crouch Jr to kidnap me to minimise the risk of being caught.”

“I still can’t believe that the Wizengamot passed a motion of no-confidence and sacked the Minister this morning,” Hermione fumed. “What happened at the World Cup wasn’t his fault at all! And there’s absolutely nothing in the Daily Prophet this morning about Crouch Jr’s capture. It’s almost like the new Minister is trying to cover things up... but why? ”

Harry picked up a bigger rock and hurled it into the water with a splash.

“I dunno Hermione - maybe Minister Umbridge is trying to protect Crouch Senior?”

“Perhaps so...” Hermione nodded, brushing a wet lock of hair from her face. “That almost makes sense. I remember Percy saying that Crouch Senior and Minister Umbridge - when she was still the Senior Undersecretary - saw eye to eye regarding Cornelius Fudge being incompetent... but still, there’s something missing...”

“Yeah - tell me about it!” Harry muttered darkly, rubbing at his painful scar. “Dumbledore and Moody don’t seem to like her very much... maybe she’s got connections to Voldemort somehow, but they can’t prove it. All I’m sure of Hermione, is that things aren’t over yet...”

“Voldemort’s going to try something else to get to me which will put everyone in danger. I just know it - we need to learn some proper fighting spells. I don’t want to just rely on Moody to protect us - he can’t be around both of us 24/7.”

“I... I agree Harry. I think we should be able to find some good spells in the Fifth and Sixth Year Charms books...”

Hermione sneezed. Harry turned around and saw her shivering, rivulets of water running down her cheeks and dripping from her sopping hair. He suddenly realised that he was as wet as she was, and that it was pouring again, but she hadn’t said a word. Harry swallowed guiltily. He felt extremely agitated, and had no desire to be inside the castle around hundreds of other students, but he knew it would do neither of them any good to catch their death of colds.

“But before Harry could say another word of apology, Hermione wrapped herself around him, kissing him deeply as the rain grew heavier. She slipped her arms inside his robes and pressed herself against him as tightly as possible. Harry felt a surge of heat fill him from the tips of his toes to the top of his head.

The limbs of the willows and birches began swaying as the wind picked up, and curtains of rain were sweeping across the surface of lake by the time they both fell apart gasping for breath, but neither of them felt the cold and damp as they trudged up the muddy hillside back to the castle with grins on their dripping faces.
Everyone was still in classes when they got back, as it wasn’t even lunchtime yet, and they hung up their robes to dry by the fire in the Common Room before heading off to their respective dormitories. Back in her own dorm, Hermione breathlessly stripped off her wet things and found clean, dry clothes in her trunk as Crookshanks purred at her. Hermione bit her lip as she peered at her fresh uniform, considering her options.

She had kissed Harry outside in the rain as passionately as she could, knowing that it would distract him from his darkening mood. Hermione had felt her success growing stiffer in Harry's trousers as she pressed up against him in the downpour, stirring herself in the process. Decision made and still unclothed, Hermione yanked her crimson curtains all the way around her four-poster bed, her heart racing. Sensing his human’s need for a moment of privacy, Crookshanks jumped off her bed and curled up by the fireplace instead.

Breath quickening, as she lay on her bed Hermione parted her thighs and slid one of her hands down her abdomen, brushing the tawny wisps on her mound, fingers seeking out her dampening fold. Her other hand she slid across her chest, grasping one breast then the other, tweaking the tender peaks. Imagining they were Harry's hands, Hermione slipped two fingers inside her heated entrance, and toggled her fleshy button with her thumb...

~o0o~

Harry smiled wryly and turned a bit pink when Hermione finally came back downstairs to the Gryffindor Common Room looking relaxed. Hermione grinned and blushed to see Harry appearing much calmer himself, sitting there in clean dry clothes; she snuggled up beside him on the sofa nearest to the crackling fire in the hearth. Harry put his arm around Hermione and kissed her forehead.

“Thanks Hermione... I feel loads better now. So what say we head to the library and start looking up fighting spells... and the history of house-elf slavery?”

“That’s an excellent idea... but I think that can wait till after lunch Harry,” Hermione said softly, fluttering her eyelashes as she leaned in for a proper kiss.

~o0o~

Harry and Hermione gave up looking for information on house-elf slavery after a while, unable to find anything about it in any of the history books - not even a single word in *Hogwarts, a History*. They spent the rest of the afternoon reading up on stunning and shielding charms, as well as a variety of concussive and incendiary explosive spells.

“Where’ve you two been all day?” groused Ron, eyeing Harry and Hermione suspiciously when he found them both in the common room studying after classes. “I didn’t see you in Herbology or Care of Magical Creatures...”

Harry grinned at Ron and began to quietly fill him in about Professor Moody with Hermione’s help. It was nearly dinnertime by the time they finished telling Ron everything.

“Blimey! No wonder Dumbledore gave you the day off! ...” Ron gaped at Harry. “Another bloody nutter trying to kill you...”

“Yeah... anyway we both skipped lunch, so I’m famished now,” said Harry.

“That miserable old bat Trelawney gave us a load of extra homework too,” Ron griped moodily as they queued in the entrance hall behind the horde of students heading for dinner.
“Maybe you should lay off the Uranus jokes when Trelawney does Astrology,” Neville muttered, frowning at Ron.

Sure enough, Harry spotted Lavender Brown in the crowd shooting Ron dirty looks again. Parvati turned around to see what Lavender was looking at and rolled her eyes. Harry heard someone shouting behind him.

“Potter, hey Potter!”

Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Ron turned to see Malfoy chortling gleefully as Crabbe and Goyle stood beside him sniggering. Malfoy held up the *Daily Prophet* for all to see the headline.

**FUDGE SACKED**

**SENIOR UNDERSECRETARY SWORN IN AS NEW MINISTER**

“How does it feel to be friends with a *loser* Potter?” sneered Malfoy. “Of course MY father is good friends with the NEW Minister. I told you that changes were coming...”

Harry peered at the black and white picture of the squat, toad-like woman on the front of the wizarding newspaper and shook his head. Draco Malfoy was slightly taken aback to see a smirk creeping to Harry’s lips.

“Is that the best your daddy can do Malfoy? He must be really getting desperate since your mummy stopped putting out for him!”

Harry felt a surge of satisfaction as Malfoy’s pallid features flushed angrily.

“I warned you to watch your mouth Potter. How *dare* you insult my family?” snarled Malfoy.

“Hark who’s talking. Maybe you should keep your own big fat mouth shut then!” said Harry, turning his back towards Malfoy.

A white-hot spell sizzled, singing Harry’s cheek as it barely missed him and exploded a bust near the entrance of the Great Hall, scattering shrieking students as burning shards rained down upon them. Harry whirled around, reaching for his wand. But before he could retaliate, Malfoy shriveled up and turned into a lizard.

Crabbe and Goyle turned and ran for it when they saw the mangled wizard with the large spinning blue eye bearing down on them.

“That’s quite enough outta you, sonny boy!” Moody growled as he scooped up the lizard with his bare hand.

“*Professor Moody!*” gasped McGonagall as she fought her way through the crowd of frightened pupils. “Is that a student?”

“Too right you are,” said Moody. “Looked like Malfoy’s boy...”

“We *never* use transfigurations as punishments,” Professor McGonagall began, “Point losses and detentions...”

“...Are bloody useless for teachin’ cowards a lesson!” Moody snapped. “That could be Potter or some other student lyin’ in pieces on the floor instead of a statue.”

Professor McGonagall paled when she saw the damage and glanced around at the faces of the
students, many of whom looked terrified.

“Point taken!” she muttered, her nostrils flaring as her eyes narrowed at the lizard in Moody’s clutches.

~o0o~

The next few days passed with much less stress for Harry and Hermione, but Malfoy shot Harry venomous looks all through Potions. Not only had Malfoy been sentenced to sit detention disemboweling a barrel full of horned toads by hand, he had also been suspended from broom flying privileges for the rest of the term, and he had been restricted to wand usage in classes only.

Harry found that Arithmancy was becoming slightly less of a struggle, finally having achieved barely passing marks on all of his homework now; though it was clear to him that he’d still be lucky to get even one Exceeds Expectations on a piece of homework or a test. And Harry was very pleased that he continued to excel in Ancient Runes. Hermione had beamed at him proudly when his parchment on warding against dangerous magical creatures had earned him the highest marks in class once again.

“Of course, I couldn’t have done it without the best translator in class by my side,” said Harry, grinning at his girlfriend.

Care of Magical Creatures was a bit less enjoyable than he’d hoped though. Hagrid had some rather ugly looking little creatures which looked like a cross between a crab and a scorpion without shells. Apparently they were just hatchlings, but that didn’t stop them from being rather painful to work with.

The males had stingers, and the females had prickly suckers, and they would occasionally blast off, emitting hot sparks - hence their name: Blast Ended Skrewts. But the lesson wasn’t entirely bad. Several females managed to latch themselves onto Malfoy’s face and he had to be sent up to the hospital wing after Hagrid removed them.

Most of the class, even Malfoy’s fellow Slytherins, had a good laugh when they saw Draco’s face emblazoned with blistering hickeys. Hermione couldn’t help smirking either. The creatures were too small to have done any real harm - and she felt that he quite deserved it for trying to attack Harry the other day.

Defence Against the Dark Arts with Professor Moody on Thursday proved to be intense and disturbing. Moody demonstrated the three “Unforgivable Curses” in class. Harry and Hermione felt well prepared, having read up about them already in the book about curses which they had discovered in Number Twelve’s library. But seeing the spells performed on a hapless spider was another thing altogether.

Many people giggled when the spider was forced to do tricks under the Imperius Curse, until Moody made it nearly drown itself. Hermione grew more anxious with each demonstration. The horrified expression on Neville’s face when the Cruciatus Curse had been demonstrated was gut-wrenching enough, but seeing Harry stare almost blankly when Moody had killed the spider with the Avada Kedavra Curse was even worse somehow.

There was barely any indication that Harry felt anything at all until Moody had pointed out that Harry was the only person known to have survived the Killing Curse. Harry’s nostrils flared, and he turned slightly pink. Tears sprang to Hermione’s eyes, sure that Harry must be thinking about his parents, and she had to bite her lip hard to keep herself from losing it completely.
“That was a bloody brilliant lesson!” said Ron, grinning as he followed Harry and Hermione to the Great Hall after class, “He really knows his stuff, Moody does! The way that spider snuffed it when Moody did the Avada Kedavra...”

Hermione spun around furiously and nearly launched herself at Ron. Harry clutched her around the waist, afraid that she might actually hit Ron.

“What is WRONG with you?” she shouted at Ron, hot tears scalding her cheeks.

“It’s alright Hermione...” Harry muttered, his own face reddening as other students turned around to see what was going on. “Ron didn’t mean anything by it.”

Ron gulped, looking half-ashamed and half-angry at Hermione’s sudden outburst. His eyes darted to Harry’s arm around her waist, then he shrugged and stalked away in the opposite direction.

“He’s such an insensitive prat!” Hermione sobbed as Harry led her into an empty classroom. He held Hermione and stroked her hair as she let it all out.

“I’m s...sorry Harry! I try to be nice to him because he’s your friend - really I do! B...but I just c...can’t stand Ron sometimes! ... He’s alright too - sometimes... I suppose. I thought things were better again between us all after he got an owl and a new broom. And... and I know he just says things without thinking, but he’s just been so obnoxious about everything lately...”

“Don’t apologise Hermione,” sighed Harry, giving her a gentle kiss. “Ron is a bit thick! There’s an alright bloke in there somewhere though - he’ll grow up sometime...” Harry trailed off, wondering if it was true, uncertain of his own breaking point.

As the weeks wore on, Ron seemed in a reasonably good mood, and appeared to have forgotten all about Hermione shouting at him. Though truth be told, as Harry and Hermione had been so busy studying to keep up with their classes, he had been hanging out with Seamus and Dean more again. And even when they weren’t studying, Harry and Hermione always seemed busy with other things which either seemed too much like homework, or which Ron thought were completely ridiculous.

They had found little information in the library about house-elves beyond the fact that house-elf slavery went back centuries, but they discovered one sunny Friday afternoon that Luna’s father was apparently a treasure trove of information on the subject.

“Not many people know that wizards enslaved house-elves after a horrible war,” Luna proffered as they strolled along the shore of the lake. “It’s not in most history books. I only know because Daddy did a lot of research for an article about the cruelty of wizards towards other magical creatures once.”

Hermione’s ears perked up. “Luna, can I contact your father? I want to find out more about it and do something. It’s not fair how house-elves are treated.”

“Absolutely Hermione!” Luna said, her silvery-grey eyes growing bigger, thrilled to be asked. “Maybe we should start an organisation to help them...”

“Harry and I’ve already been thinking about that,” Hermione interjected excitedly. “We can call it the Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare...”

Harry chortled and shook his head. “Hermione, that would be a terrible acronym: S.P.E.W. I think we should try and work on that...”

Hermione frowned pensively for a moment as Luna giggled.
“You’re right Harry,” said Hermione, turning a bit pink and giggling herself. “That wouldn’t really be very conducive to eliciting sympathy for house-elves would it!?"

“Anyway, we should probably talk to Dobby first,” Harry added. “If other house-elves are more like Winky, we’ll have to rethink how to go about this...”

Harry waited until Luna went off to send a letter to her father, asking for some of his archived articles about house-elves, then he pulled a small package wrapped in sparkling gold paper out of his robes and handed it to Hermione.

“Happy Birthday Hermione!”

Delighted that Harry had remembered her fifteenth birthday, Hermione carefully unwrapped the parcel; she unclasped the emerald velvet covered box inside and gasped at the elegant pearl necklace within. Hermione had never been one for wearing jewellery, as it hadn’t been something that her parents had ever indulged in. Jewellery had never before caught her fascination beyond the intellectual aspects of how precious gems and such were formed. But this was different.

Hermione’s heart began to race; her whole body tingled. This was the first piece of jewellery ever given to her by someone she loved, and the opalescent sheen of the white pearls gleaming in the afternoon sun caught her eye.

“Oh Harry... it’s gorgeous! ” said Hermione, as she fluttered her glistening eyelashes and bit her lip to stop herself from crying.

Harry let out a huge sigh of relief. He’d never seen Hermione wearing jewellery, but he had taken the risk nonetheless.

“I thought it would match your evening gown and dress robes,” Harry said softly.

“Thank you Harry! I’ll always treasure it!” Hermione responded breathily.

Hermione carefully stowed the little green box in her robes and put her arms around Harry’s neck, drawing him in for a kiss. Their lips met tenderly and Harry’s hands encircled Hermione’s slender waist. The kiss deepened, growing more heated as they embraced under the willow tree by the edge of the shimmering blue lake, the afternoon sun catching the golden highlights of Hermione’s hair.
Narcissa paced back and forth in one of the parlours of Black Manor - her empty ancestral home - pondering her predicament. It was clear that her husband and her son had both forsaken her. She had hoped that her relationships could be salvaged, but her husband’s words, “Blood Traitor,” echoed in her mind.

Harsh though they were, Narcissa had to concede that those words contained a modicum of truth. And the venomous hate that she had seen in her son’s eye when he had reminded her that she was a Malfoy by name only, reinforced the fact that it was she who had changed.

At one time Narcissa had shared the views of her husband, as had many back in those days before the end of the war. She had grown up believing what her parents had taught her. But when her son had been born, Narcissa began to doubt. And when the Dark Lord had been defeated, she had hoped to put the past behind her.

The memory that she had once supported many of the “questionable choices” her husband had made in the service of the Dark Lord now brought Narcissa nothing but shame. The path that now lay before her was uncertain, the choice she faced would define her very existence.

Narcissa considered seeking the counsel of her sister Andromeda, who had long ago cast aside the traditions of Blood Purity to marry a muggleborn. But there was little love lost between Narcissa and her sister, and she doubted that she would be welcomed. There was another that Narcissa had trusted, but she was uncertain as to where his loyalties truly lay.

~o0o~

Severus Snape regarded the fireplace in his office with some apprehension. He had been surprised when an owl had delivered an unmarked envelope at breakfast; he couldn’t recall the last time that he had received a piece of mail. The contents of the envelope had been equally perplexing; the floo address it contained was one he hadn’t seen before and he pondered its significance. He wasn’t sure if he should take the risk that it possibly presented.

Having made a decision, Snape finally flung the powder into the hearth and stepped into the green flames. Emerging from the fireplace at the other end of the floo connection, he lifted an eyebrow as he peered at his surroundings, which appeared to be the parlour of an uninhabited manor.

Many of the pieces of furniture were covered with white sheets. And only the few exposed furnishings and the woman present were any indication that the manor was not quite as uninhabited as it appeared to be.

“Thank you for coming Severus,” greeted Narcissa.

Severus swallowed with trepidation when he noted the tears glistening in Narcissa’s long dark eyelashes. Dealing with tearful witches was something he had little experience with, and it unnerved him. His heart pounded and there was a slight ringing in his ears when Narcissa took his arm in hers and led him to the long plush deep-red sofa near the hearth.

Orange flames flared where there had previously been green ones, and bathed the room in a warm flickering glow. Severus sat stiffly where Narcissa bade him. Narcissa unstoppered the 175 year old bottle of Dragon Barrel Brandy and poured some into two crystal snifters sitting on the mahogany coffee table before seating herself closely beside him.
They both sat in silence.

Snape swirled his goblet and inhaled the bouquet before taking a sip. The smooth rich liqueur washed over his tongue and steadied his nerves. Narcissa sipped from her glass and placed it back on the coffee table, heaving a deep breath. She took Severus’s unoccupied hand in her own two soft hands.

Severus’s features were inscrutable, but he was certain that she could feel his pulse racing. Anxiously, he drained his own goblet before setting it down. Narcissa nervously cleared her throat before speaking.

“Severus... I must know. How close are you to my husband?”

Snape stiffened, nostrils flaring, uncertain where this was leading. Could this be some sort of test of his loyalties - a trap? Quickly, he considered the ramifications of telling the truth. It was possible that Lucius had set this up, believing that Severus had betrayed him by calling his son to account for what he had done to the Greengrass girl, but Narcissa’s eyes said otherwise.

And even if it were a test, would there be much point to denying the truth at this stage, given the recent turn of events? It was clear that Snape couldn’t maintain his cover with the Malfoys for much longer anyway. The only thing unclear, was how far Lucius was willing to go. Severus’s death at Lucius’s hands was a distinct possibility.

But as Severus continued to gaze into Narcissa’s eyes, her soul lay bare for him to see. She knew what he was - a Legilimens - yet she was allowing him complete access to her mind. It was readily apparent that Lucius was unaware of his wife’s meeting with Severus.

Nevertheless, Severus was reticent to respond, the conversation possibly leading in an uncomfortably personal direction. But Narcissa was not to be put off by his silence.

“You have always been so kind to my family Severus. You have looked after my son at Hogwarts and treated him with respect... and I thank you for that. You provided my husband with friendship and companionship...”

A flame sparked in Narcissa’s pleading tearful eyes. “Please, I must know.”

Severus swallowed, and pain tautened his features as he made his decision.

“Narcissa, I...” Severus finally began, eyebrows raised, his voice lurching, “what I am about to tell you... I hope you can forgive me... The day Lucius and MacNair kept watch as the Dark Lord ended the life of Lily Potter, is the day our friendship truly died. I have - since the day that I learned Lily was a target - been Dumbledore’s Spy. And Lucius... my enemy.”

Bewilderment flooded Severus when Narcissa heaved a sigh of relief, her features brightening, and he felt a warmth creep up his arm from the hand she had clasped between her own.

“Thank you Severus,” Narcissa gasped as her breath quickened. “I needed to hear that...”

As the tears ran down her cheeks, she drew closer to Severus. “I... I fear that I am lost to my husband - I no longer believe as he believes... I can no longer pretend that I share his convictions. I had hoped that one day he would give up his obsession with Blood Purity, but he is more determined than ever...”

“And... and I fear that I have also lost my only son to the same obsession... Please, Severus, you have seen into Draco’s heart and soul - is there even a small chance that he can learn a new way of...”
Severus let out a sigh, knowing now that Narcissa would not like the answer.

“Perhaps one day...” he began haltingly, “…perhaps in the far flung future, it may be possible that Draco will come to see things as you see them - but not today.

“Not as long as Draco continues to believe that his actions have no consequence to himself... Not as long as he continues to believe that he is the centre of the universe - that other people’s lives are insignificant compared to his own... Nor as long as he continues to worship the ground his father walks upon, and continues to have his every whim indulged by Lucius.

“Draco is his father’s son; he wants nothing more than to make his father proud - to become a Death Eater - and I do not see Draco’s desire to live up to his father’s expectations wavering in the slightest. And I believe that Draco’s heart is only further hardening as the consequences of his actions begin to catch up to him... He is heading further down a path of Darkness.

“Narcissa... It pains me to say this, but it may be that only Azkaban can save Draco from himself now...”

~o0o~

Harry and Dora both eyed the fireplace in Dumbledore’s office with some distaste, and Hermione didn’t look much happier. Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled as he beckoned the three reticent youngsters towards the green flames.

“You sure about this?” Dora grumbled. “There’s still time to catch the Hogwarts Express, you know.”

“Indeed,” said Dumbledore. “However, this is the safest means of travel for Harry now that Voldemort is reconstituted. There is no question that Voldemort will continue to take any opportunity to seek Harry out.”

“He’s right Harry,” said Hermione, peering at Harry with concern.

“Yeah, I know,” sighed Harry resignedly, nodding. “Guess this is it then - see you on the other side.”

And with that, Harry stepped into the green flames, emerging dizzily into Number Twelve’s parlour coughing and wheezing as ashes swirled around him. Hermione was in no better state when she arrived moments later, hacking and sooty. Finally, Dora stumbled out of the fire and tripped on the hearth. Fortunately, Harry had recovered enough to catch her before she hit the floor.

“Ta Harry,” Dora managed to gasp between coughs.

“There she is. My little cousin Dora... graceful as ever,” chortled Sirius. Lupin chuckled and shook his head at Sirius.

“Oi... watch it Sirius,” Dora retorted, shooting Sirius a glare as she dusted herself off, before addressing the wizard beside him, “Wotcher Lupin!”

“Hello Tonks,” said Lupin, smiling. “Harry, Hermione... good to see you both looking so well.”

Harry grinned to see Sirius and Lupin. Hermione’s mother and aunt stood beside them, regarding the fireplace with no small amount of awe as the green flames became orange once more.
“Mum!” Hermione squealed happily, nearly flattening her mother as she flew across the floor and swept her into a big hug.

“I’ve missed you too darling,” Jean Granger laughed as she returned her daughter’s embrace and gave her a kiss as Hermione’s aunt beamed at them both.

There were hugs to be had all around as Harry and Hermione were welcomed home, and Jean was pleased that Harry no longer flinched at her touch. He was taller than when last she had seen him, and seemed more grown up than ever - in fact he and Hermione both did.

As Harry peered around Number Twelve’s parlour, he wondered for a moment why it seemed so different. His eyes nearly popped out of his head when he realised that he was looking at the most enormous television that he had ever seen.

Without a doubt, Uncle Vernon - who was obsessed with having bigger and newer model gadgets than the neighbours at Privet Drive - would be apoplectic with jealousy if he could have seen it. Hermione and Dora were equally stunned when they spotted it.

“Ah yes,” Sirius grinned. “I reckoned it was about time we caught up with the muggle world...”

“Oh hush,” admonished Hermione’s aunt, “We know you did it to keep me and Jean occupied and keep us from getting bored.”

“Indeed,” Sirius agreed. “Still, it was one thing to see the occasional muggle film, but I can’t believe what I’ve been missing out on...”

“That’s brilliant!” Harry interjected with a huge grin on his face. “How did you do it?”

Fortunately, Number Twelve’s library is quite exhaustive,” Lupin responded. “Sirius and I located the book with the necessary charms for operating electronics purely on magic after a brief search.”

“And thanks to Remus’s ingenuity, we’re able to pick up American as well as British channels, so there’s always something to watch,” Sirius beamed. “And we picked up a VCR while we were at it...”

“And as you can see,” said Lupin, rolling his eyes and pointing to the electronic equipment next to the TV, “Sirius also purchased the most expensive stereo system available...”

“Well, there’s no point in not having the best as I can well afford it,” Sirius retorted with a grin. “Anyway Harry, there’s also a television and a stereo system in the ‘Bridal Suite’ so that you and Hermione can enjoy your entertainment anytime you please - lazing in bed, or whatever else you’re getting up to...”

Harry and Hermione both turned pink.

“Er... Bridal Suite?” they squeaked in unison, glancing at Hermione’s mother who seemed to be trying her best not to laugh. Lupin rubbed at his forehead, eyebrows raised, trying to hide a wry little smile. Dora chortled at the expressions on Harry and Hermione’s faces.

“Oh yes, we redid your adjoining rooms to be more befitting of a married couple,” said Sirius breezily. “Take a look.” Sirius led Harry and Hermione through Number 12 to their rooms.

Sure enough, they had been remodeled a bit. Harry’s room - now Hermione’s as well - was more or less the same, though it now contained a television and stereo system; the other room had been converted into a private sitting room, and a luxurious bathroom had been added. Hermione gasped
when she peered in the wardrobe and found several new evening gowns alongside Harry’s tuxedo.

As promised by Hermione’s mother, a “small” celebration of the Potters’ marriage was held - beginning with an early dinner at another one of London’s finest restaurants, followed by an evening of dancing at a London nightclub. Harry was delighted to see Hermione in an evening gown again. Dora grumbled at being cajoled into dressing up for the occasion.

At the end of the evening, they returned to Number Twelve and retired to the parlour where wedding cake and champagne was served by Sirius and Lupin. And though Harry and Hermione were worn out, they watched a bit of television with everyone before going to bed.

Harry had finished getting ready first. He clambered into the bed sighing happily, though feeling a bit awkward at the idea that Hermione’s mother was under the same roof, perfectly aware of what her daughter would be getting up to. Pushing that thought aside, while waiting for Hermione, he decided to have a go at practicing his metamorphmagus talent, remembering that there was one thing that he had yet to master.

He turned pink when Hermione returned from the bathroom, having finished washing up and cleaning her teeth a bit quicker than he thought she would.

“What are you doing Harry?”

“Oh... er... erm... practicing?”

Hermione peered at him in amusement and she raised her eyebrows. Harry was waiting for her in bed without any pyjamas on and he had looked up at her like a deer caught in headlights after quickly dropping the covers over himself. She had a sneaking suspicion what he might have been working on.

“Hmm... You wouldn’t happen to be ‘practicing’ your metamorphic talent on a certain body part would you?” Hermione asked with a straight face.

Hermione burst into giggles when Harry turned a deeper shade of red. Hermione pulled off her nightie and leapt onto the bed completely starkers.

“Come on, let’s see it then...” she grinned, lifting up the covers. “Oh!” she said, seeing that Harry was back to normal.

“You sound disappointed.”

“NO! I’m sorry Harry, I didn’t mean...”

Harry launched a tickle attack and soon Hermione was rolling on the bed with tears of laughter streaming down her face. Hermione ended up on her back gasping for air, nipples hardening, with Harry between her naked thighs gazing softly into her brown eyes. Harry kissed her, gently brushing his fingers across her cheeks.

“Next time I’ll practice with your assistance,” Harry said playfully, “I’m sorry, I just got embarrassed.”

“I know,” Hermione responded, still feeling a bit giggly. “But just to be perfectly clear, as entertaining as the idea of playing with you in girl-form is, I want you to know that I will never be disappointed with this!” Hermione concluded with a grin as she clasped Harry’s erection in her soft warm hand and guided him to her slit.
Harry kissed Hermione again as he thrust into her depths, and soon the bed rocked with passion.

~o0o~

Hermione sighed happily as she woke, her naked body pressed right up against Harry’s. It felt good to be with him in his bed again - her bed too she reminded herself - at Number 12, which she was beginning to think of as home.

She spied the tent in the covers and giggled to herself, feeling rather naughty at the idea of waking Harry in the manner which he enjoyed the most, while under the same roof as her mother. Hermione ducked her bushy head under the covers and wriggled down, taking care not to wake Harry until just the right moment.

Gingerly, Hermione took Harry’s stiffness in her mouth, wrapping her lips around it. She felt it twitch as her tongue swirled around the tip and licked the shaft. Gradually, Hermione pressed forth until she felt the crown of Harry’s stiffness against the back of her throat. She heard a gasp of pleasure, and knew that Harry was awake.

Harry woke with a grin. He loved it when Hermione roused him like this. Her naked bottom jutted out from under the covers as she continued to pleasure him. Harry brushed his fingers against Hermione’s inner thigh and she trembled slightly at his touch. Hermione parted her thighs happily understanding what Harry wanted, and lifted one knee to the other side of Harry’s head.

Harry cradled Hermione’s cheeks with both hands and gently pulled her backside down until his lips reached her heated slit. He darted his tongue out and licked the length of her fold before entering her. Hermione tingled as Harry alternated between plunging his tongue into her wet sheath and jiggling it against her little pearl.

Elation surged within Harry as Hermione continued her ministrations. His loins felt the urge to move and he began to thrust himself deeper. Harry finally lost it, and with a groan he erupted.

A convulsive charge rippled through Hermione and she burst, releasing her own dewiness as they both wriggled ecstatically. Sparks of magic crackled; the bed shook and the lamp on the nightstand tumbled to the floor and shattered.

There was a knocking at the bedroom door. Hermione’s head flew out from under the covers in alarm and without thinking she sat on Harry’s face.

“Is everything alright in there,” Jean Granger’s concerned voice called out.

“Y... yes Mum!” Hermione squeaked, Harry’s stickiness dribbling from her lips. “W... we’re fine. I... er... just knocked over a lamp getting out of bed,” she fibbed.

Jean smiled to herself and shook her head on the other side of the door. Hermione had always been dreadful at lying. Jean sighed as she made her way down the stairs to the kitchen, feeling a swell of awkwardness at having embarrassed her daughter, and no doubt her son-in-law as well.

“I’m so sorry Harry,” Hermione apologised profusely as she leapt up and Harry gasped for air, “I forgot to set a silencing charm on the room. Are you alright?”

Hermione’s expression turned to bewilderment as Harry burst into guffaws.

“Are you joking Hermione?” Harry gasped when he managed to catch a breath, “That was brilliant... I haven’t had such a good laugh in ages... But what happened? Did we release some accidental magic again?”
“I think so...” Hermione nodded, grinning.

She giggled as another wave of naughtiness swept through her. She dragged her husband out of bed and into their private bathroom. They set a silencing charm and the steam rose as they turned on the shower.

~o0o~

The end of the Easter holidays arrived far too soon, and on the last day they had just finished breakfast when Sirius regarded the Potters solemnly; he glanced at Lupin who nodded with an encouraging look.

“Harry, Remus and I have decided to come up to Hogwarts to help keep an eye on things. We don’t want to just leave it in the rest of the Order’s hands...”

“Wait...” said Harry, puzzlement crossing his features, “Doesn’t the Ministry still have an arrest warrant for... er...” It suddenly occurred to Harry that it was a bit weird to call Lupin by his surname, as he was much more family than professor.

“...erm... for Remus?” Harry concluded, thinking it still sounded a bit funny coming from his own mouth. Lupin looked particularly pleased to hear Harry addressing him thusly.

“Indeed they do,” Lupin replied. “However, Sirius and I will be staying in the Shrieking Shack, and I am quite capable of performing a disillusionment charm should I need to leave it for some reason.”

“And my animagus form is still unkown to the Ministry, so nobody except a few key Order members have to know that I am there,” Sirius added.

“But what about Mum, and Auntie Joanne?” asked Hermione, looking concerned. “Will they be able to stay in a magical home by themselves?”

“Ah, well that shouldn’t be a problem,” said Sirius. “Dumbledore spoke with Madam Bones, and she’s agreed to allow Auror Abigail Brixton to take a leave-of-absence to look after Jean and Joanne.”

“Abbie? Really?” Dora’s eyes widened in surprise.

“That’s the Auror who was interviewing Bob Ogden, wasn’t she?” said Hermione. “The one you like?”

“Yeah!” Dora nodded. “I suppose that makes sense seeing as she’s muggleborn. She should get on nicely with your mum and aunt.”

“That’s what Dumbledore and Madam Bones thought as well,” Sirius agreed. “Anyway, what I really wanted to tell you, is that I’m signing over one of the Black vaults at Gringotts and deeding Number 12 to you Harry... Consider it a wedding present for you and Hermione!”

Harry’s jaw dropped. To say that he was stunned was an understatement. Speechlessly he shared a look with Hermione, who seemed equally flabbergasted. And it was apparent from the astonished expressions on Hermione’s mother and aunt’s faces that this was the first they’d heard of it.

“But... but where will you live after...” Harry began when his voice returned. “...er... after everything has been settled...” he continued hopefully, wondering if everything would be settled eventually.

“That ought not be a problem really,” said Sirius. “Remus and I should be able to take up residence
in Black Manor. It passed into the other side of the family when my mother’s brother - Cygnus -
inherited it. But as his daughters, my cousins - Andromeda, Narcissa, and Bellatrix - are all married
and share the homes of their husbands, being the next heir in line by rights it belongs to me now.”

“Oh... er... alright then,” said Harry, feeling somewhat disappointed as he liked living with Sirius.
Sirius seemed to know what Harry was thinking, as he smiled at Harry and tried to console him.

“Don’t worry Harry, you’ll always be part of my life,” he said gently, “…but you and Hermione will
be needing a home of your own.”

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When Harry returned to Hogwarts with Hermione, he was surprised to have received a letter while
he was gone. The owl had arrived at breakfast the following morning, but it was clear from the stamp
that the letter had originally been sent by muggle post. He frowned in perplex when he saw who it
was from.

“That’s odd,” Harry told Hermione, “I wonder why Dudley would be writing to me. I can’t imagine
Uncle Vernon allowing him to…”

Unfortunately, as classes had resumed, Harry didn’t have a chance to open it. Hermione noticed that
Harry could barely concentrate during lessons, as distracted as he was, and took extra care to make
sure that her notes were complete. Finally, classes were finished but Harry sighed, knowing that they
ought to keep up with their exercise regimen.

“Don’t worry Harry,” Hermione insisted. “It won’t hurt to take one more day off.”

“Yeah... I suppose not,” Harry agreed. “I just didn’t want Professor Moody to think I’d gone soft
over the holidays.”

As soon as the Potters were back in their quarters, Harry hurriedly tore open the envelope and began
to read as Hermione looked over his shoulder. He was surprised to see the letter covered with
splotchy tear stains.

Dear Harry,

I wasn’t sure of sending this letter by regular post, and I hope you get it. I didn’t know what else to
do as I don’t have anyone else to talk to, and it has to do with you anyway.

While I was at home for Easter holidays, Mum and Dad had huge row. Dad said you’re not to come
back this summer, or ever again. He said he was tired of being bossed around by a bunch of freaks
in his own house.

When Mum said that you had to stay because it was the only way to protect you from the man who
killed your parents, Dad went completely bonkers. He started hitting Mum when she wouldn’t back
down. I tried to stop him, but he gave me a black eye, and then he knocked Mum down the stairs.

She’s in the hospital right now with a concussion, a broken arm, and a few broken ribs. She won’t
tell the doctors what really happened. I want to call the police, but she said not to, and that she
would tell them that she just fell down the stairs if I did.

I can’t think what to do, and I was hoping that you could help. Maybe you could ask that big hairy
bloke who told you that you’re a wizard to come and sort things out with Dad. I know Dad’s afraid
of him. Please, I really need help.
To say that Harry was shocked when he had finished reading the letter was an understatement. He really wasn’t sure what to think. The fact that Dudley was asking for Hagrid - who had given Dudley a pig’s tail - showed how desperate he was.

Harry glanced at Hermione who looked absolutely appalled, tears trickling down her cheeks. As he remembered the things that Uncle Vernon had done to him, he suspected that Hermione probably couldn’t help but experience a flashback to what her own father had done to her mother. He was proved right when she spoke up.

“That... that’s so awful,” Hermione said haltingly. “As... b...bad as what my dad did to Mum is, it’s not nearly as dreadful as what your uncle did. And... and at least m...my father knows wh...what he did was wrong. I still c...can’t believe you had to live with such a horrible person.”

Harry wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. He rather thought it was just as awful in its own way, though he had to admit that it was probably because he loved Hermione so much, and because he really liked her mother. But he also knew that Hermione still loved her father despite being very angry at him.

For himself, as Harry ruminated on the turn of events, one thing was very clear; he hated Uncle Vernon with a vengeance. Harry was none too fond of Aunt Petunia either, recalling how she had once tried to bean him on the noggin with a frying pan - though in retrospect, he had to admit it had been a rather half-hearted swipe. And Harry was more than a bit startled that she had stood up to Uncle Vernon for him.

Harry reckoned that she must actually care for him a bit after all. He supposed that Aunt Petunia still felt something for her sister - Harry’s mother - more than she had ever let on. Feeling an overwhelming surge of emotion, blinking back tears, he knew that he couldn’t leave Aunt Petunia and Dudley in Uncle Vernon’s hands, no matter how afraid Aunt Petunia was to leave Uncle Vernon.

“Hermione, I want to help, but I’m not sure what to do. I don’t know how Sirius would feel about Petunia and Dudley living at Number 12...”

“It’s alright Harry - Sirius will understand. Besides, Number 12 belongs to you now. If you want to have them there, it’s up to you.”

“Oh yeah... right! That’s true...” Harry’s eyebrows shot up. It still hadn’t quite sunk in that he was now the owner of Number 12 Grimmauld Place.

“But you should probably talk to Professor Dumbledore,” said Hermione. “I’m not sure how this will affect the protection charms based on your Mum’s sacrifice.”

“Yeah... yeah, you’re right Hermione,” Harry replied, nodding. “But whatever he says, I don’t care about the charms. I’m not going to let Uncle Vernon hurt them anymore...”

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Dumbledore peered at the letter from Dudley again and sighed as he considered the ramifications. This presented a serious problem, yet he knew that Harry was right. Vernon Dursley had made it plain, in no uncertain terms, that Harry could no longer reside at Number 4 Privet Drive.

In the end, Harry’s plan made the most sense - not just from a moral perspective, but from a logistical one too. As long as Petunia resided under the same roof as Harry, the protection charms ought to still
be effective.

“Very well Harry,” Dumbledore agreed, “I am uncertain how your aunt will feel about the move. It is possible that she might feel as if she is being kidnapped - but if your cousin Dudley accepts your invitation to move to Number 12, I expect that your aunt will join him.”

“Excellent! I’ll send a letter to Dudley straight away...” began Harry.

“I think perhaps that we should move with great haste,” Dumbledore interjected. “I will meet with your cousin immediately, and together he and I shall visit your aunt in the hospital and convince Petunia to live at Number 12. I am not sure what to do about your uncle though. The charms placed on you also protect him from Voldemort.”

“I don’t care about him,” said Harry, his features hardening as his nostrils flared with anger. “He can go hang as far I’m concerned.”

Hermione glanced at Harry sadly, biting her lip. Dumbledore peered into Harry’s eyes with some apprehension, then he sighed and nodded, his features softening.

“I understand your feelings Harry,” he said gently, “Given the hardships that you have borne - that I myself bear some responsibility for - I cannot blame you in the slightest. Truly you are far more forgiving than anyone has any right to expect from you.

“To be willing to take in your aunt and cousin - who themselves were both responsible for much of the abuse heaped upon you in your formative years - is a true demonstration of your sterling character... No doubt your uncle belongs in prison, where he can no longer cause anyone harm.

“Regardless Harry, I cannot in good conscience simply leave your uncle - despite all the suffering he has inflicted upon you - to face the all too likely prospect of being murdered by Voldemort without at least offering him some options...

“I myself will approach him and give him the choice of remaining at Number 4 Privet Drive, or being relocated to some foreign country, beyond Voldemort’s reach. Whatever choice he makes will be entirely up to him... If Vernon Dursley wishes to remain at Number 4, then so be it...”

~o0o~

Draco knew better than to expect to return home for Easter - he never had before - but it was of little concern to him. He was leaving Hogwarts at the first opportunity he got, but there was someone who deserved some retribution before he left. And with a little careful planning Draco would be leaving with a valuable prize indeed - something which would cause his enemy pain, something which Draco deserved more than anything.

Once he returned home, Draco reckoned that Father might be a bit cross at first, but Draco knew that he would understand. There was no way that Draco was going to remain at Hogwarts as long as Dumbledore was in charge. And with a bit of luck, perhaps he could convince Father to send him to Durmstrang instead.

Following the end of Easter, and several letters back and forth, Draco received two packages in the post. His eyes narrowed when he addressed Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott in the Slytherin Common Room after breakfast. He waited until the rest of Slytherin cleared out for classes. The less people who knew about this the better.

“Right you lot,” Draco addressed his gang with an authoritative glare, “Now don’t forget who’s boss around here. If any of you rat me out, I’ll make sure Fenrir Greyback knows how to find you. He’s
done some work for Father before, so don’t think that I don’t know him and that I’m just pretending.”

Crabbe and Goyle nodded their heads fearfully. They had no doubt about that, as their fathers had also done some “work” for the Malfoy Warlock on occasion. Theodore Nott smirked at them. Draco opened the first parcel and his friend and his minions oohed with awe.

Draco’s new wand was a masterpiece of construction, 10 inches of ebony stained wood with a carved spiral along its length. Its grip was a silver serpent’s head which glittered in the flickering light of the common room fire.

“It’s a Gregorovitch Wand made to order based on the specifications of the wand that Snape stole from me,” Draco remarked. “My friend Gehlen says Gregorovitch makes Ollivander look like an amateur.”

Pleased with the way it felt in his hand, Draco waved his new wand about and tried a couple of simple transfigurations. His mug turned into a mouse and scurried away. Delighted, Draco opened his second parcel. His gangs’ eyes all widened, and they gasped as one as Draco carefully unfolded a silvery piece of fabric.

“This was much harder to come by, and it was bloody expensive” said Draco proudly. “Gehlen tracked down an Italian Wizard who makes really good ones - but he only makes two or three a year. I was very lucky that he had one in stock.”
Unable to stay asleep any longer, Albus Dumbledore poured himself a hot cup of Darjeeling, squeezed in a bit of lemon and stirred in a single spoon of honey. Fawkes grumbled and squawked at having been woken so early - as did the portrait of Phineas Nigellus which Dumbledore just ignored.

The headmaster was pleased that things seemed to be coming along nicely at Number 12 with Petunia and Dudley Dursley - both Evanses now, he reminded himself, having convinced Petunia that she should file for divorce and seek full custody of her son - and with Jean Granger and her sister.

It would not have been at all feasible without a wizard to manage the magical residence and monitor the situation now that Sirius and Remus had taken up residence at the Shrieking Shack to be closer to the centre of the action. But Abbie Brixton appeared to be doing a fine job, and she had indicated that things had been going as well as could be expected the past couple of months, given the disparate personalities of the family members of both Potters.

Which was good, because things were clearly coming to a head. Given the situation at the Ministry, it was clear that Harry would have no longer been able to reside at Number 4 Privet Drive anyway, even if Vernon Dursley hadn’t been so intransigent. While safe from Voldemort there, Harry was vulnerable to the Minister - who had made it plain as day that her interest in Harry Potter was as obsessive as that of the self-styled “Dark Lord.”

And it was ever more clear that though Voldemort posed the most immediate threat - barring the Triwizard Tournament of course - that the Minister was beginning to look like the bigger long-term threat by far.

The Minister’s political skills were masterful, and her agenda - much the same as Voldemort’s - threatened to undo over a century of progress in wizarding Britain in a way which Riddle could never have hoped to achieve through brute force alone.

As “Lord” Voldemort, Tom Riddle had frightened many into seeing things his way, but his habit of murdering his own supporters in fits of psychotic rage had also made that support rather wobbly. A fact that the current Minister had exploited to her great advantage in Voldemort's absence.

It was also clear that if Harry survived the Tournament, that the Minister would escalate and move to secure the Ministry completely in an effort to drive Harry Potter and the Order underground.

Another fact was that Amelia Bones was in danger while Voldemort lived. The Bones Family had been targeted with extreme prejudice and nearly wiped out by Voldemort in the last war, the only survivors being Susan Bones’s parents, and her Great-Aunt Amelia. It was almost a certainty that Voldemort would want to finish the job.

And now it was also quite probable that the Minister would find some means to wrest the DMLE from Amelia’s control. An assassination attempt by Minister Umbridge was also a distinct possibility while Voldemort remained at large as a convenient scapegoat, whenever she deigned to reveal his return. Should she gain complete control of the Ministry, the Minister would no doubt attempt to take Hogwarts at her earliest opportunity.

Dumbledore dipped his quill in his inkwell and began to scribble a rough plan.

Dawlish and Shacklebolt would have to stay glued to Amelia at the Ministry for the time being, but
she would not be safe in her own home. Harry had indicated that he would feel better if the Evanses and his wife’s family had extra magical protection. Perhaps if Amelia also took up temporary residence in Number 12 that would meet everyone’s needs.

As to the Order itself, it was clear that Hogwarts could not be left unattended over the summer. It was likely to be targeted by both Voldemort and the Minister. It might be best for the Professors to remain at Hogwarts this year. And every effort must be made to protect the members of the School’s Board of Governors. Their homes must be provided with the highest levels of security.

And now that the Order had a media outlet to counter the Minister’s propaganda, Mr Lovegood’s facilities would also have to be protected - possibly moved to a new location altogether.

Meanwhile, further efforts were necessary to locate and finish Voldemort and his horcruxes - the sooner the better. As long as the Minister appeared to be the bigger threat, Voldemort was a thorn in the Order’s side, and the Order’s attention divided.

And as to the odd magical power surges, Dumbledore had a strong suspicion that the Potters were somehow behind them - and he had a reasonably good idea of how they were producing them. One thing at least had been made clear by the instruments which monitored Hogwarts, the magic - whether in the raw outbursts, or in the apparent directed applications - was highly purified and refined.

Traces of such high frequency magic in Ireland, Britain, and Europe were these days to be found only in ancient magical sites associated with Witchcraft, which were currently ascribed by muggles to primeval Goddess worshippers.

The only other time Dumbledore had personally come across such magic was during a tour of the Orient when he had been introduced to an Ashram in India, a Temple in Tibet, and a Temple in China’s Wudang range, all of which bore the signature of similar magic, and all of them the only schools dedicated to witchcraft in otherwise male dominated magical traditions. But their secrets had been fiercely guarded by the witches who maintained them.

And if anything, the mysterious magic had strengthened every defence which Hogwarts possessed. With each event of the raw outbursts - three in just the course of last night’s dinner-time, and the one several months ago - and with each event of the applied magic of the same frequency signature, which had been occurring on a regular basis in that time period - the power of the protection charms which warded the castle had increased tenfold.

With some direction, the magic could be utilised to provide an unmatchable level of security for Hogwarts. But for the meantime, Dumbledore felt it wise to simply let it flourish on its own... at least until the conclusion of the Triwizard Tournament. And perhaps it would also be wise to follow up on Alastor’s most recent suggestion.

Confident now that he had addressed all of his immediate concerns, Albus Dumbledore lay down his quill, sighed, and poured himself a fresh cup of tea.

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In the final weeks leading up to the Third Task, Harry and Hermione had never been busier. Especially Hermione as, unlike Harry, she still faced final exams at the end of June. The Champions had all been given the break from exams as it was expected that they would all be studying and training as hard as they could to make it through the Tournament.

It was during the last week of May, not long after Harry and Hermione had had their first real
argument, when they were approached by Professor McGonagall during Transfigurations. She had a
dour expression, which wasn’t uncommon for McGonagall.

“Potter... and Potter, if you would, I’d like a word with the both of you after class today.”

“Er... what’s this about Professor?” asked Harry.

“After class Mr Potter.”

Of course Harry and Hermione could think of nothing else during the rest of the lesson. Even
Hermione was having trouble concentrating. Finally class was finished, and the rest of the students
began filing out of the classroom.

“Alright then,” McGonagall began, her voice crisp, once the class was empty of all but her and the
Potters. “I have been in consultations with the headmaster, and it his considered opinion that you -
Mrs Potter - are to be relieved of the burdens of final exams...”

“Oh no!” Hermione squeaked in disappointment - though Harry appeared to be very grateful.

“Quite!” said the Professor, looking as if she very much agreed with Hermione’s sentiments. “It was
brought to my attention by Professor Moody and the headmaster that you have been providing Mr
Potter with unprecedented levels of assistance...”

Harry swallowed nervously and glanced at Hermione, who peered back at him, equally anxious -
both wondering if their plans had been found out.

“In any case,” McGonagall continued, “after the necessity for you both to focus your attentions in
these last few weeks before the Third Task became clear to me, I could only but agree with the
headmaster’s concerns. So... there you have it Mrs Potter - you are clear to do your utmost to help Mr
Potter without the distractions of studying for finals...”

Harry let out a huge sigh of relief. He couldn’t be happier; it had become very clear to him that
Hermione was becoming overloaded and experiencing high levels of stress - though she would never
admit it. The Potters both thought McGonagall was finished and turned to leave, but the Professor
had one last thing to say.

“Oh... And Mrs Potter, do try and keep Mr Potter alive, won’t you?”

Both turning pink, Harry and Hermione scurried out of the classroom as quick as their feet could
carry them.

“D’you think they all know?” Harry whispered, as they made their way to the next class.

“I’m not really sure Harry,” said Hermione. “It does seem very suspicious, but I rather think that
Professor McGonagall would have put her foot down if she found out, so I doubt it.”

Things seemed even odder when Snape held them both back after Potions the following day. Harry
stared at Snape feeling very perplexed, and Hermione bit her lip, wondering what was going on.
After the usual awkward moment whenever Snape tried to talk to them, he finally began after
heaving a weary sigh.

“Potter... It has been brought to my... attention, that you may be facing some rather... extreme
circumstances in the upcoming final task. Given the severity of the situation, I have deemed it wise to
bestow upon you some knowledge which you may find particularly beneficial.”
At this point, Snape reached into the drawer of his desk and pulled out a tatty old potions book with ragged edges and frayed bindings. The Potters’ eyes were drawn to it as Snape slid it across his desk.

“That’s a sixth year potions book...” said Hermione, looking very puzzled.

“Indeed... That is most perceptive of you, Mrs Potter!”

Harry lifted an eyebrow, wondering if Snape was being sarcastic. It was hard to tell sometimes.

“In any case,” Snape continued, his features inscrutable, “this book is more than just any sixth year potions book - it was my own. And it contains in the margins annotations, including some very useful spells - many of them of my own invention. There is one in particular that should prove quite... efficacious, in situations requiring extreme measures.

“Now one might ask... why I do not simply tell you the spell, and retain the book for myself? I had considered it, but as it so happens, I believe that you will both be needing it. The lessons from your current year are clearly not challenging enough for either of you...

“And I have no doubt that next year’s will be equally undemanding. So at the earliest opportunity, you are both to begin Advanced Potions with me. Clearly, this is not the time - however, it seems likely that you will have plenty of time this summer...”

Incredulous and unable to help himself, Harry blurted out, “Wait... did you just say this summer?”

“Yes Potter...” Snape gave Harry a withering look. “Keep up, won’t you?”

“Er... sorry sir!” Harry flushed. “I just... I mean... er... Why this summer?”

“You will have to ask the headmaster,” Snape replied, still looking impatient. “Perhaps he means me to give you private lessons at your home. I am not always privy to Professor Dumbledore’s reasons for his instructions, and it is not my place to question the headmaster. Now, if there are to be no further questions...”

Harry bit his tongue.

“Very good!” Professor Snape appeared to be somewhat mollified. “As I was saying - at some point you shall be receiving tutoring in Advanced Potions from me, but for the moment, there is a particular spell - a very... dangerous spell which you may find invaluable during the Third Task.

“It is not altogether unlike the Diffindo Charm - a spell which I know that you are quite adept with. It can be however, much more damaging... its effects more long lasting, and in some cases permanent. It is also more effective on some magical beings who are otherwise invulnerable to the Diffindo Charm... Hence, I am sure that you can see how it might be useful to you, Potter.”

Snape appeared to think that required a response, so Harry nodded and answered, “Er... yes! Of course sir.”

“Excellent!” Snape seemed relieved to have got that out of the way. “The spell is the Sectumsempra Curse. It is written in the margins of one of the pages... labeled ‘for enemies’... Look it up - practice it.

“And I’m sure that I don’t have to tell you not to test it out on unsuspecting persons... nor to tell you not to test any other unknown spells on unsuspecting persons for that matter - there are a number of such in that book.”
Harry felt extremely insulted that Snape would even think that he was stupid enough to try out a spell he’d never heard of before on someone, but he didn’t say so... not in so many words anyway. Though Harry’s tone might have given him away.

“Of course I wouldn’t sir...”

Snape seemed satisfied, as his expression softened. “Good! I think then that we are finished for today, Potter!”

~o0o~

It was the eve of the Third Task, and Minister Umbridge went over her strategy one last time as she sipped her third cup of tea. All seemed to be in order. At last, at the conclusion of the Task, the return of Voldemort could be announced. He would prove to be such an exceptional scapegoat for what she had planned.

~o0o~

The day before the Third Task arrived with little fanfare as it was Friday and most students were in class. The Champions however had been given the day off to mentally prepare themselves and ostensibly get as much rest as possible. But Harry had called them all to the Room of Requirement to go over the last details.

“Of course it’s going to take place at dusk instead of in the morning,” Hermione grumbled as she and Harry waited in the corridor for the others to arrive. “Obviously to maximise the danger as much as possible.”

“Oh...” Harry sighed, raising his eyebrows. “You’re right... I hadn’t thought about that.” He heard footsteps in the corridor and spied the others approaching.

Cedric seemed a bit put out. “I was hoping to spend a bit of time with Cho, Harry. I managed to convince McGonagall to let her have the day off.”

“Well, we shouldn’t be too long Cedric. I’ll do you first if you’d like,” Harry responded. Though he was quite sure that Viktor was hoping to have as much time as possible with Lavender too - and no doubt Fleur would want to spend the rest of the day with Dora, who had arrived with the others.

“Er... what do you mean, ‘do me first’...?”

“You’ll see,” said Harry, grinning. “Anyway, I think you’ll like this Cedric - it was Hermione’s idea. She’s absolutely brilliant!” Hermione blushed, trying not to look too pleased.

Harry opened the door to the Room of Requirement and the others gasped. They peered around in amazement as they entered into the sunlight and stepped onto the sand. Waves crashed near the shoreline, the blue-green waters of the Mediterranean shimmering, and there wasn’t a cloud in sight in the bright blue sky.

“Ze Cote d’Azure,” Fleur murmured, her eyes wide. “It feels like ‘ome...”

“Yes!” Hermione beamed, eyes gleaming, her hair as usual catching the golden rays of the sun. “It’s a bit of the French Riviera I visited with my parents one summer.”

“What... how...?” Cedric was absolutely stunned.

“It’s a bit like the Enchanted Ceiling in the Great Hall,” Harry replied. “The edges are really an
“...Though if we went all the way to the water, the room would make that bit real when we got to it,” said Hermione excitedly. “We’ve already tested it.”

“Anyway, we thought it would be a nice place to relax while I painted some runes and symbols on us all,” Harry added.

“Oh? For Vot vill we need ze Runes?” asked Viktor.

“Well, they should help protect us from some of the creatures we think might be in the maze,” Hermione replied. “Harry and I have been working on them for weeks. We wanted it to be a surprise.”

“Er... us?” Cedric looked puzzled by Hermione’s choice of words.

“Oh, that’s the other thing... Hermione will be joining us in the maze,” said Harry. “She’s going to use my invisibility cloak to slip by everyone.”

“Are you joking?” Cedric’s jaw dropped. Fleur, Viktor, and Dora seemed only mildly surprised, knowing the Potters as well as they did.

“I’d come in too if I could,” said Dora. “I asked Dumbledore if I ought to join you lot. But ‘e seems to think that the wards might take me for a Professor. Hermione should be alright though.”

After the surprise wore off, Cedric wondered what they were supposed to do next. But Fleur seemed to understand what was required right away. Cedric gulped, turning beet-red when Fleur removed her blouse. Dora and Hermione grinned at his goofy expression. Soon everyone except Dora was topless and lying on beach towels, ready for Harry to tattoo them.

True to his word, Harry did Cedric first, for which Cedric was very grateful. Hurriedly, Cedric put his shirt and blazer back on and bolted from the Room of Requirement, trying his hardest not to look at Fleur, who was tittering. Harry grinned.

When he had finished with Hermione, Harry started on Fleur. He was quite glad that her charms had little effect on him, as he wasn’t sure that he could keep his hand from shaking, judging from the reactions of Cedric and most other guys.

“I don’t recognise some of these runes Harry,” Dora remarked as she watched him work when he moved on to do Fleur.

“That’s because most of them aren’t Norse Runes,” Harry replied, “They weren’t in standard texts. Hermione and I found some symbols in books of ancient Greek Magic, and others in books of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs...”

“...We’re not entirely certain that they’ll work because obviously we haven’t had an opportunity to test them of course, but they ought to,” Hermione continued. “One set of symbols is supposed to protect us from the Gorgon’s Gaze, and another set should protect us from Manticore venom...”

“...Hermione and I are bringing some bezoars in a little pouch too in case an Acromantula or Skrewt...
gets one of us,” said Harry, “but they may not work for Manticore venom, which can kill you nearly instantaneously if you get hit with its stinger…”

“... And these are the symbols the Egyptian Ministry uses to keep the Mummies locked in their tombs,” Hermione added. “The Norse Runes are just the standards for Fire and Cold though... There weren’t any that would scare away Skrewts or Acromantulas...”

Dora was very impressed... and very aroused by the sight of her new girlfriend only half-clothed. Harry and Viktor both chortled when Fleur dressed and Dora practically dragged her out of the Room of Requirement. Hermione rolled her eyes at the pair of silly boys.

Once behind the closed doors of Dora’s quarters, clothes were quickly shed and scattered on the floor. Fleur and Dora never even made it to the bedroom. Leaning against a wall, Fleur parted her thighs for Dora’s fingers, moaning as they reached their heated target and entered her.

Dora nuzzled Fleur’s neck, tracing a path with her humid lips to Fleur’s breasts where they wetly encircled the hardened peaks. Fleur clutched Dora’s spiky violet hair, writhing ecstatically and gasping as she succumbed to Dora’s ministrations.

Finally making it to the settee, Fleur returned the favour, her head between Dora’s thighs. Dora wriggled and arched, letting out squeaks of delight as Fleur’s tongue reached into her depths and twirled her fleshy pearl, devouring her...

~o0o~

Dora suddenly awoke when Fleur stirred beside her.

“Bloody Hell! Is that the time?” Dora’s eyes widened with shock when her eyes lit upon the clock on the mantelpiece. She leapt out of her bed and began flinging her clothes on. “I’m supposed to be escortin’ Harry and Hermione to breakfast...

“They’re supposed to be meeting the officials and foreign dignitaries... You are too come to think about it.”

“Mmm... vairy good, Dora! I will be right be’ind you chérie...”

~o0o~

Molly Weasley turned to look when Minerva McGonagall glanced at the entrance of the Great Hall. She beamed when she spotted Harry and Hermione arriving with Tonks and the French girl. Molly tugged on Arthur’s sleeve.

“Just a moment Minerva. Arthur... I think I’ll go say hello then - to let Harry know that we’re here to support him. Do you want to join me?”

“Oh... er...” Arthur spotted one of his sons directly in the path between the entrance of the Great Hall and the Staff table. His jaw tightened. “Perhaps later dear - but you go right ahead.”

Molly began to make her way through the throng of students and visitors to greet Harry and Hermione. As she passed by her son amongst the other officials, she caught his eye. Her son quickly looked away and turned his back on her. Molly huffed and continued on her way.

She narrowed her eyes when she saw Amos Diggory glaring at the Potters. Molly hoped he wasn’t going to cause a scene. Arthur had told her about his attitude towards Harry since the World Cup, and her friendly feelings towards Amos had cooled dramatically. Her hopes for a civil encounter
were dashed when Amos began spouting off.

“There he is - the little Dark-Lord-in-Training himself,” Amos Diggory sneered loudly when he spied Harry strolling into the Great Hall, “Watch your back in there Cedric. He might use that Dark Curse on you…”

Harry’s face darkened. Fleur and Hermione flushed angrily, and Dora was livid. She looked like she was about to lay into Amos herself. Daphne, Parvati, Ginny, and Luna, who were about to seat themselves at the Mingling Table with Lavender and Viktor, all glowered at Mr Diggory. People turned to stare, and some even turned up their noses at the Potters, nodding in agreement.

“SHUT-IT Father!” Cedric snapped and his voice rose, “You don’t bloody know what you’re talking about. All you do is parrot the rubbish in the *Daily Prophet* and I’m done with it... In fact, I’m done with YOU!

“How many times do I have to tell you that if it weren’t for Harry, that I would have never known about the Dragon? I was almost burned to a crisp as it was! And if it weren’t for Harry my girlfriend would probably still be at the bottom of the Black Lake! Harry’s a good person and he’s my friend.”

Cedric turned his back on his gobsmacked father and stalked away. Molly thought Cedric’s mother looked rather proud of her son. Despite her best efforts, Molly’s hopes of saying hello to Harry and Hermione before breakfast were dashed when the crowd grew too thick to push her way through.

“Don’t pay any attention to my father, Harry,” Cedric said emphatically as he put his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “He’s just an idiot who believes whatever he reads in that Ministry-loving Rag.”

“Er... Alright then.” Harry swallowed uncomfortably, knowing how hard it must have been for Cedric to stand up to his father. “Thanks for sticking up for me Cedric.”

Dora hoped that the awkwardness was over and that she could get back to doing her job and lead her charges over to the additional table laid out for the officials in the center of the Great Hall.

Hermione began to bristle again; Harry looked to see what was making her so cross. He stiffened when he saw who else was at the table. Dora peered to see what had caught the Potters’ attention. She sighed when she spotted Senior Undersecretary Percy Weasley at the table glad-handing the foreign dignitaries.

“Oh bugger it!” Dora huffed, “Forget the bloody dignitaries! They can all sod off - it’s mostly just the Minister’s foreign pals anyway! Go ‘ave breakfast - I’ll deal with ‘em...”

Harry glanced at Fleur and Hermione, uncertain.

“Er... you sure Dora?” asked Harry. “I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“Well I’m really only here for the Order anyway,” muttered Auror-on-leave Tonks, “...no matter what the other Aurors think. Go on you lot. I mean it... I’ve got this! I’ll see you at the table in a minute, alright!?”

“Thanks Dora,” said Hermione, letting out a sigh of relief. The last thing she and Harry needed was a run-in with Percy.

The Potters took their seats among their friends. Everyone was at the table today, including the Twins, Dean, Neville - even Ron and Seamus. Ron was scowling at the table full of officials.

“Bloody Percy!” Ron fumed. “He’s been a real git lately - had a huge row with Mum and Dad when
he became Senior Undersecretary. Percy began complaining to Dad about you and Dumbledore, Harry... He’s moved out on his own now - good riddance!”

“Hear, hear!” chimed in George.

“I always knew he’d come to no good,” Fred agreed. Ginny bit her lip, looking torn. As cross as she was with Percy, she was more than a bit sad about the whole affair.

Everyone did their best to put Percy out of their minds when breakfast arrived on their plates. Hermione was eating a piece of bacon when she noticed a beetle sitting on the corner of the table.

For some reason it looked very familiar. A memory of Viktor pointing out a water-beetle in her hair after the Second Task popped into her head - another memory arose, this time of Harry flicking a beetle off his chest after he’d had a vision of Voldemort summoning his Death Eaters.

Suddenly it all fit. Hermione’s eyes narrowed when she finally reached her conclusion. Then, grabbing her cup of tea, Hermione drained it in one gulp and smiled brightly at Harry.

“Just a moment Harry, I'll be right back...” Hermione stood up with her empty cup in hand, stalked to the end of the table, and slammed the cup upside down over the beetle, trapping it inside.

“Do you mind if I borrow your saucer Luna?” Hermione asked sweetly.

“Of course not Hermione,” Luna peered at Hermione with great interest as she passed her the saucer.

Carefully, Hermione slid the cup onto the saucer, keeping the beetle trapped. Then she serenely returned to her seat and sat back down next to Harry. He eyed Hermione questioningly. She gestured towards the teacup with the saucer on top and grinned.

“Say hello to Rita Skeeter, Harry!”

~o0o~

Rita Skeeter couldn’t fathom how Hermione Potter had discovered her secret. But that wasn’t her biggest problem. Her biggest problem was that she now faced Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, and Madam Pomfrey in a dungeon deep in the bowels of Hogwarts.

Judging from violent glares she was receiving from the two witches, Rita decided that Dumbledore was her best bet.

“You can’t keep me trapped here forever you know,” Rita purred, licking her lips and fluttering her eyelashes at the Headmaster, “I promise I’ll behave if...”

“You are very fortunate Ms Skeeter...” the headmaster interrupted, his voice calm and his gaze frosty, “It was quite crowded in the Great Hall this morning. Someone might have accidentally stepped on you.”

Rita shuddered from a sudden chill when she realised that Dumbledore wasn’t joking. But surely he wouldn’t...

“You are also quite fortunate that I am unwilling to allow Minerva and Poppy to determine your fate,” Dumbledore continued, “They do not look kindly upon the damage you have done to Mr Potter and his wife’s reputations.

“Nor do I... but I am more forgiving than they... You will find that we can keep you here quite
comfortably for the time-being, until such a time as the Wizengamot sees fit to unseat the current Minister and imprison her for her crimes - unless she perishes first.

“Until then, the House Elves of Hogwarts will look after you. They have been ordered to do you no harm - which is good, because some of them are quite friendly with the Potters who treat them very well.

“You would do well to remember that this cell is enchanted to prevent animagus transformations. Though should the enchantment waver, you should also know that the House Elves are very fastidious when it comes to pest control - and I may have forgotten to mention your animagus form to them...”

~o0o~

Pink wisps of cloud faded into darkness as the setting sun fell behind the mountains. The tops of the tall hedges which made up the maze could only just be seen above the shroud of mist. As the host of students, staff, and visitors made their way to the stands, once again Harry wondered what they expected to see.

Fleur gave Dora a kiss before following Harry to the gate. Dora sighed resignedly and found a seat at the end of the row where the rest of the Potters’ friends were seated. In all of the hubbub, none of the other students thought to wonder where Hermione was. Ginny and Luna, Lavender, Parvati, and Daphne knew, but they had all been sworn to secrecy.

Hermione stood still and quiet under the invisibility cloak next to Harry and Fleur by the gate to the maze, though it wasn’t really necessary as the noise of the crowd in the stands and the ominous purple shadows of dusk provided distraction and cover. Oddly, Mad Eye appeared able to see her, but he winked and said nothing. This time Hermione was certain that his eye could see through invisibility cloaks.

Percy Weasley smirked nastily at Harry from his seat in the judges’ station. Bagman grinned, sure that this time he would hit the jackpot - but if not, he knew the Ministry’s coffers would cover his losses. Bagman stood up and counted down. The crowd roared when he fired red sparks from the starting wand.

Trepidation set in as Harry darted into the maze with his invisible Hermione, followed closely behind by Fleur. Cautiously the three of them crept down the aisle until they were enveloped by the dark shadows of the hedges, well over six metres tall, and they waited for Cedric and Viktor to join them...
Trials and Tribulations: Part 1

Harry was stunned by how many of their friends were at Narcissa Black’s house when he and Hermione arrived by floo with Dora and Fleur. Besides the Twins, Ron, and Ginny, Luna, Daphne, Neville, and Viktor were also congregating in one of the parlours. The only ones missing were Parvati, Lavender, Seamus, and Dean.

“Hi Harry,” yelled Ron, grinning. “What took you so long?”

“What are you all doing here?” asked Harry, looking very puzzled.

“Our parents are all part of the Order, silly,” giggled Luna. “Except for Viktor...”

“My headmaster - he bring me here tonight,” Viktor interjected with a lopsided smile. “He say I should join - I am old enough. But I think because he does not vant to be by himself - all others from Durmstrang go home already... Though I vould stay here anyvay, for Lavender.”

“Oh... of course,” said Hermione. “Fleur is old enough too.”

“Oui,” said Fleur with a nod, smiling at Dora. “Dora invited me, and Papa, he already speaks wiz Dumbledore. He stays in France wiz Maman, but ‘e and Madame Maxime organise assistance for ze Order.”

“Bill and Charlie joined up,” said Ron, looking very glum.

“Yeah... I know about that...” Harry gave Ron a funny look. “They joined up when they met Sirius and Moody at the World Cup - after the attack... Didn’t you know?”

“Er... not really,” Ron muttered. “I didn’t find out until Bill came to watch the Final Task with Mum and Dad.”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “That’s because you weren’t paying attention Ron. Bill and Charlie were with Dad talking to Sirius and Moody about it outside the tent.

“We’re old enough and we tried to join too...” Fred growled.

“But Mum threw a wobbly - said we’re not to as we’re still in school...” said George with a sour expression, not noticing his mother entering the parlour.

“And I should think not!” snapped Mrs Weasley. “It's bad enough that I have to worry about Bill and Charlie...”

“I don’t see why we can’t at least listen in on the Order meeting!” Fred gave his mother a mutinous glare. “It’s rubbish!”

Most of the others averted their eyes, sensing an argument building up. Neville looked extremely nervous. Luna was the only one who didn’t look away uncomfortably, appearing fascinated if anything. Hermione and Harry got the distinct impression that this wasn’t the first row of the evening between Mrs Weasley and her children on the topic.

“And I don’t see why Ron and I have to be left out just because we’re too young to join,” said Ginny heatedly. “Luna’s dad is letting her in on the meeting...”
“Yes! Well that’s up to Mr Lovegood isn’t it,” retorted Mrs Weasley, her voice rising.

“If we’re too young, then how come Harry and Hermione get to be in on the meeting?” moaned Ron.

The fight was momentarily paused as everyone stared at Ron incredulously, including Mrs Weasley. Ginny opened her mouth, looking like she was just about to say something very rude to Ron. But Mrs Weasley, now in full dudgeon, got back into the thick of it.

“Because for one thing they’re both legally of age, even if they are bit young and I don’t like it,” she shouted. “I don’t get a say about them either. And for another, if anyone’s got a right to be in on things, it’s Harry. It’s all got to do with him, doesn’t it…”

Apparently drawn by the commotion, Mr Weasley appeared in the doorway with Moody, Sirius, and Lupin.

“Molly, please…” said Mr Weasley. “They might as well sit in. Harry’s probably just going to tell them anyway…”

“We might as well just induct the lot of them then!” Mrs Weasley snapped. “Do you really want our children to be fighting Dark Wizards…?”

“And why shouldn’t they be prepared to fight Dark Wizards?” Sirius interjected sharply. “Do you think Death Eaters are going to give them a choice in the matter if they come calling?”

“Sirius is right Molly,” Moody growled. “Your kids might have to face Dark Wizards at some point whether you like it or not. We all are. They need to know what they’re facin’… They need to be prepared. Is that what you want? For them to face danger without knowin’ what it’s all about?”

“Of course not Alastor,” Mrs Weasley gasped. “But…”

“But nothin’…” Moody snapped. “That’s just how it is. Get used to it.”

Mrs Weasley quieted, and looked to Remus for support. But when he just raised his eyebrows at her, she knew that she had lost. When she turned back to glance at her children, Hermione and Harry could see the tears running down Mrs Weasley’s cheeks, all anger gone, trying hard not to lose it altogether.

Hermione bit her lip, watching Mrs Weasley sadly. Harry swallowed, suddenly realising how much pain Mrs Weasley was in at the thought of losing her children. Mrs Weasley dabbed at her tears with a hanky and tried her best to muster a smile at the Potters.

“Sorry about all the fuss, Harry, Hermione,” said Mrs Weasley as she swept them both into a bear-hug. “It’s lovely to see you both again.”

“It’s good to see you too, Mrs Weasley,” Hermione squeaked, trying to catch a breath, unused to being on the receiving end of a hug as bone-crushing as one of her own.

“Hi Mrs Weasley,” said Harry, feeling relieved that the row was over and hoping that Mrs Weasley would cheer up a bit. Having finally arrived, Dumbledore entered the parlour, smiling warmly at everyone, eyes twinkling.

“Good! You’re here. Now we can get this thing started,” said Moody gruffly.

“Indeed, Alastor…” Dumbledore beckoned everyone in the parlour, as if he had expected all of the
teenagers to be joining the meeting. “Well, if we’re all ready then, why don’t we join our gracious host at her table... Harry, Mrs Potter, if you would join me.”

The room quieted when they arrived, all eyes upon Harry and Hermione. Harry glanced around nervously at all of the people, many of whom he didn’t know. Hermione was more than a bit apprehensive too.

“Its alright guys,” Dora whispered. “I’ll be right beside you.”

There was a long highly polished ebony table in the middle of the room with numerous chairs all around it. Dumbledore led the Potters and Dora to the end of the table and gestured for them to sit beside him.

Molly Weasley looked a bit anxious as well. She was still having some difficulty getting used to being in the house of someone who had been an enemy for so long. Narcissa was a courteous host though, and Molly was on her best behaviour.

“If you would please be so kind Narcissa?” Dumbledore began, as he glanced down the lengthy table at many dubious faces. “Some here do not yet know the circumstances by which you have come to host us.”

Narcissa’s stomach tightened and she swallowed nervously. She looked to her cousin Sirius, and he gave her hand a comforting squeeze.

“I... My husband and I were betrothed at an early age,” Narcissa began. “There was a contract... For those too young to know, Marriage Contracts were once common among the Noble Houses. And though they are no-longer validated by the Ministry today, Contracts issued before times changed are still upheld. My father had pledged me to the Malfoys from birth, for a vast sum of money.”

Hermione bristled, eyes wide with shock. She couldn’t believe that such a barbaric practice could have taken place in modern Britain. Harry’s stomach churned in revulsion at the idea of an arranged marriage, bought and paid for. He felt like throwing up. It struck him as tantamount to slavery.

Fleur frowned and bit her lip. Daphne cast her eyes down, feeling humiliated, but glad that her own father had steadfastly refused Lucius Malfoy’s many offers to buy her for Draco. Luna and Ginny scowled, both nauseated by the very idea.

“I did grow to love my husband,” Narcissa continued, “and at one time I shared his beliefs. We all did in those days... we were raised to believe in the superiority of our blood. But during the last war, I came to see the cruelty and suffering that such beliefs wrought. After my son was born, I had hoped to put it all behind us.

“At first, I begged my husband to withdraw from the company he kept. But he did not, and for some years I kept my tongue to myself. But gradually, we began to draw apart - especially after my son reached the right age for Hogwarts. I did not wish for Draco to grow up with the same beliefs that I and my husband had.

“But... but as you know, my husband maintained his arrogant views, and passed them on to our son. When my son was duly sanctioned at Hogwarts for his assault against the Greengrasses first daughter, I came to realise that my hopes had been dashed... that Draco had passed the point of no return... and that my husband saw nothing amiss with our son’s actions.

“I finally sought a way out... and my solicitors found it. There was a clause buried deep within the contract... A clause which gave me the right to divorce after I had obtained a certain age...”
Her eyes glistening, Narcissa paused, and peered apologetically at Daphne and Mr and Mrs Greengrass.

“I... I am shamed by my own blood - my son. For his grievous offences I am truly sorry. Offering my home as a sanctuary for those who have been wronged by my husband and my son will never be payment enough. But it is the least I can do...”

Narcissa sat down abruptly and Sirius put his arm around her comfortingly.

Satisfied that Narcissa had assuaged the concerns of most, Dumbledore glanced around the table. He faced the largest gathering of Order members since the last war - many, many more than his Inner Circle. There were a large number of old members, and more than a few new faces, including the Greengrasses and Xenophilius Lovegood.

Dumbledore was very pleased to see Igor Karkaroff, who had made an Unbreakable Vow to demonstrate his commitment - truly remarkable. Dumbledore nodded his head gratefully at Severus Snape for his successful attempt at recruiting Igor. Finally Dumbledore brought the meeting to order.

“I should like to begin by giving Madam Amelia Bones the floor. She has some grave news to impart which will affect Mr Potter and his wife greatly. Amelia, if you would be so kind...”

Madam Bones adjusted her monocle, cleared her throat, and launched into her presentation, forgoing any pleasantries.

“As you all know by now, I have been summarily dismissed from my post as Head of the DMLE. The Minister managed to persuade the Wizengamot that I was at fault for the stationing of the Dementors at the conclusion of the Triwizard tournament... and that it was due to my negligence that Voldemort took Azkaban...”

Many members of the Order winced and cringed at the mention of Voldemort by name. But Madam Bones studiously ignored them and continued.

“Fortunately, there are still a number of Aurors who are loyal to me, and me alone. One of them has brought to my attention an interdepartmental memo which indicates that Warlock Potter is to be brought to trial for the destruction of Ministry Property... namely, 416 Dementors.”

A collective gasp of shock rose among those assembled. Harry slumped in his seat and groaned. He should have known that the Minister might try something like this. Hermione’s nostrils flared with anger.

“That’s outrageous!” Hermione fumed.

“Bloody ridiculous is what it is,” snapped Sirius, “They’ll never be able to prove that a Patronus killed the Dementors. Everyone knows that’s impossible. I saw what happened to those wraiths, and I know that was no Patronus that did it...”

Harry felt a bit awkward. He wanted to tell Sirius what he and Hermione had learned through their conversation with Dumbledore the previous night. But he couldn’t say anything in the middle of an Order meeting as it was supposed to be a secret from all but a few key members of Dumbledore’s Inner Circle.

“It must have been some sort of coincidence.” Sirius continued to rage, “Something very strange had to have been happening at the same time. Maybe the Minister herself deployed some sort of secret weapon developed by Unspeakables to set Harry up. And how can anyone be held criminally liable for killing creatures which are legally determined ‘non-beings’ anyway...?”
Amelia Bones arched one eyebrow and sighed. 

“The Minister is determined to at least give it a go, and given her sway, all she needs is five or six votes on the current Wizengamot to go her way. Some of the ‘wobblies’ may see that as a mere technicality Sirius…”

Sirius snorted, his face twisted in outrage, but he nodded, understanding all too well the trouble Harry faced.

“Right then. Well there’s only one thing for it Harry,” Sirius began, as he handed Harry a card, “You’ll need a lawyer, as Dumbledore won’t have any pull with the Wizengamot at the moment. Ragnok is the best. He’s a Solicitor Advocate for Gringotts and he’s done some occasional work for other members of the Order in a bind…”

Mundungus Fletcher had a coughing fit further down the table and Amelia’s eyes narrowed in distaste, as did Mrs Weasley’s.

“I thought solicitors only provided information and handled contracts and that sort of thing,” Harry whispered to Hermione, frowning in puzzlement. “Don’t I need a Barrister?”

“Solicitor Advocates are a special sort of solicitor Harry,” Hermione murmured back. “They’re allowed to represent their clients and make arguments before the Court. It’s a relatively new position which came into effect a few years ago.”

“Blimey Harry,” Hagrid gasped, clapping Harry on the back, clearly intending it to be a comforting gesture. “Whoever heard o’ such a thing…? Tryin’ yeh fer doin’ somethin’ impossible fer any wizard to do. Don’ worry though. I’m sure yeh’ll get off... Obviously yeh didn’ do nothin’ yerself...”

“Thanks Hagrid, I appreciate it...” Harry grimaced, wincing at Hagrid’s “comforting” pat.

“Oi! Watch it Hagrid, you don’t know your own strength sometimes…” Dora glared at Hagrid, peeling his dustbin-lid sized hand from Harry’s shoulders.

“Oh... er... right Tonks!” Hagrid’s face fell. “Sorry Harry!”

Harry relaxed considerably when Dora rubbed his shoulders where Hagrid had walloped him.

“Better...?” she asked.

“Loads, thanks Dora,” Harry replied. He grinned at Hagrid. “It’s alright Hagrid. I’ll be fine... just a bit stiff from the Third Task still,” he fibbed, not wanting Hagrid to feel badly.

Hagrid’s features brightened. Hermione squeezed Harry’s hand, and smiled gratefully at Dora.

“I’ll be part of Harry’s escort,” Dora said firmly to Amelia Bones and Dumbledore. “I won’t put in my resignation until after the trial and I get Harry back outta the Ministry safely. But I’ll need someone else I can trust who ‘asn’t resigned ‘in protest’ yet,” Dora narrowed her eyes angrily at Shacklebolt and Dawlish.

“Tonks, The Minister already suspects that we are too close to Amelia, and therefore too close to Dumbledore,” Shacklebolt sighed, “We would be useless to the Order as Ministry employees…”

“How about Auror Mulligan?” Madam Bones offered. “He’s still loyal to me, and he’s Auror Brixton’s partner... well, was Brixton’s partner before she took a leave to look after the Potters’ immediate families. But I am absolutely certain that Reynard still has standing in the Auror Corps.”
“Right then. He’ll do,” Dora agreed.

Madam Bones and Dumbledore exchanged glances; the Headmaster nodded his approval.

Harry let out a sigh of relief when the meeting moved on to the next point of business, arranging security for Mr Lovegood and the Quibbler, and for the School’s Board of Governors. Hermione and Dora quietly departed with Harry from the head of the table and went to sit with the rest of the teens. Hermione could tell from Harry’s pensive expression that something was still bothering him though.

“What’s up Harry?” Hermione quietly asked.

“Er... I was wondering why Madam Bones called me Warlock Potter. What’s that all about?”

Hermione’s eyebrows popped up in surprise. She’d never really thought about it. But it only made sense she supposed.

“Harry,” she began, sounding a bit breathless, “It’s because you’re the last Potter... You’re the Head of your House - a Warlock. All of the Pureblood families are treated as Houses with special privileges. The Heads of Houses have seats on the Wizengamot, which are filled either by themselves or their proxies. They’re the ones who vote on legislation and preside over State trials. That’s why Dumbledore was known as the Chief Warlock...”

“She’s right Harry,” Neville chimed in, having overheard. “One day I’ll be the Warlock of the Longbottom House... or at least I will be when Gran dies. She’s Head of House at the moment.”

“But that doesn’t make an sense,” said Harry. “I’m not a Pureblood...”

“That doesn’t make a difference Harry,” Hermione responded. “Most Wizards today aren’t Pureblood, including many members of the Houses. But the Houses were established centuries ago, and they still have a lot of status and wield a lot of power in Wizarding society regardless.”

“Oh!” Harry looked startled at the idea of being the Head of a House.

He wasn’t entirely certain the he wanted the “privilege” bestowed upon his station. He never had placed much credence in that sort of thing. He hated it when people lorded their status and wealth over everyone else, and as far as he was concerned everyone should have equal say in how things were run. And if it meant that he was like the Malfoys, he wanted no part of it.

Hermione could see what Harry was thinking written all over his face, and she rather felt the same way herself. But she couldn’t help thinking that Harry could one day use that status for Good... to help make changes in Wizarding society... make it more Democratic.

“How come Dad isn’t a Warlock then?” asked Ron. “I don’t understand. We don’t have any status or special privileges...”

“Actually he is a Warlock,” said George. “He even gets to write laws and stuff. He just never put any stock in that sort of thing...”

“...because Dad thinks it’s all rubbish,” Fred added. “He’s always stood up for the rights of muggleborn, and thinks that everyone should have equal representation in the Ministry and on the Wizengamot...”

“...and that’s why Dad never made it very high up the ladder at the Ministry,” George continued.

“...Which is why Percy’s being such a bloody git now,” Fred concluded.
“Oh!” said Ron as light dawned on him. “I get it... I thought it was only arseholes like the Malfoys who thought we were Blood Traitors.”

Then Ron scowled at his brothers. “But how come nobody ever told me? I’m always the last to know everything...”

“Oh get over yourself Ron!” Ginny snapped. “I didn’t know either...”

Fred shrugged dismissively, but George piped up and tried to explain.

“It’s probably because Mum and Dad never believed in that rubbish. I expect they didn’t want us to get swelled heads. The only reason Fred and I know, is because we’re always nicking the post to see if there’s anything interesting. Sometimes stuff comes addressed to Warlock Weasley.”

“I wonder why nobody told me that I was a Warlock though...” Harry bit his lip, looking puzzled.

“Because I was planning on shepherding you through the process myself Harry...”

Startled, everyone turned around to see Sirius, who had apparently come up behind them partway through the conversation and overheard.

“One has to officially declare oneself Warlock and the Right to take a Seat on the floor of the Wizengamot during a full session,” Sirius continued. “After everything went south since the World Cup, there simply hasn’t been the opportunity.

“And actually, your upcoming trial presents the best opportunity available since then. When you win - and with Ragnok in your corner, I don’t doubt that you shall - you should stand up and Declare yourself.”

“Are you going to be there?” asked Harry, feeling a bit anxious at the idea.

“Well, as a known associate of a ‘fugitive’ Werewolf, I thought it best to remain scarce,” Sirius sighed. “I’ll have a proxy filling in for me - which you'll have to do yourself once you get out of the Ministry safely. But Warlock Greengrass will be there... He’s already offered to look out for you.

“That was what I was coming over tell you actually... Well, that and to tell you that I won’t be joining you in London as Remus and I will be doing some work for the Order - Mad Eye’s going to join you though, as he’s got business in London anyway.”

“And I’ll be coming with you of course,” said Dora, grinning. “And Fleur’ll come along too if you don’t mind having her at your house for a few days. She can stay in my room with me.”

“Of course,” said Harry quickly, feeling much better already.

“We don’t mind at all,” Hermione beamed.

Finally Dumbledore brought the meeting to a close, but unfortunately for Ron and Neville - who were both getting bored - Dumbledore remained with several of the professors, Sirius, and Lupin to discuss a few last details with Mr and Mrs Weasley, Mr Lovegood, Madam Longbottom, and the Greengrasses, for their ears alone.

Harry and Hermione were a bit puzzled when Dumbledore revealed that the professors and the Potters would be remaining at Hogwarts for the summer. They were even more surprised when Madam Longbottom asked the headmaster to also allow Neville to return to Hogwarts for the summer out of concern for his safety.
Dumbledore sighed but relented when Madam Longbottom refused to take no for an answer. Mrs Weasley stewed for several minutes. Finally, making what was clearly a difficult decision, she begged Dumbledore to keep her only daughter and youngest son safe at Hogwarts for the summer too. Of course, Luna decided that if Ginny was staying, then she wanted to as well.

For their part, Harry and Hermione were quite pleased that they would be having some company over the summer.

~o0o~

It was very late when Harry, Hermione, and Dora all tumbled out of the fireplace at Number Twelve. Fleur tittered when she gracefully stepped out of the green flames to see them all still coughing and wheezing as they dusted the soot off. Finally catching her breath, Hermione beamed and flung her arms around her mother, who was the only one who had stayed up to await their arrival.

“It’s lovely to see you again dear,” said Mrs Granger before giving Harry a hug and greeting Dora.

“Mum, this is Fleur,” said Hermione. “She’s...”

“One of the Champions in the tournament. I remember from your letters darling. I’m delighted to meet you Fleur. Have you come to stay with us for a bit then?”

“Oui... I could not let my girlfriend come to London alone.” Fleur smiled brightly at Mrs Granger. “I am vairy pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Dora grinned, blushing when Fleur introduced herself as her girlfriend. When Harry yawned, Hermione’s mother wished everyone a good night, and soon they were all off to bed.

Hermione snuggled in Harry’s arms, pleased to be at home again, even if only for a week. Harry sighed happily, stroking Hermione’s golden curls, breathing in her minty fragrance as the tension of the evening faded. For a moment, he could almost forget the travails which lay ahead of him.

~o0o~

It was quite early in the morning and Minister Umbridge had just sat down to her first cup of tea. As she began to peruse the reports on her desk, there was a knock on the door before it opened slightly and a familiar face peeked in. When she saw the red hair and the enthusiastic features, Minister Umbridge broke into a winning smile.

“Ah, Mr Weasley, do come in... Thank you for being so prompt,” said the Minister in her most dulcet tones.

“Of course, Minister,” Senior Undersecretary Weasley eagerly responded. “What can I do for you today?”

“Mr Potter should be returning to Privet Drive by the end of tomorrow,” replied the Minister, “and I thought it wise to begin immediate preparations for his trial, so that we might send the Summons as soon as possible. I would like to have the Summons ready for Thursday morning.”

“I’ll get right on it Minister...”

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Percy Weasley rubbed his hands together gleefully as he began preparing for the trial of Harry Potter. He didn’t care that it was still early Tuesday morning and that he had a large stack of Law Books in
front of him. Percy only had till Wednesday evening to formalise the charges for the summons, and less than a week to prepare for the trial on the following Monday.

It had been Percy’s greatest ambition to be Minister for Magic for as long as he could remember, and he was determined to prove to Minister Umbridge that he was up to the challenge of being Senior Undersecretary.

It had never been more clear that Harry Potter was a menace to society - stirring up trouble with the Merpeople, and telling that ridiculous tale about Kappa assassins - making a complete mockery of the Third Task by cheating and then utilising some sort of Secret Weapon to destroy the Dementors.

Percy should have seen it from the beginning, but he reminded himself that he had still been under the influence of his parents’ misguided teachings until he joined the Ministry.

Now he realised that Harry Potter had been thumbing his nose at the rules and authority from his very first day in Hogwarts. And yet that old coot Dumbledore had rewarded Potter time and again for his disorderly behaviour. Without a strict adherence to rules there could be no Order and Chaos would reign supreme.

Percy hoped that eventually he and the Minister could get rid of Dumbledore as well as Potter. It would be a real thumb in the eye to Dumbledore when Potter finally got what he deserved.

And then there was Hermione Potter! What a disappointment she had turned out to be. Percy had high hopes for Hermione Granger in her first year, and then she had befriended that little hooligan, Harry Potter. Of course, as with Potter, Percy had been too blinded to recognise what a bad influence Potter had been on her.

And it hadn’t seemed like a big deal that she was a muggleborn at the time. But again, Percy now knew that it was his father’s muggle-loving ways which was holding the Weasley family back financially, and ruining the Weasley family name.

Percy frowned, wondering if he could find a means to put Hermione Potter on trial alongside her husband. Then he remembered that she had participated in the Third Task. The Triwizard Commission had found evidence all over the maze indicating her presence. Clearly she was guilty of aiding and abetting Harry Potter’s scheme to win at any cost.

Percy cracked his knuckles and began flicking excitedly through the Law Books.

~o0o~

Harry and Hermione woke up to the smell of bacon and eggs wafting through Number Twelve. Feeling very hungry, they showered quickly and dressed, then jogged down the stairs to the kitchen. Hermione’s mother was the only one up as everyone else appeared to be sleeping in.

Jean Granger glanced up to see her daughter and son-in-law grinning when they burst into the kitchen.

“Well, come on then, breakfast is ready,” Jean smiled back, “You’d better get a move-on before Dudley smells it and wakes up. That boy has lost a lot of weight and is looking much more fit, but he can still put the food away like there’s no tomorrow...”

“Thank you.” Harry beamed happily at Jean as he ate his breakfast, “I’m famished, M... er...”

All of a sudden Harry felt very awkward. He wasn’t sure what to call Jean Granger. Calling her “Mrs Granger” didn’t really seem appropriate anymore, as Hermione had told him that she was in the
process of getting divorced. But he still felt a bit uncomfortable about calling her Jean... somehow it wasn’t quite like calling Lupin by his first name.

Jean Granger caught on immediately to Harry’s quandary. Harry was perhaps the kindest and most mature young man that Jean had ever known, and he made Hermione so happy. She just wanted to hug him and make all of his anxiety all go away.

“Why don’t you call me Mum dear!?” said Jean, hoping that she hadn’t stepped over a line.

Hermione’s eyes widened and she stopped eating a piece of bacon in mid-bite. Hermione sensed the wave of emotion surging inside of Harry, she glanced at him and saw his eyes glistening.

Harry gulped. He knew then, that was exactly what he wanted to call Jean Granger - her hugs felt like how he imagined hugging his own mother would feel. He had often wished that he had his mum back, even knowing that it was pointless wishing for such - but if he couldn’t have his own, he could at least share Hermione’s.

“Er... Yeah! I’d really like that,” Harry croaked. “Thank you.... thanks for everything - Mum.”

Hermione beamed at her mother, sighing happily as she squeezed Harry's hand.

~o0o~

Petunia smelled the bacon and realised she had overslept. Fortunately it was too early for most teenagers to be awake and Dudley was still asleep. Petunia quietly crept down the stairs and headed for the kitchen. She was about to step through the entrance to the kitchen when she caught the scene.

Petunia witnessed everything. Her chest tightened and her stomach lurched. Petunia bit her quivering lip to stifle her tears and turned to go back up the stairs as quickly as she could. Not wanting to wake Dudley, she tiptoed quietly all the way up the staircase and locked herself in the bathroom on the fourth floor.

Unable to contain herself any longer, Petunia began sobbing for Harry and Lily. An image of Vernon forced itself into Petunia’s mind and she began vomiting in the toilet.

~o0o~

Hermione whirled around in her seat when she sensed someone behind her. She had turned around and only just caught a glimpse of Petunia before she disappeared. Hermione really wanted to hug Harry and her mum, but it seemed like something was very wrong with Petunia. Hermione quickly ran to see where she had gone.

She spied Petunia at the top the stairs on the uppermost landing just as she entered the bathroom, and she heard the door click shut. Hoping that Mum and Harry would understand, Hermione dashed up the stairs and knocked on Auntie Joanne’s door. Yawning as she rubbed the slumber from her eyes, Joanne answered the door.

“What’s wrong dear?” Joanne asked, seeing Hermione’s distress.

“It’s Harry’s aunt... Petunia. I think she’s ill. She just ran all the way up to the top floor and locked herself in the bathroom.”

Following her niece, Joanne ran up the stairs to the bathroom on the fourth floor. Hermione unlocked the door with an alohomora charm when they heard the retching sounds within.
Joanne didn’t much care for Petunia, as they had very different views on things, and Jean had told her of Petunia’s past with Hermione’s husband. But tears sprang to her own eyes at the sight of the sobbing, heaving woman hunched over the loo.

“Oh you poor dear...” Joanne said as soothingly as she could manage, reaching out to Petunia and gently rubbing her back.

Abbie Brixton opened her door rubbing her bleary eyes, wondering what all the hullabaloo was about. Her eyes widened when she heard the commotion above and she hurried breathlessly up the stairs. Seeing Petunia’s state, Abbie waved her wand with one hand and caught the medicine kit which flew from her room with the other.

“It’s alright you two, I can manage Petunia,” Abbie said kindly. “I know you haven’t seen each other in ages. Go on, off to breakfast both of you. I’m sure that Petunia will be alright in a bit.”

By the time Hermione returned to the kitchen with her aunt, Dora and Fleur were sitting at the table, drinking tea and coffee respectively with her mother and Harry.

“Mornin’ Hermione,” said Dora with a grin.

“Bonjour ‘Ermione.” Fleur put her coffee down and smiled.

“What’s going on?” asked Harry. “Trip to the loo?”

“Er... your aunt Petunia’s not feeling very well,” Hermione replied, still looking worried. “But Abbie Brixton is looking after her now.”

“Oh...” Harry frowned, wondering if Aunt Petunia was alright.

Everyone chatted amiably as they continued breakfast. After he’d finished, Harry took a deep breath, just about to mention the upcoming trial, and how Dora was going to escort him when Abbie entered the kitchen with Dudley in tow. Dudley’s face lit up to see Harry again.

“I’ve put Petunia back to bed for now,” said Abbie. “She’ll be okay for the moment... Just go easy on her alright!?” Abbie looked pointedly at Jean and Joanne. “I think Petunia’s having a bout of PTSD - that ex of hers was a right monster. And... and I think she’s only just finally starting to come to terms with it...”

“Er... Of... of course we will,” said Jean, looking slightly ashamed of herself.

“I’ll pop by St Mungo’s later when Moody or Amelia get in,” Abbie continued. “One of the Mind-Healers there may be able to give me some advice. I wish I could do more, but it’s a bit difficult at the moment with us all having to stay under the Ministry’s radar.”

“I’ll make us a bit more breakfast then shall I?” said Hermione’s aunt, hoping to relieve the tension. “Who wants some bacon then... Dudley?”

“Yes please.” Dudley nodded eagerly, his face brightening. “I can help...” he offered.

“That’s alright dear. Why don’t you just sit down and have some orange juice - I’ll only be a minute”

“Hi Harry,” said Dudley, sitting down at the table. “Good to see you again.”

“You too Dudley,” said Harry, thinking that Dudley looked a bit sad. “Er... so you alright then?”

“Well... er... erm...” Dudley looked very embarrassed, glancing around the table, not sure that he
wanted to say anything in front of everybody. Face reddening, he hung his head down and looked at the floor. “Er... I know what it’s like to not have any friends now,” he mumbled. “I’m sorry Harry...”

Harry swallowed, feeling a bit awkward. “Er... that’s all water under the bridge Dudley. There’s really no need to apologise again.”

“Th...thanks Harry...” Dudley offered a wan little smile.

“Anyway, I... er... I don’t think you’ve met Hermione...”

“Hi Dudley.” Hermione smiled a bit shyly. “It’s nice to meet you.”

After breakfast, the Potters ended up with Dudley in the parlour playing video games on Dudley’s Playstation. Fleur and Dora joined them, both fascinated by the interactive muggle technology.

“Your godfather and his friend enchanted it for me,” Dudley told Harry when he asked.

“This is brilliant!” said Dora when she had a turn with the controller. “I’ve never actually played video-games before, though my muggle cousins play them all the time.”

Harry and Hermione were in the middle of a game when they heard voices they recognised in the hallway behind them. Moody and Madam Bones had arrived. Dudley was surprised to see a girl with red hair entering the parlour.

“Oh... er... I forgot to tell you Dudley. You won’t actually be all alone this summer,” said Harry. “This is Susan Bones, Madam Bones’s niece. Susan, this is my cousin Dudley.”

“Er... Hi!” Dudley flushed. He’d never really talked to a girl before and had no idea what to say.

“Hello Dudley,” said Susan shyly before addressing Harry. “Thank you for inviting me and Aunt Amelia to stay for the summer Harry... Dad and Mum were frightened that You-Know-Who would get us now that he’s back.”

“You’re welcome Susan,” Harry responded, smiling. “Madam Bones and Dumbledore told me and Hermione about your parents being in the Order. I... I’m sorry about the rest of your family...”

Harry glanced at Dudley who was twiddling his thumbs and staring awkwardly at his shoes. “You’ll be nice to Susan over the summer won’t you Dudley?”

Dudley looked up and nodded.

“Oh of course I will Harry!” Dudley replied. “…It’ll be nice to have someone else around a bit the rest of the summer. I promise I’ll be nice to Susan.”

~o0o~

Feeling a bit agitated, Harry had taken the opportunity to escape after saying hello to Moody and Madam Bones, retiring to the library with Hermione. Being alone with her, Harry finally began to relax after the rather emotional morning. Hermione was sitting on Harry’s lap in a cozy armchair in the library, both reading a stack of superhero comics which Dora had given them to read.

“I think you two’ll love these,” Dora had said with a chuckle. “You’ll see what I mean...”

Hermione giggled as Harry carefully turned the page. “He reminds me of you Harry. He’s got the same round glasses and everything...”
Harry shook his head in amazement at how much he had in common with the protagonist. Apparently, often feeling like everything was his fault when the people he loved were put in harms way must be a more common trait than he had thought. The boy with a radioactive spider bite had even been raised by his aunt and uncle after his parents had been killed.

Harry laughed and tickled Hermione, causing her to squeal, when they read the next page.

“Yeah... well she reminds me of you...” Harry grinned, pointing at the picture of the superhero’s sexy girlfriend in the issue they were reading. “She’s the perfect partner for Spiderman - smart, gorgeous, superpowered, both of them fighting crime together...”

“Don’t be silly Harry! Her hair looks like Fleur’s...” Hermione stuck her tongue out at Harry. “...And her bust is much bigger than mine by far.” But she squirmed happily on his lap at the favourable comparison nonetheless.

“Maybe so, but the Black Cat makes a lot more sense as Spiderman’s girlfriend than the one who looks like Ginny...” Harry responded, earning himself a rather heated kiss from Hermione.

A grunt and a cough from the doorway startled the Potters, and they both blushed furiously when they spied Mad Eye grinning at them.

“You’ll want to be careful with those comics Potter... Tonks won’t take it kindly if you squash them,” Mad Eye chuckled.

“Anyway, I just wanted to let you know, I’ll be escorting you to Gringotts tomorrow mornin’... I’ve made an appointment with Ragnok for you - Right that’s it then! Carry On where you left off...” Mad Eye smirked and clomped down the stairs to the kitchen for an early lunch.

Harry waved his wand, shutting and locking the library door behind Moody. Another swish cast a silencing charm and he placed the comic carefully on the table.

“Harry!” Hermione squeaked anxiously when Harry’s lips brushed against the side of her neck, his hand slipping under her skirt. “What are you doing?”

“Carrying On!” Harry said airily. “You don’t expect me to disobey a Mad Eye order do you?”

“But everyone’s watching the television in the parlour,” Hermione moaned as Harry’s fingers reached inside her moistening knickers, “Shouldn’t we go upstairs to our room?”

“Orders are orders Hermione...” Harry grinned; his other hand pushed under her blouse and slid across the smooth taut skin of her abdomen. “And it is our home after all.”

Hermione blushed, unable to help feeling naughtily aroused knowing that everyone was just a few rooms away, grinding her bottom against Harry’s pulsing stiffness.

“Honestly Harry, sometimes you are so literal... OH!...” Hermione gasped, her face wrought with ardour as his fingers entered her heated channel, his thumb rotating the pearl hidden in her fold. Harry’s other fingers tweaked her hardened nipples, his lips trailing burning kisses along her collarbone.

“Mmmhmmmmm...” Harry murmured playfully in response.

Hermione’s spine arched as she returned his kisses. Harry cupped and fondled a breast, gently rolling the nipple between his thumb and forefinger. Hermione began to moan, tingling with pleasure; her warm sheath clasped Harry’s fingers and she rippled with a tremor of ecstasy, drenching his hand.
with her dewiness.

Still lost in the throes of bliss, Hermione leaned forward onto the library table, gasping from the orgasm, wriggling her bottom at Harry invitingly. Harry pushed her skirt up around her waist and slid her soaked knickers to the floor. In a daze, Hermione briefly twisted around to unzip Harry and release his erection from its prison before returning to her position.

Panting, his heart racing, Harry leaned over Hermione’s backside, grasped her hips and plunged the length of his hardness into her crescent valley in one go. Harry rocked her, already fit to burst from the euphoria of bringing Hermione off in his lap, the scent of her passion filling him with elation.

Hermione exploded into bliss once more as Harry spilled his seed into her chamber. Magic sparked and the library trembled, Dora’s comics fluttering lightly, remaining safely on the table.
Chapter 42: Under Summer Skies

Luna sighed happily, wriggling her bare toes in the grass as she sat near the lakeshore patiently waiting for Ginny.

Sparrows twittered in the birches and butterflies flitted among the wild primrose and azalea by the lake, the willows whispering in the cool breeze. Several geese flew low above the shimmering surface of the Black Lake. Except for birdsong and the hum of bees, it was quiet on the Hogwarts grounds, and there was something very satisfying about having it nearly all to herself for the summer.

Everything was almost perfect - now all she needed was her girlfriend and their other friends. Luna had arrived the morning after the Order meeting, but the Weasleys had decided to have Ginny and Ron for a few days at home before sending them off to Hogwarts.

Neville was around, but he was a bit mopey as he was missing Hannah Abbott. He was hanging out at the quidditch pitch reading a book while Viktor Krum soared around the castle on a broom. And it would be a few days yet before Harry and Hermione returned from London.

Finally Luna heard someone calling her name; she glanced back and grinned when she saw a beaming face full of freckles and red hair.

“Here you are...” said Ginny. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“I knew you’d find me here. This is the perfect spot,” said Luna. “How come Ron didn’t come back to Hogwarts with you?”

“Wait... how did you know that?” Ginny looked very puzzled for a moment before she realised that Luna was having one of her intuitive moments.

“I can tell by your face,” Luna replied with a giggle. “You don’t look annoyed.”

“That’s a good point...” Ginny grinned, “Ron convinced Mum and Dad to let him go to Ireland to hang out with Seamus instead.”

“That’s nice,” said Luna, pulling Ginny in for a steamy kiss. “Everyone should get to hang out with their best friend for the summer.

“Mmhmm,” Ginny responded, her lips busily engaging with Luna’s.

Luna pulled Ginny closer until they were both rolling around in each other’s arms on the grass together, giggling and kissing with reckless abandon. Ginny ended up on her back, her skirt rucked up around her waist with Luna between her parted thighs.

“Mmm...” Luna grinned, sliding her hand across the velvety skin of Ginny’s lower abdomen, her fingertips reaching the waistband of Ginny’s knickers. “This is much nicer without that creep McLaggen and his obnoxious friend watching. Maybe we can do a bit more this time... There’s no-one else around.”

Ginny’s eyes widened and she nervously licked her lips, smiling shyly back. Nobody else had ever made Ginny feel this way before. She’d been wanting to go further with Luna for a while, but hadn’t been sure how to ask, afraid of scaring her away. Ginny was delighted that Luna had taken the initiative.
“Er... alright then,” she squeaked. “I’d love to...”

Taking Ginny at her word, Luna slid her hand under the waistband of Ginny’s knickers. Luna’s fingers brushed against a downy patch on Ginny’s mound; she wondered if it was as red as her hair. Ginny trembled as Luna’s fingers reached further down, finally arriving at Ginny’s already heated entrance.

The fingers rubbed along the outer rim of Ginny’s slit, pressed into her dampening fold, her thumb finding the fleshy pearl hidden within.

Ginny gasped when she felt two of Luna’s fingers delving inside her, burrowing until they were knuckle deep and could go no further. Her sopping sheath clasped Luna’s digits tightly as Luna began thrusting. Ginny groaned, arching, feeling the blades of grass flattening under her back.

This was much more intoxicating than diddling herself under bedcovers in the dead of night. In a heady daze, Ginny kneaded Luna’s breasts through her blouse, tugging her hardened nipples; Luna felt little tingles of pleasure rippling through her at Ginny’s touch.

Imagining how much better it would feel without her blouse on and Ginny’s hands touching her bare skin, Luna began pumping her fingers into Ginny faster, her thumb flicking Ginny’s nubbin. Luna knew that Ginny had peaked when she shuddered and squealed, bathing Luna’s fingers with her nectar.

Grinning with delight at having brought her partner to completion, Luna tugged off her own blouse and tossed it aside before undoing the waist of her skirt.

“What are you doing?” Ginny squeaked anxiously.

“We’re trying that again,” Luna retorted breezily. “But this time without clothes on...”

“But... but we’re outside...”

“So?” said Luna as she peeled her knickers off.

“Someone might see us...” Ginny moaned half-heartedly, nipples hardening, pulse racing.

“Trust me, it’ll be even better this way.”

Ginny couldn’t bring herself to disagree. She grew wetter, flushing with desire at the sight of Luna’s lissome figure utterly naked under the bright summer sky, framed by the green foliage of the bushes behind her. Eyeing Luna’s hairless slit and perky pink nipples, Ginny licked her lips.

Throwing caution to the wind, Ginny grinned and hurriedly pulled off her own clothes as the squirrels peeked down at them from the branches of the sycamore and the sparrows settled on the bushes to watch. Luna peered at Ginny with as much enthusiasm as Ginny had regarded Luna, moments ago.

As she lay back on the grass, Luna noted that the delicate wisps upon the v shaped apex of Ginny’s thighs were indeed as red as the hair on her head.

Giggling delightedly, Ginny pounced on Luna, this time taking position between Luna’s parted legs, one hand squeezing Luna’s firm little globes, the other sliding down Luna’s satiny belly and over her smooth mound. Feeling the cool breeze against her bare skin and the grass under her knees as she slipped her fingers inside Luna put Ginny over the top.
Moments later, she was moaning and gasping as much as Luna was and they both lost themselves, climaxing together in a storm of ecstasy.

Still in a euphoric haze, fingers inside of Luna, Ginny’s eyes widened when she thought she heard footsteps approaching. Luna’s breath caught and she gaped at Ginny in shock when they both heard a voice drawing nearer. Panicking, Ginny quickly pulled her sticky fingers out and grabbed her clothes as Luna snatched at her own.

“I could have sworn I saw them come down this way earlier,” said a voice which they both recognised, as they’d met Hestia Jones at the Order meeting. “They’re lovely girls dear. I’m sure they would be happy to keep you company a bit while you’re staying with me at Hogwarts...”

Ginny bit her lip, groaning as she looked around wildly for a place to hide. Luna clapped a hand to her mouth to stifle a giggle, and beckoned Ginny, pointing to the bushes nearby. The embarrassed pair of nude young witches scrambled under the bushes and covered each other’s mouths, both breathing rapidly.

Huddled together, breasts squashed against one another, their hearts pounded as one when they spied Hestia’s shoes and the shoes of someone they didn’t know through the leaves only centimetre’s away. Unable to help herself, Ginny let out a little squeak of shock when she spied her knickers dangling from the twigs of a low branch at the edge of the bush’s canopy.

“Sssh...” hissed Luna.

But as the feet continued to pace around the grassy clearing, a naughty gleam flashed in Luna’s big silvery grey eyes. Luna quietly slid down Ginny’s front between her parted thighs giving her a sultry look, her lips drawing nearer to Ginny’s heated entrance. Ginny’s eyes boggled and her face turned beet-red when she realised what Luna was up to - she had never even imagined...

Ginny clasped her hand tightly over her mouth to stop herself from squealing when she felt Luna’s lips pressed against her humid vulva. The delicious sensation of Luna’s tongue burrowing deep inside her as Hestia Jones and the unknown girl continued to peer around the clearing was too much and Ginny burst ecstatically, wriggling and trying her hardest not to make a noise.

“Hmmmph... well, never mind dear, I expect we’ll see them at luncheon. I’ll introduce you then. I see a little boat out on the lake - perhaps they’re out there...” The footsteps and Hestia’s voice faded into the distance as she and the unknown girl traipsed back up to the castle.

Ginny and Luna gasped in relief and burst into giggles at having almost been caught. Luna wiped her face and gave Ginny a kiss.

“How was it then?” asked Luna, grinning, fairly certain that she knew what the answer would be.

“That was amazing - I’ve never felt anything like that...” said Ginny, biting her lip and fluttering her eyelashes. “Did I ever tell you how much I love you Luna?”

“Only about a hundred times,” Luna retorted, beaming happily. “I love you too Ginny.”

As they dusted themselves off and dressed, shaking the twigs from their hair, the pair of them couldn’t help feeling curious about the new girl at Hogwarts. They scurried up to the castle for lunch, hoping to meet her. They arrived just in time to see a girl with long black hair covering her face dart out of the Great Hall with a plate of food.

“I wonder what that’s all about?” Ginny frowned in puzzlement as the girl exited through the front doors of the castle. “She’s a bit too old to be a First Year.”
“She looked sad and frightened,” said Luna, feeling rush of sympathy. “I wonder if she’s only just discovered her magic... She might be a late-bloomer - I’ve heard of them before.”

Seeing Neville sitting near the staff-table with Viktor, Ginny and Luna made their way through the Great Hall to see if they knew anything.

“I dunno,” Neville told them when they asked, looking very perplexed. “Dumbledore only told Viktor and me to leave her alone...”

“I think she might be ill,” Viktor added. “She get food, but looks at no-one.”

Luna furrowed her brow pensively as she put two and two together. She took Ginny aside and whispered in her ear. Ginny gasped in horror, suddenly not feeling quite so hungry.

~o0o~

Over the next few days, Jennifer had no idea yet what to make of Hogwarts. Hestia was really kind, but Jennifer missed her parents and she was still frightened. The old headmaster was nice and talked to her gently, but Jennifer couldn’t bear looking at the male professors, or the two boys who sat near the staff-table.

Sometimes she would glance at them, and she couldn’t help but see Ratface’s head on their shoulders. Jennifer would do a double-take, and see that whoever it was, it wasn’t really him, but it was still terrifying. Jennifer grabbed her food and hid in an empty classroom or outside behind a bush at mealtimes, unable to sit for one minute in the Great Hall with anyone else.

Jennifer had spied the other girls from a distance. They looked nice, but the idea of actually meeting them scared her. Jennifer felt too ashamed and humiliated to be near them, afraid that they would see how worthless she was.

At breakfast on Monday, as she had every day, Jennifer swiped a plate of food and ran outside before anyone could see her, hiding between some bushes and a low stone wall under a balustrade to eat. When she was finished, she began to sob, not knowing what to do next.

Jennifer angrily wiped her tears away. She was tired of crying. Mum and Dad weren’t coming back to make it all better, but she couldn’t help it. The tears kept falling.

She suddenly stopped when a pair of big round silvery-grey eyes peered at Jennifer through the leaves, belonging to a delicately featured face framed by dirty-blonde hair. Jennifer froze, not daring to breathe.

The girl crawled through the bushes and kneeled in the soil, peering sadly at Jennifer. The girl was slight, almost elfin, like a fairy; she didn’t look more than 12 or 13, and she was wearing a sky blue dress with a white pinafore.

“They aren’t all horrible,” the girl said quietly.

Jennifer blinked, swallowing uncomfortably, puzzled.

“Boys I mean,” the girl responded.

Jennifer shuddered.

“Well, I suppose a lot of them leave much to be desired. I’m not entirely fond of many of them myself. But I know one boy in particular who is really sweet... And there’s a few other nice ones
too,” the girl replied. “Viktor and Neville for example... the boys staying here this summer.”

Jennifer thought this was the oddest conversation she had ever had. Odder than the ones with the headmaster, who seemed to know what Jennifer was going to say before she said it. Jennifer wasn’t even talking; she had spoken to the headmaster and to Hestia, but that was only because she knew she was supposed to speak when spoken to by adults who were looking after you. Jennifer couldn’t bring herself to speak to anyone else.

But the blonde girl seemed perfectly keen to carry on a conversation with a mute girl as if she understood the words behind every silent gesture. Jennifer pulled up her knees to her chest and hugged her arms around them, casting down her eyes, long strands of ebony hair falling in her face.

“One of my friends’ younger sister was hurt badly by a boy too,” the girl said sadly. “She’s being looked after at home now.”

Jennifer bit her lip, suddenly feeling sorry for someone other than herself.

“It’s alright to feel sad,” the girl sympathetically remarked. “I expect your own circumstances are particularly dreadful. Harry and Hermione were both sad when they first arrived at Hogwarts - at least that’s what Ginny told me.

“Hermione didn’t have any friends at first, and lots of people were mean to her and bullied her - even Ginny’s brother did. Though Ginny’s brother isn’t so bad really, just a bit rude and thoughtless... still, he was quite mean to Hermione at first, but Harry told him off a few times. The last time he yelled at Ron - after the dragon - Ron tried hard to be a bit nicer...

“From what I read in the papers - my father’s newspaper anyway - Harry was treated quite awfully by his relatives for years. They made him sleep under a staircase and didn’t let him have any friends. And his uncle and cousin used to hit him all the time.

“Harry doesn’t like to talk about it much... He was staying with them because when he was a baby, his parents were murdered by Voldemort…”

Unable to help herself, Jennifer gasped, and spoke for the first time - suddenly not feeling quite so alone.

“Snakeface,” Jennifer hissed, feeling a flare of anger - surprised when her misery diminished at the flash of rage. She flicked her hair out of her face and looked at the blonde girl directly.

“Oh... is that what you call Voldemort?” the blonde girl asked.

“Er... y...yes - Voldemort killed my parents too - or rather, Ratface killed them on Snakeface’s... on Voldemort’s orders...”

“I’m very sorry. Do you want me to stop talking?”

Jennifer shook her head. “No... I can manage. So what happened with Harry and Hermione? Did they eventually get over things?” she asked hopefully.

“Oh yes...” the blonde girl smiled for the first time. “...Though he tries not to show it, I think Harry still feels a bit sad on occasion - I don’t know if it ever goes away completely. My own mum died a few years ago, and I still think about her from time to time.

“But it’s not so bad for Harry now - especially since he and Hermione got married...”
“Married, really?” Jennifer asked, letting her curiosity get the better of her, distracted momentarily from her own situation. “How old are they then?”

“Harry’s going to be fifteen in a few weeks,” the girl replied. “Hermione’s already fifteen.”

“Is... is that normal then? ... for wizards to get married so young I mean. I’m fifteen and I can’t imagine being married.”

“Not really - I’m fourteen and I can’t imagine it either. Harry and Hermione eloped... they’re allowed because they’d been emancipated. It was very romantic,” the blonde girl sighed happily, a dreamy expression on her face. But then a puzzled look crossed the girl’s features.

“Aren’t you a wizard too then?” the girl asked. “Ginny and I thought you were just a late bloomer...”

“No...” Jennifer shook her head. “I’m non-magical. I’m just here because... because... er... erm...” Jennifer reddened and trailed off, feeling humiliated and dirty again, unable to say it.

“It’s alright,” the girl said gently. “You don’t have to talk about it... I know things like that take time. But that explains why you didn’t seem to know who Harry was - he’s Harry Potter, and he’s very famous in the wizard world because he survived when his parents were killed by Voldemort.

“I had assumed that you had only learned about Voldemort recently, being new to the wizard world... Still, it’s a bit odd that Dumbledore is letting you stay here - muggles usually aren’t allowed to know about the wizard world... except for immediate relatives of wizards of course.”

“I... er... I’m n...not sure why either r...really...” Her voice began to shake and she trembled as the reason that she was at Hogwarts hit her with full force again.

Tears ran down her flushed cheeks once more. Jennifer hid her face behind her hair and bit her lip uncertainly, feeling miserable, like she’d rather be alone again. But Jennifer felt torn. She missed having friends, and the girl seemed very nice.

If Jennifer didn’t have to talk about Ratface - about the filthy things she had done with Ratface - maybe she could manage to be friends with the girl. Jennifer took a deep breath and tried to finish her thought.

“The headmaster s...said it was b...because Snakeface - Voldemort I mean... The headmaster said that it was because my family had been attacked by Voldemort, but I can tell there’s something a bit more to it... something personal I think.”

The blonde girl nodded and peered at Jennifer perceptively

“My name is Luna by the way... Luna Lovegood. You should meet my girlfriend Ginny - she’s very nice. She won’t try to make you talk about anything you don’t want to - I promise.

“And you don’t have to talk to the boys if you don’t want to... Professor Dumbledore already told them that you might be frightened of them. Though you might like to talk to Harry when he returns from London with Hermione - they’ll be back some time tomorrow. I think you and he might have some things to talk about - and he’s very kind... he won’t pressure you.”

“Al...alright then. I th...think I’d like that. I’m Jennifer.... Jennifer Watts, and... and it’s nice to meet you Luna,” Jennifer sniffled.

“It’s very nice to meet you too Jennifer,” Luna beamed. She stood up, brushed the twigs and dirt from her knees and skirt, then took one of Jennifer’s hands in her own, smiling dreamily. “Come on
then - I’ll take you to meet Ginny now…”

Jennifer swallowed anxiously, heart pounding, feeling the warmth of Luna’s soft hand around hers. Taking a deep breath, Jennifer stood up and let the girl in the Alice-dress lead her out of the bushes.

~o0o~

Harry yawned and blearily opened his eyes, glad to be awake, his scar prickling. His dreams had been plagued with what he presumed to be flashbacks to the lurching, grunting horrors emerging from the mist in the labyrinth during the Third Task. He’d also had glimpses of Voldemort and Wormtail in some sort of castle with a witch whom he couldn’t recall seeing before, but somehow seemed vaguely familiar.

Sighing, Harry stroked Hermione’s tawny curls and kissed her forehead. Hermione murmured and pulled Harry closer for a proper kiss. The heat of Hermione’s embrace lessened the pain in his head like it always did. By the time their lips parted, Harry felt much better and Hermione’s hair gleamed golden in the sun streaming through the window.

“Mmm, Harry,” said Hermione, snuggling against him and smiling. “What time is it? I don’t want to ever get up.”

Harry looked at the clock, his eyes widening when he saw the time.

“Blimey, it’s late - almost noon…” he groaned.

“Well yesterday was quite exhausting,” Hermione pointed out. “It’s not really surprising that we slept so late.”

“Yeah… you’re right,” Harry agreed, “I still feel bloody knackered… I need some coffee. How about you?”

“I think I’ll be alright with just tea,” said Hermione.

Everyone seemed to be engaged in some other sort of activity as the Potters made their way down the stairs. On the way down they spotted Susan and Dudley in the parlour watching television. Moody was sitting at the table reading a newspaper. He looked up at Harry and Hermione with an amused expression on his scarred face.

“Woke up late didja?” said Moody. “Can’t imagine why,” he added with a wink. “Anyway, we’re about to have lunch in a bit…”

“Er… just thought we’d start with a bit of coffee…” said Harry.

“…and tea,” Hermione added.

Harry and Hermione both turned a bit pink, wondering if Moody was just referring to the long day yesterday or implying something else. Just as the Potters sat down with their coffee and tea Dudley burst into the kitchen, his eyes wide with fear and excitement.

“This Harry, come quick. You’ve got to see the news on the telly. You’re not going to believe this…”

Dudley was right. Harry and Hermione were stunned by the ongoing BBC reports from the MetroCentre Mall in Gateshead, as was Moody. Soon everyone else began arriving, wondering what the commotion was all about. Petunia gasped and fainted. Fleur and Dora arrived just in time to catch her before she hit the floor.
“Bloody Hell!” gasped Dora. “Is that what I think it is?”

“What’s going on?” asked Jean when she arrived with her sister and Abbie Brixton.

“Zombies,” said Dudley breathlessly. “They’re attacking that shopping centre in Gateshead.”

Seeing Petunia passed out, Abbie darted out of the parlour to find some smelling salts. She waved them under Petunia’s nose.

“Come on dear, you don’t need to see any more of this,” said Abbie, leading Petunia back to her room when she came to.

“I can’t believe that Zombies are real,” Dudley gasped as he watched the images on the television of Special Operations forces shooting ineffectually at the mass of lurching corpses surrounding and invading the MetroCentre Mall. The special police units were aiming for the heads, but nothing seemed to stop the “zombies.”

“Yeah... Though technically, wizards call them Inferi,” Harry said. “Apparently Zombies are something a bit different - I’m still not clear on what the difference is though.”

“Inferi are just mindless corpses reanimated and controlled by a spell - like a puppet, or more accurately, like a robot programmed to perform certain tasks,” Hermione explained. “Zombies are magically reanimated corpses too, but somehow, the soul of the person is also resurrected and trapped inside the otherwise still quite dead body.”

“That’s revolting...” Jean looked horrified.

“Voldemort used ‘em in the last war,” Moody growled. “Looks like he’s at it again. Bit odd seeing them still attackin’ in daytime though. They generally avoid the light and retreat when dawn breaks. I suppose Voldy is sending a message...”

“How do you kill them in real life?” Dudley asked excitedly. “Why don’t they die if you shoot them in the head.”

“Well, that’s just it. You can’t kill what’s dead already. They aren’t partially living with minimally functioning brains like the ones in muggle films seem to be,” Mad Eye replied. “Inferi don’t feel pain or fear. Though they don’t like light and heat, and can be repelled by certain Light and Heat spells... but to destroy ‘em completely you have to use some sort of fire spell.

“Confringo can take out a few o’ the buggers at a time, or more depending on how powerful the spell is. A Firestorm spell works even better - takes out loads at a time... Disintegration spells like the Reductor Curse can work on ‘em too, but only the one you’re aiming at. If you’ve got people trapped by a load of the buggers, you’re in trouble...”

“The police could just use flame-throwers then, couldn’t they?” said Dudley.

The grizzled ex-Auror snorted and grimaced. He was starting to like Dudley’s enthusiasm.

“Too dangerous in this sorta situation, unless they wanna torch the whole mall and every living person inside... and you run the risk of flaming Inferi runnin’ around catchin’ everything else on fire before they finally succumb... Really, the only time you want to use a Firestorm spell is when you’ve got a load of ‘em in an enclosed area away from other people and flammable surroundings.”

“What about a Patronus?” Harry asked pensively, glancing at Hermione who was equally curious. Neither of them had thought to mention how their patronuses had affected the Inferi to Dumbledore...
during their conversation.

“Eh? I suppose it would be quite effective as a shield or repellin’ charm actually,” Moody replied, “but that’s it. A Patronus can’t destroy anything... Still can’t figure out what happened to those Dementors at the maze. Dumbledore doesn’t even seem to know...”

Harry and Hermione shared an awkward look, but nobody caught it. The only other person who knew was Dora. Harry had been wanting to tell Sirius and Remus about it too, but he and Hermione really hadn’t had the opportunity yet.

After a somber breakfast, Harry, Hermione, Dora, and Fleur packed up and readied themselves to return to Hogwarts.

“Look after yourselves, dears.” Jean gave Hermione and Harry both a hug, smiling at Dora and Fleur.

“We will Mum!” Hermione smiled tearfully, giving her mother a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll miss you...”

“Bye Mum!” Harry swallowed and gave Jean one last hug. One by one, the Potters followed Dora and Fleur into the green flames.

~o0o~

The Dark Lord was most pleased. He stroked Nagini’s head absentmindedly as he admired his and Bellatrix’s handiwork on the muggle contraption called television in one of the parlours of the new muggle residence which he and Wormtail had taken after the assault on Azkaban, having killed its inhabitants.

It was perfect. It had specifically been chosen during the planning phase: an old castle in the Scottish headlands big enough to house the Dark Lord’s growing army with an estate large enough for the Trolls and the Giants. And being a muggle dwelling, it was a residence which the Dark Witch and her Death Eaters - the Dark Lord’s treacherous ex-supporters he reminded himself - would not be expecting to find him in.

Voldemort had paid such muggle technologies little heed before, having been more inclined in his previous incarnation to reside in Pureblood wizard homes full of magic, where such technologies didn’t operate properly, if at all. But a number of Snatchers who were involved in the criminal underworld had mentioned the practical utility of the many electronic devices favoured by muggle burglars.

And the Dark Lord was nothing if not pragmatic. He had put the corpses of the muggle residents of the castle to good use as experimental subjects. They had become the first Inferi endowed with new abilities, which - with Wormtail’s skilled assistance - the Dark Lord and Bellatrix had created after the consummation of their union.

Wormtail had then organised the Snatchers into units which had been dispatched to ransack hospitals and police morgues for the Freshly Dead, and to plunder the contents of graveyards. These the Dark Lord would use for phase one of his plan. Bellatrix had ingeniously devised some new rituals and spells giving the Inferi the ability to operate in daylight without retreat.

The Dark Lord knew that this first strike would eventually be brought to an end, but it mattered little. The message for the Dark Witch and the Old Fool had been sent loud and clear. The Dark Witch could have the Dark Lord’s old supporters for now - they would soon beg to return to their True Master’s side when they began to fall before his True Might.
And the Old Fool - he would learn once and for all that Love was a weakness. There was no Good or Evil, no “Light” or “Dark,” only Power; and the Old Fool would bear witness to the Truth that those without magical blood were destined to be ruled by those who were willing to use that Power.

~00~

When the first memo hit his desk, Senior Undersecretary Weasley’s eyes bulged and he spat out his tea in horror. He groaned loudly; there was no way the Ministry was going to be able to contain this with a few obliviations. The muggle media were already all over it. Cursing Voldemort under his breath, Senior Undersecretary Weasley hurriedly scribbled a memo and threw some Floo Powder into the fireplace in his office.

~00~

Minister Dolores Umbridge had just had a very productive morning conferring with the muggle Prime Minister.

He was under a lot of pressure, despite the economic successes and the positive movement in the Northern Ireland peace process. His party was embroiled in one scandal after another, and his leadership was being challenged right and left. Since Dolores had come to know him shortly after she had taken office, the PM had been more than amenable to the suggestions of the Minister of Magic and they had come to a mutually beneficial arrangement.

She had just sat down with her first cup of tea upon her return to the Ministry when her hearth erupted into green flames and a memo flew out. She pursed her lips and snatched it out of the air. Minister Umbridge read over the short memo twice with a gasp. After the initial flash of anger faded, Dolores’s eyes narrowed and a cruel smile pulled at the corner of her lips.

This couldn’t be more perfect.

She would have to notify the PM immediately and offer the Ministry’s services of course - after all, only wizards could effectively halt an Inferi attack and rescue the muggles trapped inside the mall. But not until after she had arranged the assassination of two of the “wobblies” who had let the Potters off the hook.

Both lived very near Gateshead, and their deaths could easily be made to look like the work of Voldemort’s Inferi.

~00~

The rotund wizard with a walrus moustache, wearing a maroon velvet jacket, stepped out of the green flames and peered around the office before acknowledging the wizard with a long silvery beard who was sitting behind the desk. He nodded at Fawkes who fluttered his wings and trilled in recognition.

“Well Albus, it has been quite some time indeed since I have been in this office,” said the pleased looking wizard. “I must say you are looking quite well, all things considered... quite well indeed.”

“Thank you Horace - that is very kind of you to say.” Dumbledore’s clear blue eyes twinkled as he directed the wizard to take a seat in one of the well-cushioned chintz armchairs. “Some tea perhaps? You might also like some biscuits after your journey... or perhaps some crystallised pineapple?” he concluded with a wink.

“Oh, of course Albus...” Horace beamed as the chair creaked heavily under his weight. “I’d be
delighted to my dear fellow... delighted.”

“I can’t thank you enough for agreeing to join us Horace,” said Dumbledore after they had both taken a sip of tea, “...and for giving me your memory. That is most helpful, and quite brave of you.”

“Yes, well, seeing that you’ve managed to keep Karkaroff alive might have something to do with it,” Horace chuckled. “That went a long way to reassuring me regarding your protection... quite persuasive I must say.

“Though, to be perfectly honest Albus, I must say that your enticements were especially convincing... I can’t say how pleased I am to have the chance to teach Harry Potter himself - that will be quite a feather in my cap... quite a feather indeed.

“Severus tells me that Mr Potter is quite the potions prodigy... and that Mr Potter’s wife is one such as well - one who might easily be a match for Lily. Two for the price of one... an offer that simply can’t be beaten Albus... simply marvelous, I must say.”

“Quite!” Dumbledore agreed. “Though there is the small matter of convincing the Potters to both elect to take on an Alchemy course.”

“Oh that shan’t be a problem I don’t doubt... not a problem at all if they are truly as diligent as I have been told.”

“Indeed they are Horace...” Dumbledore regarded keenly the chuffed wizard before him, about to continue when an insistent knocking on his door alerted him. Professor McGonagall burst into his office, her features panic-stricken.

“Oh... good heavens! Horace,” she said, quite surprised to see him in Dumbledore’s office. “It’s very good to see you again... I’m sorry to interrupt but this is quite urgent Albus. You must come at once. A muggle shopping centre in Gateshead is under attack by an Inferi Swarm...”

“In broad daylight?” Dumbledore’s eyebrows shot up in perplex. “That is most unusual, and quite disturbing. Forgive me Horace, but it appears that I am needed. You will be quite safe here in the meantime...”

~o0o~

Head of the Auror Office, Rufus Scrimgeour scowled appraisingly at the chaotic scene at the Metrocentre Mall in Gateshead. He had just arrived, and had been given carte blanche to take over as an “MI5 Counter-terrorist Operations Manager.”

He wished that he had been called in sooner. It was shortly after noon now, and Scrimgeour wondered why it had taken so long for the Minister to call him. He supposed that perhaps it had taken the Minister a few hours to talk the muggle Prime Minister into letting wizards take over.

Scrimgeour also wished that he still had Kingsley Shacklebolt and John Dawlish to work with; they had been his top two agents. But they had been too close to Scrimgeour’s previous boss, Head of the DMLE, Amelia Bones, and she had been too close to the Crafty Old Coot who ran Hogwarts.

Head Auror Scrimgeour wasn’t entirely certain that he trusted Minister Umbridge - which wasn’t saying much, as he didn’t really trust anyone. She wore far too many hats for his liking - she had been Head of the Improper Use of Magic Office when she had also taken on the role of Fudge’s Senior Undersecretary.

Now, Dolores Umbridge was not only the Minister of Magic, but the Acting Head of the DMLE as
well. And yet Scrimgeour was almost certain that Umbridge had also at one time been a staffer in the Department of Mysteries - an Unspeakable. Her career path was baffling to say the least.

Still, the Minister certainly had the right idea about Dumbledore. And unlike Fudge, Minister Umbridge was willing to do whatever it took to get the job done properly - no matter how harsh the measures, so Head Auror Scrimgeour had to give her that.

Scrimgeour's features hardened. First things first. It was time to issue a blackout on the muggle media coverage, and to clear all muggles from the area within a few mile radius so that the DMLE’s HIT-Wizards could put down the Inferi quickly with Firestorm spells without being observed.

He would do his best to rescue some of the muggles in the mall of course, but he didn’t want to waste too much time, or put any wizards at risk trying to locate them all. If a few muggles died, that was unfortunate, but so be it.

There was a loud crack and Scrimgeour started.

“Mulligan, what are you doing here?” Scrimgeour noted Auror Mulligan’s sweaty disheveled appearance.

“Saving some muggles sir,” Mulligan responded with heavy breaths, “I got here an hour ago and I decided not to wait for the go ahead. I called in several other aurors too. We’ve just been rescuing and obliviating and staying out of sight of the muggle authorities.”

“Good... that’s good then,” Scrimgeour nodded, frowning, “Don’t worry about acting without orders. You did the right thing. My hands were tied until the Minister got the green-light from the Muggle PM.”

“So what now Sir?”

“You did your bit, let the HIT-Team do theirs. We're going to use Firestorm Spells and let the place burn.”

“Should I have a Magical Repair Team ready Sir?” Mulligan asked, perplexed. Scrimgeour shook his head.

“No, the Minister said not to worry.” Scrimgeour actually looked more than a bit surprised himself. “The muggle Prime Minister told her that the owners have insurance, and that he would be able to sell the cover story better if we just leave it destroyed - the muggle PM was already considering using flamethrowers and other incendiary weapons anyway.

“He is planning to tell the muggle civilians that the Inferi are ‘living dead,’ victims of an escaped, incurable, genetically modified necrotising virus... Apparently the concept of sustained attacks by reanimated corpses has already been widely introduced to muggles through their entertainments, and they will accept it quite readily...”

~000~

Albus Dumbledore sighed with distaste as Minerva, Poppy, and Filius obliviated the last few muggles that they had evacuated from the mall and sent them wandering into the crowds beyond the perimeter which the muggle police had created. With the magically implanted memories the muggles had been given, it would just be assumed that they had somehow managed to escape the hordes of Undead who had invaded the Mall.

Severus appeared out of nowhere with a loud pop.
“Auror Mulligan and I have finished with our lot Headmaster,” Snape said. “Scrimgeour finally arrived, and I sent Mulligan to cover for us. He has taken some of the muggles we rescued, so that Scrimgeour can claim a few saves.”

“Well done, Severus.” Dumbledore nodded approvingly. “We shall leave behind the bodies of those already dead for Rufus to find.”

“What on Earth took Scrimgeour so bloody long?” snarled Madam Pomfrey, who was covered in blood from the muggles she had treated.

“That is quite a puzzle indeed Poppy,” the headmaster responded. “However, we should count ourselves quite fortunate that we had the time to rescue those that we could without being harassed or impeded by the Ministry. If I know Rufus, he is no doubt preparing to burn the place to the ground to eliminate the Inferi threat as quickly as possible, with little regard for the lives of non-magical humans.”

“Yes, well, speaking of which, perhaps we should leave before Rufus discovers us here,” Minerva said, glancing around anxiously.

~o0o~

Dora burst out of the green flames into the Hogwarts Staff-room. She tripped over the hearth and fell into Fleur’s arms.


“I would not be much of a girlfriend if I did not, chérie,” Fleur smiled, trying her hardest not to titter. Harry and Hermione dizzily burst out of the green flames, coughing and wheezing, just in time to see Fleur give Dora a sultry kiss to cheer her up.

“Welcome back Tonks!”

Dora looked up, eyes widening, spying Lupin standing nearby with a wry smile on his face.

“Wotcher Lupin!” Dora turned pink. “Where’s Pomfrey? I thought she was supposed to be greetin’ us.”

“There’s been an Inferi attack...” Lupin began.

“In Gateshead... we know! We were watching it on the BBC news just before we left,” Hermione interjected, her voice slightly shrill with worry.

“Indeed,” Lupin nodded sadly, “Dumbledore took Pomfrey, Flitwick, McGonagall, and a few other professors and Order members to rescue as many muggles as they could. Sirius and I stayed behind with Hagrid to avoid trouble with the Ministry.”

“Of course,” Harry sighed.

“Indeed, it will be problematic enough as it is, if the current administration runs into any of the Order at the scene... Well, let’s just say we don’t want to give them any ideas about trying to pin this on Dumbledore,” Lupin replied.

“But that’s just mad!” gasped Hermione, bristling with outrage. “Everyone knows Dumbledore wouldn’t create Dark Creatures and set them on Muggles...”
“Believe me, that would not stop the Minister from trying anyway.”

“Yeah... we know,” Harry said quietly. “The Minister... She won’t stop at anything to get us. She’s trying to make it look like we’re the bad guys, and she’s been doing a pretty good job of it so far. We were lucky to get Ragnok on our side - he really swung it for us.”

“Yeah... but now that you’ve claimed your Seat on the Wizengamot Harry, you’ve set ‘er back a bit,” Dora said with some pride. “You shoulda seen ‘im Lupin. Harry was amazing - a real hero. The whole Wizengamot was in an uproar when ‘e and Hermione won - between their supporters and their detractors - but he shouted over all of them and shut the lot up.”

“It was fantastic! The look on Percy’s and that Foul Evil Toad’s faces when Harry took his Seat as a Warlock made my day!” Hermione squeaked, her eyes shining.

“That’s excellent Harry!” Lupin beamed. “Sirius will be absolutely thrilled to hear that...”

“Where is he anyway? I can’t wait to see him and tell him all about it,” Harry said with a grin.

“You can visit both of us in the Shrieking Shack after dinner for a bit if you would like,” Lupin replied cheerfully. “But I should think that you would want to spend a bit of time with your friends first.”

The Potters, Fleur, and Dora found Viktor and Neville outside on the lawn, where Viktor was helping Neville improve his broom riding skills. Harry grinned to see Neville actually enjoying himself on a broom for once, and Harry was determined to have a go at getting Hermione on a broom this summer. But Harry was a bit puzzled about one thing.

“Why aren’t you on the quidditch pitch?”

“Ah... zat is because ve give Ginny and Luna time to show ze new girl vot is like riding broom,” Viktor replied.

“New girl?” asked Hermione, looking as perplexed as Harry. Dora and Fleur looked equally bewildered.

“Yeah...” Neville nodded. “There’s a new girl here for the summer - Ginny and Luna are with her. Viktor and I haven’t met her properly yet though, because Dumbledore said we’re to leave her alone until she’s ready to introduce herself.”

Their curiosity piqued, the Potters made their way to the quidditch pitch, followed by Dora and Fleur. Ginny and Luna swooped down to meet them and leapt off their brooms, squealing happily.

“You got off... you got off,” shrieked Ginny as she flung herself on the Potters.

“I knew you would,” said Luna, a bit more sedately but grinning nonetheless.

Harry and Hermione looked up in the stands at the girl Neville and Viktor had told them about to see her watching them. It suddenly occurred to the Potters that it must be the rescued muggle girl when the sunlight caught her black hair and struck their eyes.

~000~

Luna had been right. Jennifer liked Ginny a lot. Jennifer felt a bit better hanging out with the girls. They had shown Jennifer how to play wizard chess and exploding snap, and chatted a bit about their lives, and what it was like being witches and going to school at Hogwarts.
Then Luna and Ginny had demonstrated flying on brooms, which Jennifer couldn’t help laughing about at first - despite herself - as it seemed so cliche. She couldn’t believe they really did that sort of thing. Luna invited Jennifer to sit on a broomstick with her while she flew, but Jennifer shook her head. It definitely seemed too scary.

But sitting in the stands and watching the girls swooping and diving, Jennifer had to admit that it looked exciting. A movement on the field caught Jennifer’s eye. Her stomach tied in knots when she spied four people whom she hadn’t met enter the field.

Jennifer relaxed a bit when she realised that they were friends of Luna and Ginny. But Jennifer became alarmed and looked for a place to hide when they spotted her and began to make their way into the stands. Jennifer hugged her knees to her chest and shrank back into her seat, letting her long dark hair hide her face.

Trembling, Jennifer peered between the strands of her ebony hair. Luna approached with the four newcomers. Jennifer’s eyes widened in recognition when they drew closer.

The girl with bushy golden-brown hair was obviously Hermione. The older girls must be Dora and Fleur. Then the boy - Jennifer realised that he was the first one who didn’t induce an image of Ratface superimposed on his face. His eyes... they were so green, almost impossibly green, and they seemed too pretty to be a boy’s eyes.

“Hi Jennifer,” Luna said with a serene smile, “this is Harry Potter...”
Chapter 43: Rites of Renewal

Both curious about the girl in the stands, Dora and Fleur had followed the others to meet her. Dora stiffened as they drew nearer to the girl. Despite the bright sunny afternoon, a chill ran up her spine and she clutched Fleur a bit tighter for reassurance. A surge of anger knotted Dora’s stomach when she saw the girl with black hair scrunch up and try to hide her face; she recognised that look.

It was the same look which had caused Dora to nearly get herself expelled from Hogwarts - until Mad Eye had made her the offer that she couldn’t really refuse. It was the look which Dora had seen in her previous girlfriend’s eyes.

“Let’s hold back here for a moment Fleur,” she murmured. “I don’t wanna overwhelm her...” Though in truth, it was Dora herself who was feeling a bit overcome.

“Oui, Chérie...” Fleur nodded, biting her lip. The girl’s discomfort was quite apparent to her.

Finally having the chance to meet the girl that he had seen through Voldemort’s eyes, looking down from the top of basement stairs, Harry flushed and swallowed nervously when Luna introduced him. He felt embarrassed and ashamed to have seen Jennifer in such a vulnerable state.

Jennifer opened her mouth to say hello. But it had gone dry, and she couldn’t speak. Luna put her arm around Jennifer as Ginny sat beside them both.

“Er... Hi Jennifer... erm... it’s... er... it’s nice to meet you...” Harry trailed off lamely, not quite meeting her eye and mentally kicking himself for not being able to think of anything better to say. Hermione squeezed his hand comfortingly.

Jennifer was startled, seeing that Harry was as anxious about meeting her as she was to meet him. Jennifer relaxed slightly and Luna’s smile widened.

“Hello,” said Jennifer, her voice small and slightly quavering. “It’s good to meet you too Harry. Th...thank you! The headmaster... he told me that it was you - that you were the one to thank for rescuing me...”

Harry winced and swallowed again, turning even redder, wondering just how much Dumbledore had told Jennifer.

“It... it’s alright,” said Jennifer, peering at Harry gratefully. “If you hadn’t... if you hadn’t seen me somehow, nobody would’ve found me, and I... I probably would’ve died...”

After some more awkward introductions, it was obvious to Hermione that Jennifer was feeling a bit overwhelmed. Hermione suggested that they spend a bit more time together whenever Jennifer felt up to it; she and Harry left everyone to it, deciding it was time to visit Sirius. Taking the secret tunnel under the Whomping Willow, they arrived at the Shrieking Shack to find Sirius and Remus awaiting them. There was an afternoon Tea-spread on the table with pork pies, finger sandwiches, and slab of Cheshire cheese, but instead of tea a large bottle and several wine glasses stood on a lace doily in the centre of the table.

“I heard Ragnok really gave that Old Hag at the Ministry what-for,” Sirius grinned, popping open the bottle of Elf-made-wine. “...And that you took the Wizengamot by storm. Good show Harry!”

“And it appears that Tonks will be needing new employment,” Remus raised his eyebrows, his moustache twitching. “...And possibly new lodgings as well when she’s not in school?”
“Er... yeah,” said Harry, looking a bit surprised, wondering what Remus had heard. “I might as well tell you both anyway. I asked Dora to come and live with me and Hermione while we’re not at school...”

“...and she’s going to stay on at Hogwarts as a real post-grad student now,” Hermione added happily.

“Indeed,” said Remus. “Dumbledore considered that it might be good to maintain Tonks’ cover to keep her at Hogwarts anyway. She might as well further her education a bit while she’s at it.”

“That only makes sense. Dora will need to train for a new career anyway,” said Sirius, taking a swig of the Elf-wine. “At least until we get a more amenable administration in the Ministry.”

“Er... about that, Sirius...” Harry began, all of a sudden feeling a bit awkward, as he was more or less the one who had convinced Dora to follow her dreams.

“Please, don’t be cross with Harry,” Hermione squeaked, coming to his rescue, “One of the reasons Harry offered Dora to come and live with us, is because he wants Dora to be happy and do her music or draw comics...”

“Why would I be cross?” chortled Sirius, “I’m her elder cousin, not her father. I think that’s an excellent idea - she is your family as well, after all... and it’ll be nice for Dora to get a chance to pursue her dreams.”

“Andromeda and Ted might have a few issues though...” sighed Remus, “You’ll keep this to yourself for now I hope Sirius. It’s up to Dora to tell them.”

“Of course I will Remus,” Sirius responded in a slightly wounded tone. “I want Dora to be happy too. Speaking of which, it’s nice that she finally found a new girlfriend.” Sirius turned to Harry and smirked. “So Harry, I take it Fleur will eventually be staying with you and Hermione as well? Maybe Skeeter was onto something...?”

Harry and Hermione both turned pink, wondering how Sirius and Remus could have possibly gleaned their apparent knowledge of some of the Potters’ plans for the future. But they couldn’t help being amused by Sirius’s cheeky insinuation, regardless.

“Sirius, you promised you wouldn’t tease them...” Remus admonished Sirius. “In any case, whatever they get up to is their own business.”

“See what I have to deal with!?” Sirius rolled his eyes, then he winked at Harry and Hermione, taking another sip of the wine. “That’s why I love Remus though. He keeps me on the straight and narrow - keeps me sane.”

Remus smiled wryly, palming his reddening face. For their part, Harry and Hermione both grinned, tickled by the exchange. They took a sip from their own glasses of the Elf-wine. Harry thought it was about time to give Sirius a taste of his own medicine, and satisfy his curiosity at the same time.

“Er... I hope you don’t mind me asking, Sirius,” Harry began, a perfectly innocent expression on his face, “but why did you have posters of muggle pin-up girls on your wall? They were still there the last time I had a look in your room.”

Hermione and Remus both tried to stifle their smirks. For the first time during the visit, Sirius looked slightly abashed.

“Touché Harry! Well... erm... that’s a bit awkward to explain... On the one hand, I was trying to take
the piss out of Mum and Dad by putting up pictures of muggles, but on the other hand, I...er... I didn’t want them or Regulus to know that I liked blokes too…”

Sirius glanced at Remus and grinned. “...Especially one in particular.”

After swallowing a mouthful of pork pie, Harry asked the next question on the top of his mind.

“Er... Sirius, I was wondering... We spotted a portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black in the National Portrait Gallery in London...”

“...and we were both curious,” continued Hermione. “If he was in Slytherin and a Pureblood, what would he be doing in a muggle art gallery?”

“Hah!” Sirius snorted. “Good question... He was after all a real Pureblood snob - and the most hated headmaster to ever grace the hallowed halls of Hogwarts. But during Queen Victoria’s reign he was the leader of a movement by some Pureblood families to openly take control of muggle Britain through the political process.

“It was to that end he made his presence known to the Queen’s court - but of course at the time pretending to be part of a ‘muggle’ Occult secret society designed to accustom muggles to the idea of wizard rule.”

“He was in large part responsible for the rise of muggle Occult groups during the late Victorian era...” Remus added. “Aleister Crowley is one of the most famous muggle ‘sorcerers’ from that period who was influenced by Phineas.

“The movement was eventually squashed by the Purebloods who believed that the wizard world should remain a secret. It is part of wizarding history not taught in history courses for rather obvious reasons.”

To say that Harry and Hermione were both stunned and fascinated by the information would be an understatement. They spent the rest of their celebration with Sirius and Remus peppering them with questions on the topic.

Following Tea with Remus and Sirius, still mulling over the astonishing revelations, Harry and Hermione made their way back to the castle, feeling mildly tipsy from the Elf-wine. They spotted Professor McGonagall and Flitwick near the entrance to the Great Hall, both looking a bit worn and frayed with what appeared to be blood stains on their clothing.

“Ah... there you are, Potters,” said McGonagall. “Professor Dumbledore would like a moment with you in his office.”

“Professor McGonagall, are you alright?” asked Hermione, concerned by the sight of the blood.

“Perfectly, Mrs Potter. Now don’t keep the headmaster waiting... no doubt he shall be wanting to clean up a bit as well.”

As Harry and Hermione took seats in the comfy armchairs in front of Dumbledore’s desk, they both noticed how disheveled and haggard he looked. His own robes were splotchy with red stains as well. Dumbledore waved his wand, and a pot of tea with three cups appeared, which the Potters were both pleased to see, as they hadn’t actually had any tea at Teatime with Sirius and Remus.

“Please, help yourselves, and bear with me for a moment... I must apologise for my appearance. It has been a rather long and trying day,” said Dumbledore.
“Remus told us you were rescuing muggles,” Harry acknowledged after taking a sip of tea. Curiosity got the better of him. “Did you have to fight any Inferi yourself Sir?”

“Ah, indeed, I did have to employ a disintegration curse several times myself,” the headmaster replied, “…and I am most grateful for the quick reflexes of Professor Flitwick. If it were not for him, we would most likely be having this chat in the hospital wing.”

“Are you alright Professor?” asked Hermione, her eyes wide at the frightful notion of Dumbledore being injured by Inferi.

Albus Dumbledore’s eyes began to twinkle, seeing the care and concern in his students’ faces.

“Quite alright Mrs Potter... Just a bit shaken still. However, perhaps we should move on to why I asked to meet with you and Harry. First, I wish to express my utmost relief that you both survived your encounter with the Minister.

“However, I also have some information to impart. I managed to uncover and compile some very interesting particulars about Voldemort’s history which I believe are important to share with you both.

“I have finally managed to obtain perhaps the most critical piece of the puzzle only recently, and I would like you to examine it with me. Though, I think perhaps it can wait until tomorrow, or even the day after... I am quite worn out and it behooves me to confer with some members of the Order after recent events.

“In the meantime, please feel free to make continued use of the delightfully magical Room of Requirement. I would also, at some point, perhaps... after one of your... erm... sessions, like to examine some of your Spell-work and observe any changes...”

“Really?” Hermione interjected, quivering excitedly, “Are we going to do some scientific experiments then?” she asked. Harry’s eyes began to gleam with thrill as well.

The headmaster nodded, pleased to see the eagerness to explore the boundaries of magic in the Potters’ faces.

“Yes, indeed we shall Mrs Potter... and as I was about to say, I am especially keen to examine your Patroni - and if my instrument readings are correct, it would appear that your Patronus practice in the Room of Requirement has also accrued to Hogwarts. By all means, I would be delighted for you to continue your practice with such as well”

~o0o~

As Jennifer sat with Luna and Ginny on one of the stone benches along the front of the castle, plates of dinner on their laps, one by one stars began peeking like little diamonds from the deepening purple curtain of sky and she felt a surge of emotion. She took another bite of the shepherd’s pie and for the first time since she had arrived at Hogwarts, Jennifer actually noticed how delicious the food was.

“You alright?” asked Ginny, seeing a tear trickling down one of Jennifer’s cheeks. Jennifer nodded. “Yeah... yeah I think I am actually...” Jennifer let out a peaceful sort of sigh, feeling the knot of tension in her middle unwinding. She glanced at Luna apologetically. “And thanks for bringing Harry Potter to meet me Luna. I... I suppose I wasn’t really sure that I could manage after all... but I did - I needed to. Sorry I wasn’t up for much more than that.”

“You don’t have to be sorry,” said Luna kindly. “I know Harry understands. It must have been very
overwhelming for you.”

“I want to talk to Harry some more... I really do...” Jennifer offered Luna a wan little smile. “Maybe tomorrow I can manage to actually hang out with him and the others a bit...”

~o0o~

The Potters and Fleur couldn’t help but notice Dora picking at her food moodily all through dinner, her spiky hair listless and a subdued shade of violet. Harry and Hermione glanced at each other in silent communication as they walked back through the castle with Dora and Fleur to their respective quarters in the Unaffiliated corridor.

“Would you and Fleur like to join us for a bit, Dora?” asked Hermione, a note of concern in her voice. “Maybe have something to drink?”

“What? Oh... er...” Dora swallowed and glanced at Fleur, not sure what she wanted really. Fleur gave her a sad little smile.

“Chérie, per’aps you would like to talk a bit... non? ... tell us what ees wrong?”

Dora sighed. She hated talking about it - hated thinking about it. But now that the burning memory had been rekindled, Dora knew that she wasn’t going to get off that easy. She wasn’t going to be able to tamp it down and it might eat at her for days... or even weeks.

She bit her lip, eyes glistening, then slowly nodded. “Al... alright then... Might as well I s’pose. Maybe I’ll sleep a bit better if I do.”

When they were all settled around the crackling fire in the Potters’ sitting room, holding mugs of steaming cocoa, Dora finally revealed herself. As they listened, Harry and Hermione remembered back to the very first day that they’d met Dora, and the painful memory that she had glossed over during her first visit to their private chambers.

“It all ‘appened in sixth year,” Dora began glumly, chewing on a fingernail. “My girlfriend... it was after dinner and just before curfew one evenin’ - I found ‘er lookin’ a lot like Jennifer did this afternoon. She wouldn’t tell me what happened, but I kept naggin’ her until she finally did.

“She told me she’d been raped - didn’t wanna tell me ‘oo’d done it... but I finally got that outta her too. After she’d told me, I tracked down the bloke and went ballistic on ‘im... beat him to a pulp with my bare ‘ands...

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“Anyway, the long and short of it is that when they pulled me offa him, she’d totally clammed up... she was too afraid of ‘is family to say anything or press charges - they were pureblood, old time Voldy supporters like the Malfoys, and she was muggleborn. Under the circumstances, there wasn’t much Dumbledore could do, and to make matters worse, the bloody bastard’s parents pressed charges against me!”

There were horrified gasps and shocked looks all around, but Dora paid them little heed as she went on.

“O’ course Dumbledore - bein’ ‘oo he is and all - knew that the arse’ole had it comin’... but he couldn’t do a whole lot to ‘elp me without proof. In the end, the best he could do was get Mad Eye to convince the parents to drop the charges against me... Dunno how Mad Eye managed it - maybe he had somethin’ on ‘em that woulda made them look bad.

“But anyway, the deal with Mad Eye involved recruitin’ me to join the Auror corps after
graduation... so that’s ‘ow I got roped into the Ministry. And... and seein’ Jennifer today just brought it all back,” Dora concluded, the tears which had been threatening all evening finally breaking free and rolling down her cheeks.

Hermione bit her lip, wringing her hands. Harry put his arms around her comfortingly, but sensing there was a bit more to the story, his curiosity got the better of him.

“Er... if... if you don’t mind me asking, what happened to your girlfriend?” asked Harry a bit awkwardly. “I mean... obviously you’re not still together.”

“She... she was never the same after that,” Dora replied. “She sorta withdrew into ‘erself. I wanted to stay together... to look after her. But she pulled away, an’ I haven’t heard from her in a good long while.”

“I am so sorry Chérie...” Fleur pulled Dora closer into a warm embrace and kissed her forehead. “Zat you should ‘ave to relive such a tragique experience c’est horrible.”

“It’s alright now,” Dora sniffled, dabbing her nose with a hanky. “I’ll be okay... really! I think I just needed to get that outta my system. I’ve been holdin’ that in for a long time...”

~o0o~

Dora sighed happily as she woke, feeling a lot better than she had yesterday evening, especially snuggled in Fleur’s embrace. In fact, Dora felt a lot lighter than she had in quite some time. As Dora stirred in her arms, Fleur’s eyelashes fluttered open.

“Bonjour Dora.” Fleur smiled when Dora turned around, looking much more cheerful.

One of the things that Fleur liked most about Dora was her generally spirited nature and sense of fun. Seeing Dora so despondent the night before had been disconcerting to say the least.

“Mornin’ Fleur,” Dora grinned and planted a wet kiss on Fleur’s lips. “Up for some breakfast yet?”

“Oui, mon amour... Zat sounds très bien.”

On the way to the Great Hall Dora and Fleur waved at Luna and Ginny, who were heading towards the front doors with Jennifer in tow and platefuls of breakfast in their hands. The Potters looked up from the Mingling Table where they were already digging into their own breakfasts.

Hermione beamed and Harry washed down his mouthful of banger with some tea, grinning at Dora when she took a seat, both of them pleased to see her looking more cheered. Just as Fleur sat beside Dora, Hedwig swooped into the Great Hall and settled on Hermione’s shoulder.

“Good Morning Hedwig,” said Hermione.

She buttered a crumpet for the snowy owl who had dropped the two newspapers on the table beside her. Hedwig fondly nibbled Hermione’s ear before flying off with the crumpet in her beak.

“So, what’s the good news today?” asked Harry, his voice containing more than a hint of sarcasm.

Hermione peered at the headlines and sighed. “Nothing we didn’t expect Harry - take a look for yourself.”

Harry shook his head and grimaced. Both papers featured the Gateshead Inferi attacks on the front page, but the Daily Prophet’s top story had a lurid headline indicating that the Minister had found
someone just as “creative” as Rita Skeeter had been to replace her.

**The Potter Conspiracy:**
**Wizengamot Compromised, Imperius or Bribery?**

Dora poured herself a cup of tea while she waited for Harry to hold up the paper for all to see. She took one look and nearly spat the first sip out when she read the headline.

“What a bloody load of rubbish...” Dora snorted, rolling her eyes.

Fleur glanced at the Headlines and scowled. “Eet ees too early for zis nonsense today... Per’aps some coffee first.”

“I’m glad you don’t have to work at the Ministry anymore.” Harry grinned at Dora as he picked up the *Quibbler*. His brows furrowed in thought when he saw the *Quibbler’s* headline.

**Inferi Attack at Metrocentre Mall**
**Two Wizengamot Members Discovered among the Dead**

“That’s odd! Does that seem strange to you Hermione?” Harry asked after skimming the article.

“Yes it does Harry. According to this article, the two members who were allegedly killed by Inferi are Henry Wensleydale and Marmaduke Ventosus Dithers - two of the “wobblies” in the middle who supported us during the trial.”

“Mr Lovegood’s reporter seems to think it’s odd too,” Harry remarked.

“You’re right Harry,” Hermione nodded as she continued reading. “It says here that, ‘...though they both live in the Gateshead area, neither one of them have been known to frequent muggle shopping centres. Despite claims by Ministry officials, Aurors interviewed on site declared that no wizard bodies had been discovered, suggesting that neither Wizengamot member was at the scene.’”

A voice distracted the four at the Mingling Table and they all looked up to see who had finally arrived for breakfast.

“Hi Neville,” said Harry.

“Morning Harry,” said Neville, smiling at everyone. “Glad you’re all back. It’ll be nice to have a bit more company.”

As Neville took a seat, Harry glanced at the staff-table, where Dumbledore and the professors appeared to be shaking their heads and groaning as they read their own copies of the papers. At one end of the staff-table, Harry spied Karkaroff and Viktor sitting next to him eating porridge.

At the other end Harry spotted a portly wizard wearing a maroon velvet jacket and sporting a walrus moustache chatting to Hagrid.

“I wonder who that is?” Harry muttered in puzzlement. Hermione shook her head, equally mystified.

“No idea...” said Neville, looking surprised. “I haven’t seen him before today.”

“He looks vaguely familiar,” Dora frowned pensively. “But I can’t recall where I might’ve seen ‘im before.”

Fleur shook her head. “I have nevair seen him eizzer, ‘Arry.”
“I suppose we’ll meet him soon enough,” Hermione responded after a moment of contemplation. “I expect he’s just a member of the Order that we haven’t met yet.”

“Yeah... that seems likely...” Harry nodded in agreement, before glancing down at the other end of the table again. “Viktor looks a bit down at the mouth today.”

“He is...” Neville sighed wistfully, thinking about Hannah. “He’s missing Lavender. He was hoping she might come to Hogwarts for the summer too, but her parents wouldn’t let her...”

“Maybe we should try and cheer Viktor up a bit later on today and do a bit of flying with him,” said Hermione.

“We?” Harry raised his eyebrows and grinned at Hermione. She blushed and poked Harry in the ribs, sticking her tongue out at him.

“I meant you and the others, Harry, not me... I’ll be watching from the stands where I know I’ll be safe.”

“Oh come on Hermione. Why not give it a go?” Harry said eagerly. “You can ride on my broom with me... I’ve been dying to take you up - there was just too much going on this year, but there’s loads of time now that it’s summer...”

“I... I really don’t think so Harry,” Hermione squeaked anxiously, seeing the gleam in his eyes.

“It’s really not so bad Hermione,” said Neville. “Since Viktor’s been helping me, I’m actually starting to enjoy flying...”

“Anyway, I’ll do all the work Hermione - all you have to do is hold on tight...” Harry gave Hermione his best puppy-dog eyes. “Don’t you remember how fun the ride on Buckbeak was? It’ll be a much smoother ride on the broom.”

When Hermione bit her lip, Dora could see her beginning to waver. Grinning, Dora reckoned that Hermione just needed a few more words of encouragement.

“Go on Hermione,” she said. “You’ll be perfectly safe with Harry. You know you will...”

“Fine... alright then,” Hermione grumbled, finally relenting.

“Right, sounds like a plan then Hermione. You won’t regret it!” Harry concurred happily while the others giggled. “Later on it is then.” Harry paused and looked serious, peering at everyone, especially Neville.

“I... I’ve been thinking,” Harry continued, “I want us to keep training to fight - Neville, you and Ginny and Luna ought to join us as well. And... and I think everyone should learn how to perform the patronus charm...”

“That’s an excellent idea Harry!” Hermione’s eyes shone. “Everyone needs to begin preparing for whatever Voldemort or the Minister throws at us now.”

“I agree,” Dora gazed at Harry proudly. “That’s an outstandin’ idea Harry. I can help with the advanced combat magic and the hand to hand - but we’ll follow your lead, alright?”

“Oh... er... what?” Harry gulped, suddenly nervous as they all peered at him eagerly. “Er... I...erm... I didn’t mean that I should be in charge - I just meant... Look, I don’t know enough magic yet...”
“That doesn’t matter Harry,” Dora retorted. “I can show you lot some things you may not ‘ave learned yet, but you, Harry - you’re a natural born leader. You’ve got all the right instincts - look ‘ow you took charge over the Third Task...”

“But... but I... I didn’t really do anything other than convince everyone to work together...” Harry interrupted, perplexed. “I fought as hard as I could, but it wasn’t enough. Fleur and Viktor and Cedric all got hurt - we could’ve all died...”

“But we did not - thanks to you ‘Arry...” said Fleur softly. “Eet ees because of you that we all lived. You brought us all togezzer - to fight as one. And do not forget ze Second Task - eet is only because of you that ze Grindylows did not overcome me...

“You are too humble ‘Arry - did I not follow you into battle wiz ze Nereid? ... And when you told me to leave with Gabrielle and Cho Chang, I did what you told me to do, even though I wanted to stay and fight. Eet ees you ‘Arry who really saved everyone in ze Second Task...”

“That’s the absolute truth,” Hermione said forcefully, glowering at Harry when he tried to interrupt Fleur. “Harry also knew exactly what to say to convince the Merpeople to let us go when they trapped us, and to stop them from fighting among themselves. He was BRILLIANT!” Hermione glared at Harry, daring him to contradict her.

Harry swallowed again, trying to think of something else to say.

“But you helped me loads Hermione,” Harry said in a small voice. “I would’ve never survived the Triwiz without you.”

Hermione’s features softened as she melted in Harry’s glistening gaze. She leaned in and kissed him.

“I’ll always be there for you Harry, because I love you. And I love you because you always step up to try and protect everyone without even thinking about it, no matter who it is, no matter what the odds - without even stopping to think about yourself. You always put others first - and that’s why we’ll follow you... wherever you lead us.”

Harry gulped yet again and sighed. Everyone seemed to be in complete agreement. How could he say no?

He had one final go at it.

“But what if I’m ever wrong?” Harry asked quietly.

“Nobody’s perfect Harry,” Hermione answered. “But we know you’ll always try to do the right thing, and... and I’ll always be there to help you find the right path Harry,” Hermione concluded.

“Alright then,” said Harry nodding. “If that’s what you really want...”

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Hermione spent some time trying to teach Harry enough intermediate algebra so that he could start working on his Arithmancy summer assignment. Fleur was helping Ginny work on her summer homework and Luna was reading a book about Mind Healing. Dora leaned back in one of the library’s comfy chairs drawing some pencil sketches.

“Why don’t you take a break Harry! Do some runework, or maybe just some light reading for fun,” said Hermione, sensing his frustration.
“We can pick this up again tomorrow - there’s plenty of time. I think you’re really starting to get the hang of it Harry,” she concluded encouragingly.

“Thanks Hermione,” Harry sighed in relief, “My brain feels like it’s going to explode. I just don’t get quadratic equations. How can an equation have more than one correct answer?”

“Maybe you should go and fly a bit right now Harry,” Luna suggested. “It says in this Mind Healing book that sometimes it’s best to move on to a physical activity when you’re stumped about something.

“I’m surprised really. I thought there would be more magic spells involved... or potions. But it seems that a lot of Mind Healing doesn’t involve any magic at all - not directly anyway.”

Soon Harry had Hermione down on the quidditch pitch peering at his Firebolt dubiously.

“Are you sure about this Harry?” Hermione moaned.

“You can’t back out now Hermione,” Harry grinned. “There’s plenty of room. Just hold onto me tight and think about whatever you think about when you cast your Patronus.”

Hermione nervously straddled the broom behind Harry, wrapping her arms around his middle. She let out a little squeak of fright as Harry lifted off and soared into the air. Moments later he was gleefully swooping around the quidditch pitch, Hermione clinging to him with a death-grip, her bushy hair whipping in the wind. She opened her eyes briefly, shrieked, and shut them again.

Viktor grinned as he flew by the Potters on his own broom. Ginny, Luna and Neville zipped around behind them, trying to keep up. Viktor was delighted to have Harry back. Flying with friends was more distracting than flying alone.

As Hermione continued to clutch Harry around his waist, she slowly started to relax. It felt good to be holding Harry so closely, and she began to notice other surprising sensations. She was wearing a skirt, and with only her knickers between her sex and the broom, a warm tingle of arousal coursed through Hermione’s body as the vibrations tickled her most sensitive parts.

Hermione’s knickers began to dampen as the broom pressed the fabric even deeper between the apex of her thighs. A sudden surge of bliss came over her as Harry soared higher and higher and she bit her lip, unable to avoid letting out a little moan of pleasure.

She finally opened her eyes properly, for the first time since the ride on the hippogriff enjoying the sensation of the wind rushing by. Harry banked hard, and Hermione gasped when the broom shuddered as the vibrations increased in intensity.

Sensing Hermione’s confidence growing, Harry decided it was time to be a bit more adventurous. Harry dove and flew low above the treetops heading towards the Black Lake, leaving the others behind. When Harry buzzed the surface of the lake and the fine mist of water stung her face, Hermione lost herself, squeaking happily and hanging onto Harry for all she was worth.

Hermione’s spasms rocked Harry and he grinned. He was already more than a bit stiff having Hermione pressed against his backside so tightly, and his erection became even longer and harder as her orgasm surged through his own body. His breath quickened; his pulse raced. Harry needed Hermione now and he dove into the woods.

As soon as they touched down Harry dropped his Firebolt and he and Hermione tumbled giddily into the ferns and underbrush in a clearing surrounded by oaks, startling several squirrels who were arguing over a pile of acorns. The agitated squirrels scampered quickly up into the branches.
Hermione gasped as her climax was followed by another one. Harry was so hot that he didn’t care that they were outside, in the middle of the Forbidden Forest, possibly to be discovered by Hagrid or the centaurs should they stumble across them.

Hermione heatedly tugged off her drenched knickers and tossed them into the bushes, glad now that she wasn’t wearing jeans. She unbuckled Harry’s belt and unzipped his shorts as they rolled in the leaves, both of them panting heavily.

Harry grinned as he pushed up Hermione’s skirt and she parted her legs. Harry couldn’t resist, and dove in face-first plunging his tongue into her dripping crevice. Harry’s tongue snaked into Hermione’s fold. He licked and nibbled Hermione’s pulsating pearl until she squealed, her back arching as another surge of ecstasy rippled through her.

Hermione writhed ecstatically and drew Harry up for an impassioned kiss, clasping her legs around his backside. Needing no further invitation, Harry feverishly slid his length into Hermione’s warm sheath. Harry drove his hardness into Hermione’s depths again and again as she continued squeaking blissfully.

Hermione’s multiple climaxes cascaded into a crescendo, and the contractions of her sheath around Harry’s throbbing lance were finally too much. Harry exploded as the cyclone of ardour took him, releasing a flood of his essence into her chalice. Sparks of magic flew and the ground quaked.

A flock of blue-tits took flight, chirping and twittering above the trees, and the squirrels clung to the branches until the oaks eventually stopped shaking. Harry slumped on top of Hermione, gasping, and they both finally succumbed to oblivion.

When Harry came to, he felt the delightful sensation of Hermione’s tongue cleaning off his stiffening erection. He grinned as Hermione licked and sucked, amazed that she still had any energy left - and that he did too.

Hermione stopped licking for a moment and grinned back at Harry. Sensing his puzzlement she answered his unasked question.

“I’m not really certain Harry. I... I think I just got a real thrill from riding on your broom with you. I suppose being scared of heights just added a bit to the excitement of holding you - and feeling safe with you as the wind rushed by - and feeling the broomstick vibrating in just the right spots... and... and...”

“Oh bother it - I’m over-thinking again...” Hermione shut-up and went back to work on Harry’s erection while the squirrels watched, chittering in agitation.

Harry reached out both hands and stroked Hermione’s bushy hair as she knelt between his thighs, her lips encircling the base of his shaft. Despite having recently concluded a quite robust sexual encounter, it didn’t take long for Harry to feel the surges of euphoria take him again.

Harry gasped, hands tangled in Hermione’s tawny tresses and jerking his loins as he released himself. Hermione’s naked bottom jutted out from the skirt gathered around her waist as she hungrily gulped Harry’s seed.

A thundering of hooves broke the moment.

Hermione shrieked, and the last spurts of Harry’s ejaculate spattered against her rosy cheeks. She propelled herself into Harry’s arms and shivered. Harry’s eyes bulged and his gasps of pleasure caught. He held his breath and stared in trepidation at the centaur who had entered the clearing.
Harry gulped anxiously and held his trembling Hermione tightly. It was the last centaur in the world that he had ever wanted to see again.

Bane loomed over the pair darkly, his face displaying consternation and bewilderment. Hermione flushed and with shaking hands she pushed her skirt between her quivering thighs to cover herself.

The centaur with wild black hair didn’t seem to know what to make of the situation. He had angrily entered the clearing with an arrow strung in his bow, prepared to unleash it into whomever had disturbed the forest - full grown wizard or student, he didn’t care. Firenze or Ronan weren’t around to restrain him today.

Bane’s rage battled his confusion as he peered at the two young wizards. Bane’s nostrils flared and he pawed the ground with his hooves. He had witnessed the last moment of the pair’s coupling, and the air was heavy with their scent.

The atmosphere of the glade near the lakeshore seemed to be quite different from what he had expected. Bane’s skin prickled as he sensed the presence of magic surrounding him. But this was unlike the magic he usually sensed when wizards were near, which more often than not felt like a threat of violence.

This felt more like Spring - like life itself. Bane glanced in wonder at the green shoots of new growth and the blooming wild-flowers poking up through the leaves and underbrush on the forest floor. They hadn’t been there when he had passed through the clearing earlier that morning.

The centaur stared at Harry and Hermione once more. The pounding of the boy’s heart caught Bane’s ears as the boy protectively clutched the girl. Bane swished his black horse tail and began to calm, unstringing the arrow from his bow.

“You are a very unusual wizard Harry Potter... most unusual indeed.”

Harry let out his breath heavily, relief filling him as the fierceness departed the centaur’s countenance.

“You and your beloved are welcome in this forest at any time Harry Potter. My apologies for disturbing you...” Bane swallowed and a brief look of sorrow crossed his features.

“It is my sincerest hope that our interpretation of the Movement of the Heavens is wrong - the world could use more wizards such as yourself. May fortune shine upon you... young wizard.”

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“Bloody Hell Hermione - that was scary! I thought we were done for... Bane always hated me! I don’t understand... What just happened?”

Hermione stopped walking and turned to face Harry, biting her lip pensively, gazing at him with her big brown eyes.

“I think that perhaps he might have seen you for who you really are Harry,” she replied, her own features filled with perplex as she tried to make sense of things.

“I was terrified when he found us - Bane was filled with such a hate for wizards. But... but then he saw you with me... trying to protect me...” Hermione paused. She smiled and gave Harry a kiss.

“And I... I’m still not entirely certain why, but I think... I think suddenly, in that moment, Bane finally realised that you’re different from most wizards - like the Dragon and the Unicorn did.”
“You made a new friend today Harry,” Hermione concluded.

Harry blinked, then a smile crept to his lips and he shook his head in amazement. He leaned in and tenderly returned Hermione’s kiss before continuing the trek back up to the castle, his broom in one hand and Hermione’s hand in the other.

“Well... who would’ve guessed?” Harry said with a laugh after a few steps. “All I had to do to make friends with the centaurs was put on a sex-show for them with you.”

“Prat!” Hermione giggled, swatting Harry playfully with her free hand.

As they drew closer to the massive doors of the Main Entrance, Harry and Hermione were spotted by the Headmaster and the man with a walrus moustache. They appeared to be exiting the castle to take a stroll around the grounds.

Hermione eeped, and blushed, quickly rubbing at the dirty sticky streaks on her face with her hanky. She had forgotten the state of her appearance after the commotion with the centaur, having just wanted to leave the clearing as quickly as possible. Hermione groaned, realising that she had also forgotten her knickers and left them dangling from the branches of a bush. Hermione tugged at Harry’s sleeve and he stopped.

Harry tried very hard not to grin as Hermione hid behind him and performed a quick spell to clean and dry the sticky damp spots on her skirt. There was nothing she could do immediately about her knickers though, and she hadn't the time to perform another spell to vanish the viscous fluid still leaking out and trickling down her inner thighs.

“Ah there you are;” the headmaster said warmly as he and the man with the moustache approached. “Horace, I’d like you to meet Mr and Mrs Potter...”

Hermione turned crimson and bit her lips, keeping her thighs together and crossing her hands in front of her skirt. For his part, Harry did an excellent job of maintaining a straight face, and he immediately stuck his hand out to draw attention to himself.

“Er... Hello...” Harry began.

“Harry,” the Headmaster continued, his eyes sparkling in the sunlight, “this is Horace Slughorn. He was once one of Hogwarts finest Potions professors, not to mention being an exceptional Alchemist...”

“Albus, please, you are too kind...” Horace interjected with an air of humility - though Harry could tell that Slughorn was quite chuffed at the heaped praise.

“...and former Head of Slytherin House,” Dumbledore said as Slughorn took Harry’s hand and shook it.

“Delighted to meet you Mr Potter... simply delighted,” Horace gushed effusively.

“Er... nice to meet you too sir,” Harry said with a polite smile.

“I have been following your career with quite some interest I must say,” said Horace, “and Severus has told me all about you and your wife’s exceptional talents with potions.”

Slughorn turned to Hermione and held out his chubby hand. “And I couldn’t be more pleased to make your acquaintance as well Mrs Potter!”
Blushing furiously, Hermione carefully kept one hand on her skirt and shyly reached out the other to take Slughorn’s and shake it.

“Er... Likewise Professor Slughorn,” Hermione squeaked, blushing and cringing at the sound of her own voice.

“Well, I haven’t been ‘professor’ in many, many years my dear...” Slughorn beamed at Hermione. “But thanks to Albus’s persistence, it appears that I shall be once more. I do so hope that you both elect to take my Alchemy course when the Autumn term begins. It would be simply splendid to teach two such fine young pupils as yourselves... simply marvelous.

“I thought being given the opportunity to teach you Mr Potter was reward enough I must say... I taught your mother... Lily was one of my favourite students - the brightest witch I have ever known - and certainly one of the kindest. And I am delighted to have the opportunity to teach your wife as well. I am told by everyone that Mrs Potter is another in Lily’s mould...”

“And there I thought it was the protections that Hogwarts had to offer which had enticed you Horace,” Dumbledore teased.

“Yes... quite,” chuckled Slughorn. “I still don’t know how you managed to sway Karkaroff to join forces with you, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the Potters here had something to do with it.”

“Indeed...” Dumbledore peered at Harry and Hermione, keenly observing their pink faces, and disheveled appearance.

Harry gulped awkwardly and glanced at Hermione.

“Well Horace,” said Dumbledore sprightly, taking Slughorn’s arm, “I think we have taken up quite enough of the Potters’ time for now. You shall have plenty of time to get to know them better after all.”

“Oh... er, indeed. Quite so!” Horace said, looking a bit disappointed, “Bye for now then...”

Dumbledore gave the Potters a wink and Harry nodded gratefully, breathing a sigh of relief.

~o0o~

“Slughorn seemed quite nice actually,” Harry said cheerfully, washing Hermione’s back as the steam rose in the hot shower. “I’m not sure if he was happier to meet me or you really...”

Hermione turned around and gave Harry a soapy kiss.

“What was that for?” asked Harry.

“For trying to protect me as usual,” Hermione grinned and kissed him again under the spray of water. “Thanks for at least trying to keep his attention off me Harry. That was mortifying... I thought a breeze might blow up my skirt at any moment.”

“Er... you’re welcome Hermione! But if you keep kissing me in the shower we’ll never make it out in time for lunch,” Harry retorted with a smirk.

“Especially if you do that...” Harry groaned as Hermione pressed her wet soapy body up against his for yet another kiss and he began to stiffen again.

~o0o~
Ginny and Luna raised their eyebrows knowingly and smirked when they spied Harry and Hermione entering the Great Hall at Teatime. Fleur and Dora, who had both been off doing their own thing, picked up on the unspoken signals. Viktor gave Harry a lopsided smile, but Neville looked very puzzled.

“Where’d you go this afternoon Harry,” Neville asked. “The last we saw you, you and Hermione were flying over the Black Lake...”

“They took a little detour to snog for a bit Neville,” said Ginny bluntly, rolling her eyes as if it should have been perfectly obvious. The others tried their hardest not to laugh and embarrass Neville further.

Neville turned pink, smiling bashfully. “Oh... er... sorry. I didn’t mean to be nosy...”

“No problem Neville...” said Harry, grinning.

Before they sat down to Tea, Luna took the Potters aside. “You should join me in the visitor’s lounge and have Tea with me and Jennifer. I think she’s up to chatting a bit today.”

“Are you coming too, Ginny?” asked Hermione.

“You should just go with Luna, I’ll stay here with this lot,” Ginny replied. “I doubt Jennifer will want to talk in front of too many people.”

Hermione nodded in agreement with Ginny’s sensible reasoning. She followed Luna to the visitor’s lounge with Harry at her side. The conversation began casually enough as they all chatted about innocuous things with Jennifer.

“Have you tried butterbeer yet?” asked Hermione. “It’s not as funny tasting as it sounds... It’s a bit like butterscotch, and it only has a teensy bit of alcohol in it.”

“Oh... er... yeah. I had some the other day with Ginny and Luna.” said Jennifer. “It was nice...” Jennifer paused and frowned pensively, as if trying to make a decision. It appeared that she had reached a conclusion when she took a deep breath and began to talk again.

“I... er... I’m sorry about your Uncle, Harry. Luna told me a bit about him and showed me her father’s article...” Jennifer paused again.

“I... I don’t know how you managed to l...live with that all those years...” she trailed off, her voice quavering, and bit her lip, not quite managing to say what she was thinking. Jennifer couldn’t imagine having to endure the torment of being Ratface’s plaything for years on end.

Harry couldn’t really think how to respond.

“Er... yeah... erm... it was pretty horrible actually,” he finally mustered. “I dunno how I managed it either really...”

Harry cast his eyes down, and caught a sketchbook sitting on the mahogany coffee table. He suddenly realised that he was staring at an amazingly lifelike pencil-drawing. His face darkened when he saw who it was.

“Did... did you draw that?” he asked, more or less rhetorically. It was obvious that she had and Harry immediately regretted asking the question.

Jennifer cringed. She had forgotten that she had left her sketchbook on the table.
“Y...yes,” Jennifer stammered. “I... I c...can’t get his face out of my head.” Tears began to roll down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry...” Harry swallowed and tried his utmost to steady himself. “I didn’t mean to...”

“N...no, it’s alright!” Jennifer murmured. “I... I was g...going to get around to it anyway. I w...was hoping you’d t...tell me a bit about him.”

“Wormtail!” Harry muttered through gritted teeth. “His real name is Peter Pettigrew - he’s the one who sold out my parents to Voldemort. He’s the main reason they’re dead. He was their friend... and he betrayed them. They’d probably still be alive if it weren’t for him...”

“H...he r...rape...” Jennifer blurted out, sobbing. “...loads of times.”

Despite having surmised as much - based on Harry’s vision - Hermione couldn’t help gasping in horror. Harry’s blood began to boil-over as an inferno raged in his gut and spread to his extremities; he had done his best to forget the image he’d seen through Voldemort’s eyes, but couldn’t any longer.

Jennifer had shocked herself with the statement. This was the first time she had been able to say it out loud - the first time she had told anyone - the first time that she had been able to clearly articulate it in her mind.

Luna curled her arm around Jennifer. Luna had suspected it all along, and she was relieved that Jennifer had finally been able to talk about what had happened to her.

Harry’s head started spinning. He couldn’t tell where Jennifer’s pain ended and his began; he just felt it all swirling together in the firestorm within. The walls began to close in - Harry couldn’t breathe properly - he felt like he was going to explode.

Unable to speak, Harry wasn’t sure that he could contain himself and not wanting to frighten Jennifer, he leapt up and stalked out of the visitor’s lounge.

“I’m sorry...” Jennifer wailed, “I’m sorry... I shouldn’t have left my sketchbook out...”

“It’s not your fault Jennifer...” Hermione cried out, “Please! You have to understand, Harry’s not angry at you. He’s angry at Wormtail... Luna tell her - Harry’s angry at Wormtail...” Hermione jumped out of her own seat. “Look after Jennifer, Luna... I’ve got to look after Harry - stop him before he hurts himself...”

Hermione fled the visitor’s lounge and looked around wildly for Harry. Thankfully, Harry hadn’t lost his common sense. He was on the marble staircase, headed for the Seventh Floor, looking for somewhere safe to release his rage. Hermione took off up the stairs after him, but they were already moving.

Hermione ran up the stairs as fast as she could and managed to leap from the staircase to the landing on the next floor. Hermione had to do that for every staircase as she followed Harry. She almost caught up to him.

Too out of breath to yell at Harry to stop, Hermione raced down the corridor and barely managed to catch the door to the Room of Requirement before it clicked shut. Hermione ducked and screamed when debris from an enormous exploding statue of Wormtail rained down upon her.

“Hermione...”
Harry’s voice cut through the ringing in her ears. “Hermione... I’m so sorry - I didn’t see you...”

Hermione blinked and the stunning effects of the blast began to fade, but there was still a haze of smoke and dust.

“Hermione - are you alright? Say something... please...”

Hermione could see the anxiety etched on his face. He was on his knees beside her, cradling her in his arms.

“I... I’ll be fine... Harry,” Hermione managed to gasp. “Really - I’m fine, just a bit dazed. But what about you?”

Relief flooded Harry’s features, but the guilt never left his eyes. Hermione glanced around the steel reinforced room at the concrete statues of Voldemort, Wormtail, and the Minister. Harry had apparently conjured this room specifically to use blasting curses on his enemies.

Hermione threw her arms around him as she clambered to her feet.

“I’m alright... I swear Harry!” she said firmly.

“Okay... okay.... That’s good then,” Harry gasped. “What about Jennifer? I... I didn’t mean to upset her. But I had to get out of there before I lost it completely.”

“I think she’ll be alright Harry. Luna’s with her...” Hermione replied, “And... and to tell you the truth, I think Jennifer needed the release too. I don’t think she’d been able to really face what happened to her until you... until you shared your feelings about Wormtail with her.”

Hermione continued embracing Harry and he felt the last embers of his fury washing away as he caught her familiar minty aroma.

“Crap,” Harry sighed. “I bet Jennifer feels bad about upsetting me now - even though it wasn’t her fault at all.”

Hermione led a much calmer Harry back downstairs to the visitor’s lounge where Luna had finally settled Jennifer. Harry and Jennifer shared wan little smiles. Jennifer brushed her long black hair out of her face, wiping away the remnants of her tears.

“I’m sorry Jennifer...” Harry began.

“No, it’s alright,” Jennifer interjected, “I get it - I know you weren’t cross with me. I... I want to thank you actually. You’re the first person I’ve really been able to talk to about it - and... and this is the first I’ve not f...felt ashamed about what he did to me.”

Harry nodded uncomfortably. He’d often felt ashamed about admitting what Uncle Vernon had done to him - which was more or less why he didn’t like talking about it.

“Er... I... I don’t know if it’ll be the same for you, but... but sometimes those feelings might come back a bit,” Harry admitted ruefully. “But... but eventually you learn to live with it...”

Harry’s face hardened slightly, and a spark lit in his eyes again.

“And... and I want you to know... If I ever come across Wormtail, I’m going to kill him.”

Jennifer picked up her sketchbook and smiled at Harry and Hermione, feeling her heart catch in her throat.
Jennifer swallowed, “I... I think I need to be by myself for a bit. But thank you again for talking to me - I mean it.”

“Will you come and have dinner at the table with us tonight?” Luna asked hopefully, her eyes full of concern.

“I... I don’t think I’m quite ready for that yet,” said Jennifer. “But I promise, I’ll be alright. I’ll see you later then...” She glanced back at Harry and Hermione, who both looked sorry to see her going, “Thanks again Harry.”

Jennifer hurried out of the visitor’s lounge, letting her hair fall in her face before anyone could see the tears running down her cheeks again. She didn’t know what she’d done to deserve finding such nice people who really seemed to care so much for a girl they had barely met.

“Will she really be alright?” Harry asked after Jennifer had left the room, wondering if he’d said the wrong thing. “She looked like she was about to cry again.”

Luna nodded, smiling sweetly, but Harry wasn’t convinced. He was sure that somehow he’d put his foot in it once more. Hermione put her arms around Harry and hugged him tightly.

“It’s okay Harry, you didn’t do anything wrong.” Hermione said. “It’s just going to take Jennifer some time to get used to having friends again.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. That, he understood. But he was still feeling badly about what had happened in the Room of Requirement.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Harry peered into Hermione’s eyes, looking for signs of pain or concussion.

“I’m fine Harry - really...” Hermione pulled Harry closer and kissed him passionately to prove it. “You need some cheering up - I think this evening after dinner we should have some fun in the Room of Requirement... if you’re up to it after our fun in the forest today...”

“Er... really?” Harry looked surprised. “You sure about that? I mean, you’re not too upset?”

Hermione shook her head and smiled.

That evening after dinner, Harry and Hermione returned to the Room of Requirement, both of them grinning. And this time they were prepared with towels, clean nightclothes, and slippers to put on after, not having to worry about being caught out by anyone.

~o0o~

“Blimey, wha’ the ruddy hell was tha’ ? There it is again. Wha’s goin’ on then?” gasped Hagrid when the castle shook and the lamps flickered for the third time.

Albus Dumbledore swirled the contents of his brandy snifter and chuckled, his eyes twinkling. He noted with satisfaction, that the magical lanterns and candles which lit the castle only flickered, and didn’t go out completely, settling at a brighter wattage after each tremor.

“Oh, nothing to worry yourself about Rubeus,” Dumbledore replied. “Hogwarts is merely adjusting to some ongoing upgrades...”

Minerva McGonagall nearly snorted her cocktail out of her nose, and had a coughing fit. Poppy Pomfrey rolled her eyes.
“There, there dear...” said Poppy, patting Minerva on the back.

Filius Flitwick exchanged a bewildered look with Pomona Sprout, who just shrugged in response.

Severus Snape might have been puzzled too, but he was spending the night at Narcissa Black’s manor.
Head Auror Rufus Scrimgeour frowned in perplex, wondering at the Minister’s request for a meeting as he knocked on the open door of her office. Surely his assistant could have brought the files she needed. Minister Umbridge looked up from her desk and beamed.

“Ah, Rufus, splendid. Do come in won’t you.”

“Of course Madam Minister - I have the files you require. How else may I be of service this morning?”

“Some very disturbing information has come to my attention, and I would like you to look into it at once...” The Minister handed the Head Auror several files as she took the ones that he had brought her. “It would appear to indicate that the Daily Prophet’s recent inquiry regarding corruption in the Wizengamot was remarkably prescient...

“If you would please peruse these, I believe you will find enough actionable evidence to follow through and make an arrest.”

Scrimgeour raised his bushy eyebrows at the heading on one of the documents. He regarded the Minister shrewdly for a moment, then flicked through the files.

“Pembroke Chamberlain?” Scrimgeour pursed his lips and furrowed his brows in consternation. “Are you certain of this information Minister? He is highly regarded by many, despite being somewhat... indecisive.”

“Oh, most certain indeed Rufus,” the Minister replied, her voice dripping with honey. “After the Prophet’s article, I put the Unspeakable Office on the case, as it required a sensitive undercover operation. And indeed the investigation yielded these startling details of Mr Chamberlain’s dangerous associations.”

Scrimgeour considered that for a moment. It wasn’t uncommon for the Unspeakable Office to conduct undercover investigations. But the case file still struck Rufus as odd.

“His past associations with Voldemort were determined to have been due to the Imperius curse Madam Minister...”

“Oh, no Rufus...” the Minister interjected, “it is Mr Chamberlain’s current associations with which we are most concerned. The man has been consorting with criminals who are known to have connections to Albus Dumbledore - Mundungus Fletcher is quite an unsavory character, I can assure you.”

“Yes! I am well aware of Mr Fletcher’s record...” The Head Auror nodded. “But most of his criminal activities in the past have been rather petty. These new accusations, if true, are quite disturbing. Trafficking in enslaved muggles is a serious offence - I shall conduct an investigation into Chamberlain and Fletcher immediately to confirm the Unspeakable Office report.”

“Thank you Rufus! I knew I could count on you.” Minister Umbridge smiled appreciatively. She watched the Head Auror depart in satisfaction, knowing that he would find plenty of evidence to arrest and convict Pembroke Chamberlain - thus stripping him of his seat on the Wizengamot. Rookwood had made certain that there would be lots of evidence to find.

The Minister peered in her own copies of the files and scribbled a note, pleased at how swimmingly
her Senior Undersecretary was acclimating to his role. He had been slightly reticent to support the Unspeakable Office’s involvement at first, but Percy Weasley had quickly seen the political value of framing a Potter Appeaser like Chamberlain and a criminal associate of Dumbledore such as Mundungus Fletcher.

Dolores could scratch yet another Undesirable from her list of the “wobblies” who had supported the Potters during their trial.

Minister Umbridge opened the file which Scrimgeour had brought her regarding more muggle disappearances. She sighed heavily, certain that Voldemort was behind them. As much as Dolores eventually wanted Voldemort dead and gone, he was far too useful alive for the time being - providing a distraction for Dumbledore and his people. Not to mention that as long as wizards were afraid, they would willingly accept her authoritative leadership.

A sinister smile played across Dolore’s features. Another plan began to form as she perused the file of missing muggles. Yes indeed - this fit rather nicely with her own plans. Now Dolores could also link the crimes of Voldemort with the crimes for which she and Rookwood had framed Chamberlain and Fletcher.

~o0o~

The Dark Lord was perplexed by the article in the Daily Prophet. Did not the imbeciles who ran the newspaper realise that He, Voldemort, was the one to be most feared? Why on earth would they be hinting that the Old Fool who ran Hogwarts was linked to the muggle disappearances?

“Wormtail, who is this... this miscreant - this associate of Dumbledore - Mundungus Fletcher?”

“My Lord?”

“The muggle disappearances,” Lord Voldemort hissed, “They are being attributed by and large to this Mr Fletcher. He is apparently engaged in selling enslaved muggles to wizards of means, and the Prophet strongly implies that Dumbledore may have operational knowledge of his activities.” Voldemort snorted in derision at the ludicrous notion.

As if Dumbledore had it in him to harm a single hair on a muggle’s head - or anyone else’s head for that matter. The Old Fool couldn’t even bring himself to kill Gellert Grindelwald after defeating him, the most notorious and murderous Dark Wizard in history prior to Lord Voldemort.

“To the best of my knowledge, Mundungus Fletcher is nothing but a petty thief My Lord,” Wormtail replied in bewilderment. “Not even fit to be a Snatcher. He was employed by the Order of the Phoenix during the last war merely as someone with criminal contacts which could be exploited for information - he avoided any of the actual conflicts between the Order and the Death Eaters...”

“Ah... so that is why I do not recollect him. In any case, it would appear that he has moved up in the world to have drawn the attention of the Dark Witch,” Voldemort mused aloud. “I do believe it is time to remind the Dark Witch and my former supporters of whom it is that they truly need to fear. How many Inferi do we have now?”

“Around four hundred so far my Lord!” Wormtail replied, “If we are to raise the numbers you desire to take Hogwarts with, then we should conserve our forces...”

“I concur Wormtail,” the Dark Lord nodded approvingly. “Two simultaneous attacks would strike the right note - but not with the Inferi. I believe the Snatchers and a few Werewolves should pay another visit to London - to Diagon Alley...
“And another attack on a muggle location, this time by Snatchers with a few giants to maximise the damage. Unleashing a regiment of Dementors would not go amiss either... Make it happen Wormtail!”

Bellatrix had been listening to the exchange intently but feigning nonchalance as she filed her fingernails. It occurred to her that more needed to be done - it was not enough that Nott and his son were locked in the dungeon beneath the castle. Lucius had escaped his rightful fate.

His cowardly betrayal of the Dark Lord was a personal affront. Bellatrix would break out her whips just for Lucius and his son, then she would fillet them and turn them into Inferi. But he was completely inaccessible for the time-being. Lucius was likely laying low at the Minister’s home, and her home’s location was utterly unknown. That was a shame. Bellatrix would have enjoyed breaking Lucius - but perhaps she would get another opportunity.

Bellatrix considered some of the others who most deserved to die.

Not the Carrows - Bellatrix hoped to bring them back into the fold. She missed her fun with Alecto. Bellatrix found herself growing misty at the idea of she and Alecto torturing Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers together again - not to mention that she would have a good excuse to wear her black leather.

Then Bellatrix remembered that some of the most Treacherous could likely be found deep in the bowels of the Ministry itself and smiled.

“My Lord,” the Dark Consort said seductively, “I think we should see some of the traitors dead - perhaps Rookwood or Yaxley - they both hold positions at the Ministry. If I crucify them in a public manner - maybe then the Unfaithful will beg to be spared from your righteous retribution.”

Nagini hissed as the Dark Lord absentmindedly stroked her head. He chuckled coldly. Bellatrix was getting bored already. Killing muggles and turning them into Inferi was clearly not enough to satisfy her bloodlust. She wanted some real action.

“Indeed Bellatrix, a public execution would make quite a statement,” the Dark Lord agreed. “Find Yaxley and Rookwood then, and string them up in the Atrium of the Ministry - but take care not to be caught.”

“Thank you my Lord!” the Dark Consort purred. “Wormtail and I will begin to plan the attacks at once.”

An evil smirk tugged at the corner of Wormtail’s lips. This could be the opportunity to find himself another suitable plaything. Perhaps Wormtail would enlist the aid of Lockhart for the muggle operation - Gilderoy seemed to share his taste for the younger females.

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As he buckled his belt and tucked in his shirt, Gilderoy Lockhart felt quite pleased with himself. With satisfaction, he regarded the muggle girl asleep in her bed, who was now none the wiser. Having been obliviated, she would never recall her violation at his hands. Having been obliviated, she would never recall her violation at his hands.

Gilderoy’s evening of rest and relaxation was well deserved. He had successfully assisted in the capture of numerous muggles for the Dark Lord’s army of Inferi by planting evidence on, and altering the memories of yet another muggle. Muggle police would simply presume the man was a serial killer, and Gilderoy had earned himself a Dark Mark, placing himself above the lowlife who made up the ranks of the Snatchers.
Gilderoy was more elated than he had thought he would be in the Dark Lord’s service. He felt more alive and much freer as the Dark Lord’s Servant than he had while trying to maintain his image of purity in the House of Dumbledore.

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Having just sat down for breakfast, Harry picked up the morning edition of the *Daily Prophet*, wondering what sort of rubbish it had in store for him today. The paper had been having a go at him and Dumbledore every other day it seemed. He frowned at the headline then glanced at Hermione who had just started eating her porridge.

“Hermione, isn’t Mundungus Fletcher that guy at the Order meeting? ... The one that Mrs Weasley and Madam Bones didn’t like?”

“Oh, you mean the one who was smoking a pipe and chatting to Sirius?”

“Yeah... that’s the one,” said Harry, nodding. “He’s just been arrested for trafficking in muggle slaves - him and one of the Wizengamot members in the middle who supported us - Pembroke Chamberlain.”

“Bloody hell!” Dora swore. “That’s ridiculous! Dung would never... ‘e’s a bit of a reprobate, but ‘e’s alright really...”

“What? Let me see that...” Hermione scanned the article quickly, her eyes widening in shock. “It’s even worse than that - this is awful! The article is implying that Dumbledore must have known what Mundungus and Pembroke Chamberlain were up to...”

Everyone around the Mingling Table looked shocked.

“That’s bloody mad!” Harry gasped. “There’s no way...”

“It’s gotta be a frame-up,” said Dora, scowling. “I mean the muggle disappearances - they’re all on Voldy obviously.”

“Yeah... yeah, of course,” said Harry, nodding. He glanced up at the staff-table to see how the professors were reacting. McGonagall looked livid, but Dumbledore’s features were as calm as ever.

“Per’aps ees best that we forget it for now,” sighed Fleur. “There is nothing we can do at ze moment...”

“Fleur’s right,” said Luna. “Let the Order fuss about it. I’m sure Daddy will be publishing something to counter it tomorrow... We should just try and concentrate on studying and enjoying ourselves as much as possible while we can.”

“You’re both right. There’s not much point in getting all worked up about it,” said Hermione, chucking the paper aside.

“Morning!” said the cheery voice of someone who obviously hadn’t read the paper yet.

Harry was surprised when the new witch with long ebony hair gave him a hug and a peck on the cheek, before also giving the same to Hermione and taking a seat opposite them at the Mingling Table. Hermione beamed, returning Jennifer’s smile.

“Er... what was that for?” Harry asked, flushing slightly.
“That’s for making me feel better, and turning me into a witch,” Jennifer giggled. “I still can’t really believe I have magic now. But I woke up this morning and my wand still works - and I didn’t have a single nightmare last night for the first time in months...”

After breakfast, Jennifer began lessons with the professors and Harry made his breakthrough with quadratic equations. Finally he had the tools to complete his Arithmancy summer assignment. Harry doggedly slaved away in the library with Hermione’s patient assistance, determined to finish the rest of his homework assignments quickly so he could focus on training.

Confident that the books were safe with only the Potters and their friends currently at Hogwarts for the summer, Madam Pince had decided that she could leave the library unattended during open hours and enjoy the holidays as much as possible.

Hermione had already completed all of her assignments and sat on Harry’s lap as he studied, providing equal parts Inspiration to work hard, and Distraction when he needed to rest his brain. Distraction eventually won out when Hermione’s reward-kisses for a job well done inflamed his senses.

A sudden naughty idea crossed Harry’s mind and he considered the possibilities. Neville and Viktor were spending the day in Hogsmeade with Hannah and Lavender. Ginny and Luna, Dora and Fleur had all decided to take the opportunity for a Hogsmeade visit as well. And the professors were all either occupied teaching Jennifer the basics, or lounging about.

Harry and Hermione more or less had the school to themselves.

Feeling assured that they were safe in the library, Harry flicked his wand and silently cast a muffling charm at the entrance while Hermione’s lips were occupied nuzzling his neck. One hand behind his head, the other roaming his chest, Hermione was none the wiser until she heard the click of the library door lock when Harry cast his second spell.

“Harry!” squeaked Hermione; her eyes widened in both trepidation and excitement as he slipped his hand under her skirt and caressed her inner thigh. “What are you doing?”

“Studying of course...” Harry replied with a grin as his fingers reached Hermione’s knickers and gently stroked the dampening fabric covering her heated entrance.

“But what if someone comes in?” she moaned.

“There’s no-one else here - everyone’s busy or out of the castle... It’s just us,” he whispered.

Harry trapped Hermione’s lips with his own before she could retort again, and his other hand cupped one of her breasts, squeezing it through the fabric of her blouse. Hermione’s heart raced and every nerve tingled with elation. She was afraid that they would get caught, but she didn’t want Harry to stop.

Hermione gave herself to the moment, melting in the heat of a long, burning kiss. She shuddered joyfully when Harry’s fingers slipped under the elastic of her knickers and touched bare flesh, probing her humid fold, entering her slippery sheath.

Harry’s digits burrowed deeper, his thumb jiggling Hermione’s little pearl. With his other thumb and forefinger, Harry gingerly tugged the hardened nipple which belonged to the breast in the palm of his hand.

A moan of bliss escaped Hermione’s lips as she wriggled in Harry’s lap, quivering as she climaxed, soaking her knickers and skirt with her dewiness.
Harry groaned as Hermione’s bottom ground against his stiffness. He loved bringing her off in his lap. The sensation of Hermione’s orgasmic response to his ministrations nearly brought him to a peak.

Still giddy with delight, Hermione slipped from Harry’s thighs and kneeled between his legs, unzipping his shorts and releasing his erection. Hermione swirled her tongue wetly around the crown of Harry’s lance, then engulfed it with her mouth.

Fingers tangled in Hermione’s tawny curls, Harry thrust himself deeper. A swell of euphoria took him and he burst, spilling his seed into her throat.

The unrelenting tempest of ardour swept them both into a feverish frenzy, and soon Harry and Hermione’s clothes littered the floor of the library. Hermione fell back upon a table gasping, pulling Harry with her, clasping her legs and arms around his backside as he slid his length inside her.

Again and again Harry plummeted to Hermione’s depths, sweat dripping from his brows. The intoxicating scent of leather bindings and parchment mingled with heady musk - the delicious friction of passionate abandon - Hermione reached new heights of ecstasy and cried out Harry’s name.

Lost in the tremors of Hermione’s cascading climaxes, Harry burst, flooding her chamber with his essence. Sparks of magic flew - arced like lightning - and in the Restricted Section of the library, a number of books of Dark magic screamed in agony...

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For a midsummer day there were an unusual amount of Hogwarts students in Hogsmeade, all there ostensibly on an overnight outing together. Gathered in the Three Broomsticks for lunch, the youths chatted and laughed, nursing their butterbeers as they ate.

Neville glanced at Viktor and Lavender who were snogging at the far end of the table. Turning pink, he tried to focus on his bangers and mash - which was proving difficult as Hannah was whispering and giggling with Luna and Ginny, occasionally peeking at Neville.

When lunch was finished, Hannah grabbed Neville’s hand and dragged him up the stairs to one of the rooms that Dora and Fleur had rented through the following afternoon. Neville peered about nervously, spying Rosmerta at the end of the bar serving another patron.

“Er... aren’t we too young?” Neville anxiously asked, halfway up the stairs.

“Don’t be silly,” said Hannah breezily. “I turned fifteen a few months ago and you’ll be fifteen in a couple of weeks... I know lots of boys and girls who’ve already had sex - well a few anyway - Ginny and Luna for example, and they’re a year younger than us...”

“But are you sure about this Hannah?” moaned Neville. “What if your parents find out?”

“They won’t,” she giggled, “I promise. They think I’m just spending the afternoons with you and having an overnight with Lavender... and Lavender’s parents think the same thing about her and Viktor. Anyway, what does it matter... I love you Neville!”

Neville gulped when they reached the well polished oak door of the room above the pub, resigning himself to his fate...

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Harry and Hermione grinned at each other as they dressed, both glad that the rather explosive climax
of their escapade in the library hadn’t damaged any of the books. Having worked up an appetite, they made their way to the Great Hall. Following lunch, Professor Dumbledore caught up with the Potters before they exited the Great Hall.

“Please excuse my intrusion, but I was hoping that I might observe your practice in the Room of Requirement this afternoon. I wish to examine your spellwork.”

“Er... of course sir...” said Harry.

“Are we going to do some experiments then?” asked Hermione eagerly, her eyes shining.

“In a manner of speaking,” the headmaster replied. “It is my intention to measure the current output of your spells. I must return to my office briefly to retrieve some of my monitoring equipment, but I can meet you outside the Room of Requirement in ten minutes.”

Ten minutes later, the headmaster and his students were setting up his instruments in the Room of Requirement. As they did so, Dumbledore explained the workings of his devices.

“This one here measures the frequencies, and the other measures the power level of the magic - I have had to repair those several times recently...” Dumbledore chuckled. “Due to the necessity for precise calibration, I cannot place an Unbreakable Charm on them - it would rather defeat their purpose.

“And this one detects the types of spells performed and locates them wherever they are performed on Hogwarts grounds. It is however, only calibrated to react to spells of a certain level of intensity due to the high degree of magic which flows through the castle during school-term. It would be all be ‘noise’ otherwise - a cacophony of signals...”

“Thus, it does not generally register every minor charm or jinx. And of course, it cannot locate magic performed in this room - the Room of Requirement - from the outside, as the room is Unplottable. However, I would like you to begin with something small to establish a baseline for comparison... perhaps a Cheering Charm cast simultaneously, as one.”

“Alright Hermione,” said Harry. “You ready? ...on three.”

Harry counted down; on the count of three he and Hermione silently performed the Charm. Dumbledore peered at his contraptions, looking only mildly surprised. Both Potters felt a bit giggly as they peered expectantly at Dumbledore, waiting for him to inform them of the results.

“Now see this reading here?” the headmaster began. “For an average sized class performing Cheering Charms, it would not register at all, even if I were standing with my instrument right next to them, because it is a rather minor charm, requiring very little magical power - yet I am getting a clear indication that a Cheering Charm has been performed.

“This other reading indicates the power level - and currently it indicates that the power levels of your Cheering Charms far exceed that of ordinary Cheering Charms, even done as regular group practice in class.”

“Would it make a difference if we were both touching - like holding hands - when we perform our spells simultaneously?” asked Hermione “I was just wondering because both times we summoned our Patronuses we were in physical contact.”

“Physical Proximity and Directionality can certainly make a difference between the caster and the subject with certain spells, and it is quite likely that being in physical contact with one another may provide some extra measure of power for some sets of spells as well,” Dumbledore answered. “But
the difference will likely be quite insignificant if you are very near to one another.

“However, the extent of your range is something worth discovering during practice. It may vary from spell to spell. I would ask that when you do experiment in that regard, please take notes and relay any pertinent findings to me so that I may observe them for myself in your next proceedings.

“Of course Professor,” Hermione beamed.

“Now, do you have any additional spells which you have practiced together which you would like to perform before I observe your Patronuses?”


“Yes,” said Hermione without hesitation. “I think we’ve practiced that the most besides our Patronuses.”

“Right, here goes then...”

The air in the Room of Requirement rippled with magic as the Potters performed the powerful shield spell several times. Dumbledore nodded with satisfaction at the readings, noting that with each casting, the spell’s potency grew.

“Well... it would appear that the power of the magic behind the spells is still developing. It is quite possible - and I daresay quite likely - that your power levels may eventually reach an equilibrium. However, nothing is certain at this stage...”

After continuing to lecture a bit on Magical Theory, Dumbledore sat in the comfy armchair he had conjured and felt the waves of bliss wash over him when Harry and Hermione simultaneously performed their Patronus Charms. The headmaster quickly took his leave before he was completely overcome with emotion, but not before expressing great pride in the Potters and their accomplishments in a rather hoarse voice.

“D’you think he’s alright Hermione?” asked Harry with a bemused expression. “Dumbledore looked a bit teary.”

“He’ll be okay Harry. He’s just feeling a bit overwhelmed,” Hermione replied giddily, “I think the euphoria created by our Patronuses may have affected him.”

~o0o~

Jennifer was exhausted after her long first day receiving instruction from the professors. After dinner with Harry and Hermione, she retired to the quarters she had shared with Hestia for a few weeks. Settling into bed, she snuggled happily under the covers and quickly fell into a deep slumber.

Hestia was happy to see Jennifer sleeping soundly by the time she had concluded a nightcap with Dumbledore and a few of the professors. It was nice to see the girl not shaking and crying out from nightmares anymore. She wondered if the appearance of her magical abilities had anything to do with it - but for some reason Hestia couldn’t help wondering if the Potters had something to do with it.

She sat for a few moments in the chair at the side of Jennifer’s bed watching her sleep. Hestia gently stroked Jennifer’s long black hair and sighed as a swell of motherly affection filled her. Jennifer looked enough like her, and was still young enough, that Hestia could easily imagine the girl as her own daughter.
“Good night Sweetie,” Hestia whispered, giving Jennifer a kiss on the forehead as she got up to leave.

Jennifer stirred slightly when Hestia reached the doorway.

“Night Mum,” Jennifer murmured in her sleep.

Hestia’s heart skipped a beat and she quickly stifled a sob with her hand as her eyes filled with tears.

~o0o~

Neville woke up the next morning and yawned, wishing that he could hold onto the dream a little longer. It had been the best dream that he could ever remember having, and he felt invigorated. Blinking in the bright sunlight pouring through the window, everything looked strange.

He wasn’t in the Gryffindor dorm at Hogwarts. Neville gasped as everything that had happened the previous night fell into place. He rolled over in his bed and his eyes widened when he saw blonde hair strewn across the pillow next to him and the partially covered nude figure of his girlfriend.

Already properly awake, Hannah snuggled right up against Neville’s own nakedness and grinned. Neville’s heart began to race.

“It wasn’t just a dream...” Neville murmured giddily.

“Of course not, silly billy!” chortled Hannah. “But you woke too soon. I was just about to try something to wake you up that Luna said I should try - of course it’ll be a bit different for us than it is for Ginny and Luna, you being a boy...”

“Er...?”

Hannah almost lost her nerve seeing Neville peer awkwardly at her, but she and Neville had shagged twice in his bed before passing out last night, giving of themselves to each other for the first time, and she really wanted to try this. Last night had been amazing, and what Luna had told her about sounded like it would be just as much fun.

Heart beating rapidly in trepidation, Hannah fortified her resolve. Before she could talk herself out of it, Hannah tossed the blankets back and leaned over, wrapping her lips around Neville’s morning erection.

Neville was shocked when she began to lick and suck his thingy. It had never even occurred to him that anyone would dream of doing that. Embarrassed, Neville almost stopped her, but Hannah’s tongue massaging his shaft felt too good. Feeling himself beginning to lose it, he tried to get Hannah’s attention.

“Hannah,” he gasped between ragged breaths. “I’m about to... er... you know!”

Hannah just looked back at Neville with a naughty gleam in her eyes and ignored him, continuing her ministrations. Neville couldn’t hold back any longer. A surge of elation filled Neville and his loins jerked uncontrollably as he filled Hannah’s mouth with his stickiness.

She gagged slightly and quickly pulled back, mouth agape. Several strands of Neville’s essence - jetting from his still erupting penis - landed across Hannah’s pink cheeks. Grimacing as she swallowed what was in her mouth, Hannah grabbed a tissue from the nightstand and wiped her face, then grinned sheepishly at Neville, blushing furiously.
“I... er... I just wanted to see what it would be like,” she said with a nervous giggle. “Did you like it then?”

Neville grinned. “Er... I loved it! ... Erm... if you’d like, I could... er... return the favour.”

Hannah hesitated, then beamed at him. “I don’t have to go home till this evening, so we’ve got plenty of time…”

Later that afternoon, after lessons with the professors were completed, Jennifer joined Harry and Hermione as they practiced spells together in the Room of Requirement. She was surprised when Harry had her begin with half an hour of calisthenics.

“Er... It’s good to get in a routine,” Harry told Jennifer. “Being fit helps you stay sharp and quick on your toes.”

“On my toes...?” Jennifer looked puzzled. “I didn’t think wizards needed exercise to do magic.”

“Being strong and fast helps in a fight...” said Hermione.

“...and we’re going to teach you some really basic combat spells today,” Harry added, “because I bet none of the professors have showed you any. Am I right?”

Jennifer nodded.

“Right, thought not...” said Harry. “They don’t really have a class just focused on learning how to fight with magic at Hogwarts. Defence Against the Dark Arts is mostly how to defend against dark magical creatures and some dark spells...”

“...and most of the proper defensive spells aren’t usually taught until fifth and sixth year Charms class,” said Hermione.

“And at some point we’re going to practice a bit of muggle martial arts too,” Harry continued, “but don’t worry about that for now - Dora will train you when we get around to that. We’re just going to practice stunning and shielding spells today, so you can get the hang of it.”

Jennifer swallowed nervously. “Er... alright then,” said Jennifer, nodding again.

Jennifer was a fast learner, quickly picking up the wand movements and the pronunciations of the spell incantations. Hermione rather thought that Jennifer was a bit like Harry, in that she seemed to have a natural instinct for physical activity, and had remarkably good hand-eye coordination.

“Excellent!” Harry grinned at the end of the lesson. “You’ve got great aim. We’ll have you up to speed in no time flat...”

The following day at breakfast, Harry and Hermione were pleased to see Neville and Viktor both looking much cheerier. Everyone decided that it would be nice to spend the morning on the quidditch pitch. While the others tossed a quaffle around, Viktor and Harry chased a snitch. After flying around for a bit, Harry and Viktor decided to take a breather.

“Zat vos amazing catch Harry,” Viktor panted as he dismounted his broom. “You come out of nowhere on that last one.”
Harry grinned, clutching the struggling snitch in his hand as he sat next to Viktor on the field of the Quidditch pitch. Luna, Ginny, Fleur, and Dora continued to fly around and throw the quaffle through the hoops while Neville watched from the stands.

“Thanks Viktor!” said Harry, “I don’t really miss playing Quidditch for Gryffindor when I have someone to fly with. It’ll be fun to have a few more when the Twins and Ron come back... but what about you right now? Will you still be able to fly for the Bulgarian team if you’re staying in Britain?”

“I want to, but it will be difficult, so they are letting me take time off for now to decide what I want more...” Viktor reddened and trailed off.

Harry had an inkling of what was bothering Viktor.

“Er... So how did your time in Hogsmeade go with Lavender the last couple of days?” asked Harry.

Viktor’s face lit up, but the blush deepened. “Er... the dates were very good. Thanks to Dora, we find nice private place to... I... er... I probably should not speak of it too much though,” Viktor heaved a deep sigh. “I want to marry Lavender, but I think her parents might not approve while she is still in school - but I wait if I have to.”

“That’s great,” said Harry. “So did you...er... ‘pop the question’ then?” Harry had to ask. It only made sense really, if Viktor was willing to wait until Lavender finished school.

Viktor’s sudden grin and nod was Harry’s confirmation. Harry grinned back. He expected Lavender was excitedly telling Parvati all about it.

Harry looked up when he heard Hermione’s voice and he spotted her entering the Quidditch Pitch carrying the never used Firebolt he’d bought for her on the outing to Diagon Alley the previous summer - the same day he’d bought her wand holster. Jennifer was with her, looking really anxious.

“I think I take my leave,” Krum said to Harry with a smirk. “Zese moments are special for you, no?”

“Er... yeah, I suppose,” Harry replied, turning a bit pink. “But it looks like Hermione brought her own broom today, so maybe she’s finally ready to give it a go...”

“Hello Viktor! Hi Harry, would you mind teaching Jennifer how to fly?” Hermione asked brightly. “She can use my broom, and I’ll ride with you...”

“Vot did I say?” Viktor chuckled quietly, clapping Harry on the shoulder. Then he said a bit louder, “Good Afternoon, Hermione, Jennifer, I vas just leaving. Haff fun flying.” Viktor gave Harry a wink and strode out of the pitch carrying his broom.

“Are you sure you want to try this Jennifer?” Harry asked, eyeing the nervous looking girl. Ginny and Luna swooped down to see what was happening, followed closely by Dora and Fleur.

“Er...” Jennifer glanced at Hermione and gulped. “I do really - it looks like loads of fun. But I’m a bit scared...”

“Hi Jennifer! You can ride with me for a bit at first to get used to it if you’d like,” Luna offered dreamily.

“Oh...er...are you sure Luna? I don’t want to interrupt your game...”

“I don’t mind. I’m not very good at throwing the quaffle anyway, but I love to fly. Come on, get on behind me.” Jennifer clambered onto Luna’s broom behind her and put her arms around Luna’s
“Hold on tight,” Luna giggled as she ascended into the air and Jennifer gave a little shriek. Ginny zoomed up after them, chasing them around the hoops.

“Wotcher Hermione,” greeted the bubblegum pink haired girl. Dora peered admiringly at Hermione’s Firebolt.

“Oh Hi Dora,” Hermione grinned, “You might as well have a go with my broom. It looks like Jennifer won’t be needing it after all right now.”

“Cheers Hermione!” said Dora. “I’ve always wanted a go on one of these...”

“I’m sorry Dora,” said Harry. “I never realised. You could’ve had a go on mine...”

“No worries Harry! I never said anything about it before, and I hadn’t really thought about it until loungin’ around Hogwarts this summer.”

Hermione mounted Harry’s broom behind him and sighed happily. Harry grinned when she wrapped her arms tightly around his waist and snuggled against his back. Moments later they were soaring around the towers of the castle, Hermione’s golden tresses whipping in the wind.

That afternoon in the Room of Requirement, after practicing for several hours, Neville and Viktor both managed a Corporeal Patronus, much to their delight. Neville’s appeared to be a Shire Horse, and Viktor’s a falcon.

~o0o~

Several days later, Hermione was thrilled at how quickly Jennifer was progressing. In just the last few days, Jennifer had managed to learn a lot of the basic First Year spells. But Jennifer sighed at the piles of homework the professors had given her.

“I don’t mind all the reading,” Jennifer told Hermione. “It’s absolutely fascinating and I’m a pretty fast reader. It’s just... there’s so much to learn - I’ll never be able to catch up to fifth year by start of term...”

“Don’t worry, I can tutor you. You’re doing amazingly well already,” Hermione replied encouragingly. “You probably won’t be able to manage any of the elective classes - except for Care of Magical Creatures. But I’m sure you’ll do well enough to at least take the core classes for fifth year.”

“And I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to writing with these antiquated quills and inkpots,” Jennifer sighed in annoyance as a splash of ink stained her Charms essay.

“Don’t worry about splodges, there’s a good spell for cleaning up the ink... Tergeo,” said Hermione, pointing her wand at the page and siphoning up the excess ink.

“Oh, ta Hermione!” Jennifer brightened.

“And actually, Harry can help you with your calligraphy, as well as Defence Against the Dark Arts,” Hermione said glowingly, “He’s better than me in Defence. And either of us can help you with Potions...”

“Urgh! Potions - that teacher is really creepy,” Jennifer shivered. “He looks like a vampire, and he’s awfully strict...”
“He’s alright really,” Hermione said sympathetically. “He was quite horrible to me and Harry - especially to Harry - for much of our first year here. But something about him changed. He’s quite nice to us these days - nicer to everyone really...”

“And you’ll find that a lot of teachers here are very strict... they’re a bit like the old-fashioned teachers in boarding-school stories...”

“Yes! That’s exactly what I was going to say,” Jennifer interrupted animatedly, her eyes turning big, “Except for Dumbledore - he’s a real softy - I feel like I’m in one of Enid Blyton's school stories, or those Jennings and Darbishire books...”

“Don’t tell Harry I said this,” Hermione giggled, “but he’s always reminded me a little bit of Jennings... and Professor Snape was Harry’s Mr Wilkins until Snape finally came around.”

Jennifer began giggling too, feeling much better about the piles of homework. “I just realised why I feel like I’m in *First Form at St Clare’s*... Professor McGonagall is *such* a Miss Roberts...”

Hermione snorted and both girls fell into a fit of laughter.

~o0o~

When she’d finished cleaning her teeth, Hermione found Harry reading the book she’d come across in the Room of Requirement. She smiled brightly to see him looking so happy.

“This is amazing Hermione,” he said eagerly. “I never realised... I mean... some of this stuff about Chi, even though it's for muggles to do martial arts, it still looks like magic.”

“That’s because ‘Chi’ is just another name for the body’s magical energy field,” Hermione began, having already read the book, “like Dumbledore was talking about when he was explaining why our Patronuses are so powerful...”

“Wait... doesn’t that mean that muggles can do magic then?” Harry frowned, looking puzzled. “I don’t understand... I thought Dumbledore said that people had to have magical genes...”

“Well, they *do* to be able to manipulate magic and do spells like conjuring and charming, or transfiguring things - obviously muggles can’t do that sort of thing,” Hermione replied, “But *everyone* has the potential to learn how to feel and control their *own* energy fields to some extent... It only makes sense if you think about it.”

“Oh!” said Harry, his eyes widening as light dawned. “Yeah... right! Of course... that does make sense.”

“Yes, and there’s some more interesting bits towards the end of the book. It has an addendum to the original muggle text with detailed illustrations and instruction specifically regarding the energy field, and how to use it for meditation and self-healing and other things... It’s not just for fighting.

“Anyway,” Hermione continued, snatching the book from his hands, a golden gleam in her eye, “you can look at that later. I think it’s about time I helped you with something you’ve been dying to practice for a while.”

“Wait,” Harry gaped, feeling a tingle of excitement. “You mean... *really*?” Harry felt slightly surprised. He hadn’t been certain that Hermione would really want to follow through.

Hermione grinned and nodded.
You're sure then Hermione? I mean - I know you’re not into girls...”

“Says who?” Hermione smirked.

“But... really?”

“Honestly Harry! Is that all you’ve got to say?” Hermione rolled her eyes exaggeratedly. “I’m sorry Harry... I didn’t mean to tease you,” she giggled.

“Look, I said I’d help you change into a girl completely Harry, and I meant it. And... and if I’m being totally honest I have to admit that a part of me is really looking forward to this. I wasn’t sure that I would actually like being with a girl in that way - but ever since Fleur kissed us a couple of times, I realised it actually felt quite nice...

“And now... now I really do think it would be fun to... er... do it - but only with you Harry. Though I think it would be more appropriate to call you Harriet when you’re in girl form.”

“Alright then,” said Harry eagerly. “Er... so how should we go about this then?”

Harry followed Hermione’s instructions while she rummaged through the bookshelf to find her book of female anatomy and took off her nightie. Then she passed him a mirror and parted her naked thighs to give Harry a very close, in depth view of her vulva. Hermione pointed her wand at Harry’s glasses and muttered a magnifying incantation.

An hour and a half later, after numerous tries, Hermione declared that everything looked just right.

“Okay Harriet, it looks smashing!” Hermione giggled. “Now let’s try out the new plumbing to make sure all the sensitive bits are in the right place so that it actually senses everything like it ought to...”

Moments later, Harriet gasped in pleasure as Hermione’s fingers slipped into her heated fold and found the clitoris. Then Hermione probed Harriet’s wet passage with her fingers and found the g-spot.

“Perfect, Harriet!” giggled Hermione again when Harriet wriggled and moaned ecstatically...

~o0o~

Broderick Bode sighed. He was working late again, wondering if he should resign from the Department of Mysteries. He missed seeing his family, and he was concerned by the rumours swirling through the sub-departments that Operations had something massive in the works.

In fact, Bode had been concerned for a long time - ever since Chief Umbridge had wormed into a position as Head of the Improper Use of Magic Office - and now she was Minister and ran the entire DMLE as well as the DoM. But there was nothing he could do about it. He was just a lowly technician, and Operations ran everything.

All he could do was keep his head down and follow orders. Bode couldn’t speak of what occurred in the Department of Mysteries without risking arrest himself.

Bode finished cataloguing and storing the latest magical artifact confiscated after being found in Muggle possession when he heard a shout. He looked up to see Yaxley scowling at him from the doorway. Bode sighed; he wasn’t sure who he hated most - Head of DoM Security Yaxley, or
Yaxley’s immediate superior, Deputy Head of the Unspeakable Office Rookwood.

“Look alive,” snapped Yaxley. “We have a possible breach in the Atrium...”

“What?” gasped Bode, “But who would be mad enough to break into the Ministry...?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out!” growled Yaxley. “Now shut it and get a move on...”

“Wait...” Bode gulped in trepidation, “I’m just a Magical Artifact Storage tech - I’m not Security...”

“You are now...” Yaxley snarled. “Hurry up or I’ll kill you myself.”

~00o~

Screams rent the air and the sound of shattering glass and small explosions filled Diagon Alley in the darkening evening as wizards and witches finished shopping for the day and store-keepers began closing procedures. Florean Fortescue shoved the last of his customers through the floo in his office and turned back to face the hooligans rampaging through his Ice Cream shop shooting curses from their wands.

Florean swore when he spotted that he had missed one of his customers lying sprawled on the floor. Dead or alive, he didn’t know. Angrily, Florean fired hexes and curses back at the Snatchers.

He dropped two of them with stunning spells, but when one fired a killing curse and missed, Florean retaliated with a concussive spell that slammed the Snatcher heavily into a brick wall with a sickening crack. The Snatcher screamed in pain and collapsed in a broken heap. Florean magically bound the other two prone Snatchers and stepped over them.

Florean breathed a sigh of relief; he could still feel his customer’s pulse. Steeling himself, Florean carefully peered out of his door to see if there was anyone else he could save. His face fell when he saw through the haze two people lying in the street who were clearly dead.

Further down Diagon Alley, Fenrir Greyback roared in fury. Ollivander’s shop was empty - there were no wands and no wand-dealer to be found. And if the shop had moved, there was no indication of its new location; Ollivander had left no clues.

It was never good to disappoint the Dark Lord - Ollivander must be found. Seething with rage, Greyback set the place ablaze with a Firestorm Spell and disapparated.

~00o~

Bode’s face went white, but Yaxley was unmoved by the sight of a security guard’s body dangling by the neck in the Atrium of the Ministry as the gore from guard’s disemboweled midsection oozed and dripped to the floor. The sentry had clearly been the victim of an Entrail Expelling Curse.

It was too quiet. Standing by the fountain, Yaxley set his jaw and peered around the Atrium. He heard a sudden noise behind him and whirled around too late as an Incarcerus spell bound him from head to foot. Bode collapsed lifeless to the floor, dropped by a Killing Curse.

Bellatrix cackled as she cast a Petrificus Totalus on Rookwood and the ropes of the Incarcerus vanished.

“She’s just going in the way,” the witch said with a lustful gleam in her eyes. She reached into her cloak and pulled out her ceremonial dagger as she knelt beside Yaxley.
“No curses for you Corban,” purred Bellatrix, drawing a line of red with her dagger across the exposed skin of Yaxley’s forearm, “No, that would be too quick and easy! I think I’ll draw this out slowly - the old-fashioned way...”

Bellatrix giggled madly as she slit another thin red line across Yaxley’s forearm, forming an X through his Dark Mark. If Yaxley could have screamed, he would have as the knife came down again, this time aimed at his gut.

~o0o~

Hundreds of fans watching the football match at the Old Trafford stadium in Manchester were taken aback when all the lights and television-cameras went out, and those with mobile-phones lost their signals. An explosion ripped through the field and a number of muggles fainted as giants tore through the walls and stands.

Snatchers began dropping panicked muggle spectators like flies with curses and stunners, and disapparating with several victims at a time or transporting them via Portkeys. Two dozen Dementors swarmed and began sucking out souls at random.

Lockhart was more careful in choosing his victims, using a discerning eye to locate young muggle girls for himself and Wormtail as he moved through the shrieking and gradually diminishing crowd.

When it was over, nearly a hundred lay strewn in the rubble and many were left behind alive, still screaming amid the smouldering ruins of the stadium. Maximum terror had been inflicted, and numerous muggles had been captured or killed and taken to be turned into the Dark Lord’s Army of the Dead.

~o0o~

By the time the Minister had flooed back to the Ministry from her home, reporters from the Daily Prophet, the Quibbler, and the International Wizard News Agency were already taking pictures from behind the taped perimeter around the dangling mutilated corpses of Yaxley, Bode, and several Security wizards.

The WNN was doing a live radio report, and a glowing green cloud in the shape of a skull and serpent hovered just above the bodies.

There would be no mistaking the hand of Voldemort for the work of a petty thief by the Press this time. Rufus Scrimgeour and numerous Aurors were scouring the area for magical and not so magical evidence, and he gave the Minister the rest of the bad news when she arrived.

“I have fifty Aurors and a Magical Clean-Up squad already in Manchester,” Scrimgeour scowled at the Minister. “We had to move quickly to obliviate the memories of Giant Involvement from the muggle survivors. And I have another dozen Aurors in Diagon Alley. Florean Fortescue rescued a number of people and captured several Snatchers...”

“This is all clearly part of a coordinated assault by Voldemort’s forces!” the Chief Auror concluded.

“Indeed!” the Minister responded darkly. The wheels in Minister Dolores Umbridge’s mind began spinning, seeking ways to turn this disaster to her political advantage.

Fortunately Bode and Yaxley were no huge loss, and Security was expendable. Dolores nearly had the Wizengamot in the palm of her hand. If she had enough Snatchers to punish, and played her cards right, this could be the breakthrough Dolores needed to gain a majority on the Wizengamot.
“Very well Rufus,” Minister Umbridge nodded. “You seem to have everything well in hand, but please inform me once you have finished interrogating the Snatchers under Veritaserum, and then turn them over to the Department of Mysteries for further questioning.

“Excuse me, Minister?”

“People only reveal what they believe to be the truth under Veritaserum, and memories can be tampered with - sometimes we must dig much deeper, Rufus. The DoM has the magical means to go deeper - but it is highly top secret of course...”

The Head Auror regarded the Minister shrewdly for a moment before responding with a nod.

“Yes Madam, I understand!”

~o0o~

“My goodness gracious me!” Garrick Ollivander exclaimed, his features crestfallen as he read the morning edition of the Daily Prophet. “You were absolutely correct Headmaster Dumbledore...”

“Please Garrick, we are all friends here. Call me Albus.”

“Oh...er, indeed sir; Albus it is then. In any case, I cannot thank you enough Albus! I do not know how you managed to foresee the necessity for my relocation, but you were quite right. It appears that my shop was especially targeted by the Dark Lord’s followers for complete obliteration...”

“And you would no doubt be one of Voldemort’s ‘guests’ by now, Garrick,” McGonagall proffered grimly. “Though I am as intrigued as you are by Albus’s remarkable prescience. How did you know Albus?”

“Voldemort will seek every advantage in this fight,” Dumbledore replied. “Like the Minister and ourselves, he faces battle on two fronts. It seemed highly likely to me that he would seek to control Britain’s preeminent supplier of wands...”

“And I confess, I believed that Voldemort would have sought out Garrick’s expertise in wandlore should Tom have run into any issues if he were to face Harry Potter’s wand - their wands each contain the same core: a phoenix feather from Fawkes. I felt preventing him from obtaining that knowledge was of utmost importance.”

“Ah, but of course. That sounds quite... logical!” Ollivander’s gleaming eyes widened. “But not having faced young Mr Potter since his return yet, the Dark Lord still does not know that their wands share a core. So you are suggesting that this was purely a tactical ploy on his part then - quite ingenious of you I must say, Albus.”

Dumbledore took a sip of tea before replying sadly with a shake of his head.

“No, just the terrible Logic of War, Garrick,” the headmaster responded. “He - or she - who controls the supply of weapons in a war has a great advantage - and wands are weapons after all...”

Garrick Ollivander regarded the headmaster of Hogwarts cannily, taking a sip of tea himself.

“Yes - well, regardless, my dear fellow, you undoubtedly saved me from torture and eventual death...”

“Let us hope so,” Dumbledore interjected, “Voldemort’s next target may be Hogwarts itself - but I believe we shall have the advantage should that be the case... no matter what sort of force he
manages to muster.

“I must also confess Garrick, that was another reason I had for cajoling you away from your Diagon Alley location. As you had been so kind as to do a ‘House-Call’ for Hogwarts’ newest student, you know that we have remained for the summer to protect Hogwarts from capture, and you know that Mr Potter is among us,“

“It would not have done for Voldemort to have discovered yet that Hogwarts is currently inhabited. The longer I can maintain that element of surprise, the greater advantage we have!” concluded Dumbledore.

“Thank you,” Ollivander said quietly, peering keenly into Dumbledore’s unguarded eyes. “I appreciate your frankness Albus - that makes this decision much easier. I shall do anything which is within my power to do to aid in the protection of Mr Potter. He and his wife must survive - I expect great things to come from the both of them... If I may be so bold, I humbly offer my services to the Order of the Phoenix...”

~00o~

“That’s the wandmaker,” murmured Jennifer at breakfast. “I wonder what he’s doing here again?”

Hermione shook her head as she chewed a piece of bacon. She had no idea why Ollivander was sitting at the Staff Table with Professor McGonagall and the headmaster. Harry’s brows knitted pensively.

“I dunno... maybe Ollivander is joining the Order. Maybe Dumbledore offered him protection. It’s probably a good idea to keep Britain’s top wandmaker out of enemy hands...” Harry suggested.

“Oh!” gasped Hermione. “Of course Harry. That’s very logical...”

“It does make a load of sense,” responded Dora with a nod before taking a bite of scrambled egg.

Hedwig dropped the Daily Prophet and the Quibbler on the table next to Fleur before settling on Harry’s shoulder and nipping his ear fondly. Harry grinned and reached a hand back to stroke her feathers, passing her a sausage with his other hand.

Fleur’s eyes widened in surprise as she read the headline of the Quibbler.

“Eet is a good thing zat Ollivander ees here,” Fleur gasped. “I think you are correct ‘Arry, look at ze paper...”

Harry was shocked at how close to the mark he had been; he swallowed in trepidation and passed the papers around.

“Looks like Ollivander left in the nick of time,” said Ginny as she read over Luna’s shoulder.

“Right... I suppose this was inevitable,” sighed Harry, “But as horrible as this is, we need to try and not dwell on it. We need to remember why we’re here. That’s what we need to focus on if we hope to have a chance of defeating Voldemort...”
Chapter 46: Looking Glass Chessboard

A fluttering of wings caught the lunchers at the Mingling Table by surprise. An owl which Harry didn’t recognise dropped something off for Dumbledore at the staff-table before depositing a large envelope in front of him while he was in mid-bite.

“Bit late aren’t you?” he chuckled, giving the obviously tired bird a kipper.

“Who’s it from?” asked Hermione as the others looked on with interest.

“It’s from Moody,” Harry replied, his eyebrows perking in surprise. “He’s been watching the BBC and reading the muggle papers, and they say that the Muggle Prime Minister is blaming the Old Trafford Stadium attack on a recalcitrant faction of the IRA trying to blow up the peace process, and... and,” Harry gasped, “…and Sirius Black?”

Hermione nearly snorted her tea out through her nose. Everyone else at the table looked stunned, except for Jennifer who just looked puzzled as she wasn’t sure who Sirius Black was.

“Bloody Fucking Hell!” Harry swore angrily. “They’re claiming that Sirius is a dangerous criminal with ties to international terrorists.”

“What? ... but how... why?” sputtered Dora. “That doesn’t make any bloody sense...”

“It might,” said Hermione, frowning thoughtfully. “Sirius told us that he’s been avoiding being seen in public because of his association with Remus. And don’t forget, Sirius was targeted in the muggle press before as a criminal in our third year when everyone still thought he was a mass murderer.

“What if Minister Umbridge told the Muggle Prime Minister about Sirius because she knows he’s your godfather Harry? What if they’re colluding? I think she might be trying to undermine your support system...”

Harry nodded as he continued to read Moody’s letter. “Yeah... I’d say you’re right Hermione, Moody seems to think this proves that Minister Umbridge and the muggle PM are in cahoots too... And he says that I should avoid being seen in the muggle world because he thinks that the Minister may have also informed the PM that I’m Sirius’s godson...”

“A conclusion with which I quite agree,” said Dumbledore, causing everyone at the Mingling Table to lurch in their seats. They had been so preoccupied that they hadn’t seen the headmaster approaching.

“I too have just received a communication from Alastor informing me of this alarming turn of events,” Dumbledore continued. “I believe that it would be wise to follow Alastor’s advice Harry. It would be best for you not to be seen in public...

“However, if it should be at all necessary for you to walk for a time in the non-magic world, I trust that your... special talents shall keep you unnoticed,” Dumbledore concluded with a wink before strolling back to the staff-table.

“Special talents?” asked Jennifer. And she wasn’t the only one who looked bewildered. Only Dora seemed to know what Dumbledore was on about.

“Er...” said Harry, suddenly feeling a bit guilty with all eyes upon him. It occurred to Hermione that Harry might be feeling badly about not telling their friends about his rare ability.
“Harry’s a metamorphmagus,” Hermione said quietly.

“Like me...” Dora added.

“He is?” Ginny gasped. “Really?”

“Er... yeah,” said Harry. “It was supposed to be a secret. But you’re our friends and I suppose I could’ve told you. Sorry I didn’t let you all in on it...”

“It’s alright Harry. You don’t have to apologise,” said Luna. “Of course it’s something you’d want to keep secret. If too many people know, even your friends, someone might let something slip accidentally.”

“Er... what is a metamorphmagus?” asked Jennifer, still looking puzzled.

“Someone who can alter their appearance to look like someone else at will, without the use of a wand,” Hermione answered. “Only someone born with the ability can do it without a wand...”

After lunch Hermione took Harry aside and spoke quietly to him, a big grin on her face.

“Speaking of being a metamorphmagus,” she said, “I think it’s time for a proper ‘first date’ with Harriet tonight.”

“Oh... er... yeah, alright,” said Harry, blushing and grinning back at Hermione. “I’ve been looking forward to this for a while - I’ve always... er... I dunno... I guess I always wanted to experience what it was like to be a girl - at least sometimes anyway...” he muttered, peering around to make sure no-one was listening and turning even redder. “I’m not sure why really...”

“I know,” said Hermione. “I finally understood why you were so interested after you read that Oz book to me. Well, you’ll definitely get to find out tonight.” Hermione smirked and leaned in close for a giggly whisper in Harry’s ear. “And I have a little surprise for you - I ordered a... er... well, I ordered a toy to play with...”

Harry’s jaw dropped in immediate understanding and he swallowed nervously; he hadn’t even considered that. Harry couldn’t stop thinking about it the rest of the afternoon and all through dinner. He couldn’t concentrate and fidgeted the entire time he was supposed to be helping Hermione tutor Jennifer, and his palms kept sweating.

After dinner Harry said goodnight to their friends rather absentmindedly and nearly tripped over his own feet as he departed the Great Hall with Hermione.

Harry stared at himself in the bathroom mirror while he cleaned his teeth and wondered what the hell he was doing. He felt as anxious as if he really were going on a first date. He had no idea what he was supposed to do.

Should he morph now or after joining Hermione in bed? Put on makeup? What was he supposed to wear? Pyjamas? Nothing?

Sighing, Harry undressed and reached for his pyjamas only to discover that they were gone. In their place was a nightgown, a sheer slip, and a pair of silky white knickers. He shook his head and chortled. At least now he knew what Hermione expected.

Harry looked at his naked body in the mirror and began to morph. His jaw diminished and his face rounded, lips puffing and pouting slightly. The only feature on his now heart-shaped face which remained wholly unaltered were his eyes. His hair lengthened until it curled over his shoulders and
his black fringe flopped in his face. Harry flicked his now long fringe back and continued.

His entire form slimmed and curved until there wasn’t a single sharp angle on his body. Harry peered between his legs swallowing anxiously and completed the transformation. It still felt really weird to watch his dangly bits shrink into his body and see a slit form. At this point she was Harriet, she reminded herself.

Harriet spotted one last thing which she had been thinking about altering even before she had finally figured out how to transform her naughty bits. She had noticed Hermione picking a pubic hair out of her teeth the other day after sucking Harry off. Hermione hadn’t said a word, but Harriet still felt embarrassed.

Her pubes had come in gradually as Harry, and she hadn’t really noticed quite how thickly until this point. As much as Harriet enjoyed stroking the delicately trimmed tawny wisps on Hermione’s mound, she quite liked that Hermione’s labia was bare. She felt it was only fair to return the favour and she watched her pubic hair disappear.

Finally satisfied that everything was right - that she was now completely feminine and presentable - Harriet slipped into the nightclothes Hermione had left for her. She tingled at the sensation of the silky fabric clinging to her skin. Harriet took a deep breath to steady herself, and exited the bathroom.

“You’re beautiful!” Hermione gasped when Harriet entered the bedroom. On the previous occasion when Harry had completely transformed into a girl, she had looked much like Hermione as Hermione had been Harry’s model.

“Th...thanks,” Harriet stammered nervously.

Hermione took Harriet’s glasses off so that she could get the complete effect.

“Gorgeous Harry... I mean Harriet. You can put your glasses back on again in a minute. I just want to see all of you without them for a bit. Here let me help you...”

Harriet got goosebumps when Hermione helped her slip out of the long nightgown. Harriet’s erect pink nipples were clearly visible, poking through the sheer fabric of her white chemise. She gasped with a thrill of pleasure when Hermione cupped her firm perky round handfuls and gave them a gentle squeeze.

“Oh, they’re the same size as mine Harriet!” Hermione gasped again, melting into Harriet’s green eyes. “You really meant it when you said you thought I was perfect...”

“Of course I did Hermione!” squeaked Harriet.

“But mine aren’t very big,” Hermione replied mournfully.

“I love your ... er... breasts,” Harriet responded earnestly, “...They fit in my hands perfectly. I know they’ve grown a bit, but so have my hands...”

Hermione purred and threw her arms around Harriet, giving her a big kiss. Feeling Hermione pressed against her, inhaling her calming minty scent, Harriet relaxed.

“How did you change your voice?” Hermione asked after separating her lips from Harriet’s. “I mean, I can tell it’s still you, but it’s in the right register, and I can tell you’re not putting it on...”

“I...er... I’m not sure really. I didn’t try to on purpose. I... I think my vocal cords just shrank slightly when I was adjusting my neck to look like a girl’s.”
“Hmmm... that makes sense,” Hermione trailed her fingers along Harriet’s delicately sculpted throat, “It must have altered when the muscles changed shape.” Hermione replaced her fingers with her lips; Harriet trembled slightly and her heart began to race.

“This really is amazing Harriet...” Hermione murmured, “all the little details are perfect - even better than last time.”

“Because I had the perfect model Hermione,” Harriet whispered as she put her hands around Hermione’s waist and began tenderly returning Hermione’s kisses. Hermione melted again as she pulled Harriet onto the bed.

New sensations tingled in Harriet’s body, and the silky knickers Hermione had given her began to moisten as Hermione slid her hands across Harriet’s taut, smooth abdomen, and drew her fingers across trembling skin. Hermione pushed the clingy chemise up above Harriet’s breasts, kneading her firm little hills.

Tentatively at first, Hermione gave the attentive peaks a lick, then encircled one with her lips, gently nibbling, drawing it in wetly, flicking it with her tongue as she gained more confidence and felt Harriet responding.

Harriet shuddered as a ripple of pleasure swept through her from head to toe; her nipples were now many times more sensitive than she recalled them ever being before. She moaned and folded her legs around Hermione’s when Hermione slid a hand under the waistband of Harriet’s knickers.

Hermione slipped her fingers into Harriet’s entrance while she continued to lave Harriet’s nipples with her tongue; her thumb located Harriet’s fleshy pearl and the younger girl’s moans grew louder. As the waves of euphoria crested, Harriet squealed and arched ecstatically, flooding Hermione’s fingers.

“Mmmm... you’re much more vocal as a girl Harriet,” giggled Hermione as she tugged off Harriet’s soaked knickers.

“I... I never realised...” gasped Harriet, still in the throes of passion, “…so sensitive...”

When the fog of ardour in Harriet’s brain cleared somewhat, she saw that Hermione had stripped off her own chemise and knickers. Hermione straddled Harriet’s waist, and with a gleam in her eyes she gestured towards the toy she had bought.

Harriet’s eyes widened and she gulped, shivering slightly in anticipation.

“Are you ready for this Harriet?” Hermione asked, her eyes softening with concern. She needn’t have worried. Harriet grinned.

“Be gentle Hermione... it’s my First Time!”

“Prat!” Hermione stuck her tongue out and swatted Harriet playfully, giggling.

Hermione parted Harriet’s thighs and presented the tip of the strap-on to Harriet’s humid pink entrance. Hermione squeezed Harriet’s bottom cheeks and thrust her loins, penetrating Harriet to the core. Harriet gasped when she felt the lance slide inside her, filling her completely.

Harriet was utterly blown away by the rapturous sensations engulfing her as Hermione built up a steady rhythm. She bucked her hips to meet Hermione’s thrusts as the sweat dripped from Hermione’s brow and spattered onto Harriet’s shimmying breasts.
Harriet wrapped her legs and arms around Hermione’s backside and undulated beneath her. Another wave of elation surged and the magic crackled and arced from the squirming pair of naked witches. The bed rocked and the walls of the Potters’ bedchamber shook as the tempest of bliss took them both, the room echoing with the sounds of ecstasy.

As the storm of delight ebbed, Hermione peppered Harriet with little kisses.

“Well?” said Hermione, grinning. “What do you think? Was it as nice as you expected?”

“That was fantastic Hermione!” Harriet gushed, her green eyes shining gleefully. “What about you...? Technically it was your first time with a girl too...”

“It was lovely!” Hermione bit her lip, fluttering her lashes, her cheeks turning pink. “You’re so pretty as a girl - you felt so nice... and... and it was fun pretending to be the ‘boy’...”

“Brilliant!” said Harriet. “Let’s have another go then shall we?”

“Only if I get to be the girl again after...” Hermione giggled.

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Summer seemed to be flying by. Snape appeared to be pleased with the Potters’ progress in Advanced Potions (though as usual, it was hard from his expressions to be entirely certain). Training and practice in the Room of Requirement with the others was going well, and Jennifer was exceeding everyone’s expectations.

All the professors were doing their utmost to help Jennifer catch up enough to be placed among the fifth year students at the start of term. Even Lupin had taken up his role as professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts to help her advance as quickly as possible.

Although it was clear that she didn’t have time to learn four years worth of magical theory, and four years of Potions or Herbology, Jennifer’s spellwork was exceptional. She was already learning second year spells by the time Harry and Neville’s birthday arrived, and nobody doubted that she would at the very least be able to perform most of the spells required for beginning fifth year students.

Sirius and Remus insisted on throwing a birthday party for Harry and Neville in the Shrieking Shack, and it was being catered by Dobby and the other house-elves. On the way to the Whomping Willow, Jennifer chatted about some of her latest schoolwork.

“I still can’t believe that things like Mummies, Vampires and Werewolves are real,” said Jennifer, a little shiver running up her spine.

“They’re just like other people really. They aren’t all evil.” Hermione reassured Jennifer. “At least not all Werewolves and Vampires are - I don’t really know about Mummies. Professor Lupin is a Werewolf.”

“Really?” Jennifer’s eyes widened. “He’s so kind - I never would have guessed.”

“Yeah... Remus... er... Professor Lupin’s really nice,” Harry nodded. “He was one of my dad’s best friends - he and Sirius both were...” Harry couldn’t help feeling a flare of anger as he thought about Wormtail again, but he did his best to put it aside and just enjoy the celebration.

Soon the party was underway. Everyone had butterbeers in hand or set on the table next to plates of hors d’oeuvres and bottles of Elf-wine. Neville was beaming, thrilled to have a cake with his own
name on it sitting next to Harry’s.

Dora had brought her acoustic guitar, and Jennifer joined in on the old piano in the sitting room of the Shack after Lupin used a magic spell to tune it up. Everybody danced when Dora and Jennifer played a few bouncy tunes. Then a record player was turned on; Fleur and Dora continued dancing for a bit while Luna and Ginny snogged in a corner and Neville and Viktor took turns dancing with Jennifer.

Harry and Hermione took a breather and joined Remus and Sirius in comfy seats at the edge of the room. Sirius took a large swig from a crystal goblet full of wine before grinning at Harry.

“Well Harry, looks like I’m a mass-murdering fugitive again,” he chuckled tipsily. “I just can’t seem to shake my reputation.”

“Of course, being a known associate of a fugitive Werewolf probably didn’t help matters,” said Remus half-jokingly with a wry smile.

“According to Moody it’s probably my fault for being your godson,” Harry muttered darkly. “The Prime Minister’s only going after you because of me...”

“Don’t be silly Harry,” said Hermione sharply, frowning at Sirius. “Moody didn’t say anything of the sort. It’s not your fault at all.”

“Hermione’s right, Harry,” said Remus. “The blame is not yours to bear. The Minister is just trying to rattle all of our cages...”

“That hag would out Dumbledore to the muggle media too, if she thought she could get away with it,” Sirius added. “The only reason she probably hasn’t is because it would raise too many eyebrows at the ICW... The Minister wouldn’t want to be called to account by an International Tribunal for violating the Statute of Secrecy...”

“Thank goodness for small favours!” sighed Remus. “Anyway Sirius, lets not dwell on that. This is supposed to be a party.”

“Quite right Remus!” Sirius looked crestfallen when he realised what he’d done. He peered apologetically at Hermione and Harry. “I’m sorry Harry... I shouldn’t have even mentioned it. Come on then... time for presents...”

When the party was over, everyone helped Harry and Neville carry their presents back to the castle. Two others were quite surprised to have received presents of their own.

“Thanks for the broom Harry!” gushed Jennifer tearily, giving him a hug. “I’ll pay you back when I get a chance to transfer some of my inheritance to a wizard bank...”

“No, please,” interjected Harry, blushing. “It’s a present...”

“Cheers Harry!” said Dora, looking more than a bit teary herself as she carried her own brand spanking new Firebolt. “Really, you shouldn’ ‘ave... these must’ve cost a fortune.”

“And we’re supposed to give you presents for your birthday, not the other way around,” Jennifer responded. “You should have told me your birthday was coming...”

“It’s alright... really! I’ve got way more than I need already,” retorted Harry, his blush deepening. “Sirius’s family was filthy rich, and he just up and gave me a whole vault - and I’ve already got a vault of my own. I just want to share what I have with people I care about.”
Jennifer bit her lip, not sure what else to say, once again feeling a bit overwhelmed that people she’d only known a few weeks actually cared enough about her to treat her like family.

After dinner, Hermione helped Jennifer study for a Charms exam. Then Jennifer spent some time perusing magazines and catalogues with Luna and Ginny, Fleur and Dora.

“I can’t believe it. Do wizards really dress like this every day?” Jennifer giggled when Ginny showed her a British wizard-wear catalogue.

“Mostly only older wizards and witches,” snorted Ginny. “Even my mum and dad wear robes at home, but they both dress like muggles a lot - especially Dad, because Ministry employees are usually around muggles all the time. Most younger wizards - except for a few Purebloods - tend to follow modern muggle fashion trends...”

“My daddy only wears robes unless he absolutely has to change,” said Luna with an amused look. “You should see some of the silly outfits he wears when he has to be around muggles to follow a story for his paper.”

“Ze Continental wizard world, it ees much more with ze times,” tittered Fleur, passing Jennifer a French magazine full of alluring men and women in sleek, elegant clothes which Jennifer could easily imagine seeing in posh muggle nightclubs.

“I can’t picture my mum and dad in anything but muggle clothes,” said Dora, peering at the French magazine with great interest. “Mum gave up wizard clothes when she married my dad apparently. They only wear robes for formal events.”

Nearby, Hermione was sitting on Harry’s lap with her arms around him as they read The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe together. She had bought Harry a complete set of The Chronicles of Narnia with full colour illustrations for his birthday.

“Thanks loads for this Hermione. I haven’t read these in ages,” said Harry, giving her a kiss, “And I’ll have to thank your mum for the set of Roald Dahl books. I only ever read Charlie and the Chocolate Factory...”

Distracted by the sound of giggling, they looked up to see the others huddled around the magazines.

“That was really kind of you to order those brooms for Dora and Jennifer Harry,” Hermione beamed.

“Er... Yeah, I suppose,” said Harry awkwardly. “I just wanted to do something nice for them both. Dora’s family, and Jennifer... well... she deserves to be treated nicely - she doesn’t have anyone else but us now.

“Anyway, Jennifer needed her own broom - she's great at flying!” Harry suddenly grinned. “She took to it jolly quick after she got used to it riding with Luna...”

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Harry peered closely and listened attentively as Hermione turned the page and pointed at the Chinese symbols next to the illustrations.

“...So...” Hermione continued from where she had left off, “these are some of the symbols which should provide the same physical protection as practicing Iron Shirt and Iron Skull techniques. They protect bones and internal organs from damage, and also supposedly prevent serious wounds from edged and piercing weapons.”
“I thought that sort of thing usually took years of practice,” said Harry.

“Yes... for muggles,” Hermione nodded in agreement. “But being wizards, we can use a shortcut, and get similar effects by tattooing these symbols on ourselves... It’s not perfect - they won’t make us completely invulnerable - we could still be injured if the Force behind a physical attack is strong enough.

“I doubt they would protect us from bullets for example, but for most common circumstances they should protect us from serious injuries.”

“That’s brilliant Hermione!” Harry said excitedly. “It’s a shame I didn’t know about this in second year! Dobby’s rogue bludger wouldn’t have broken my arm.”

“I know... I was just thinking the same thing myself,” sighed Hermione. “Still, you had no idea that you’d be good at calligraphy in second year, and there’s no guarantee that you could have drawn them well enough to stop your arm from being broken back then.

“And in any case, these symbols aren’t at all common or even really known in European Wizarding usage Harry,” Hermione continued. “I expect that normally you would only learn them if you went to a Chinese wizarding school, or had a Chinese teacher.

“We got very lucky to find this book, probably because when you asked the Room of Requirement to conjure up a place to practice fighting you envisioned the Kwoons and Dojos from some of the martial arts films that Sirius and Remus took us to see. It’s all your doing really, Harry,” Hermione concluded, beaming proudly at her husband.

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Even from his dank dungeon cell, fetid water dripping from the rocky ceiling, he could hear the waves crashing against the craggy cliffs of the Scottish headlands. Cassius Nott sighed at the sound of freedom, so near, and yet so far away. But if anything could be said for his lack of freedom - and the torture that he had endured - it had at least given him the time and the motivation to rethink things.

During his time in captivity, Cassius had examined the wreckage of his life and found it wanting. He set his jaw in determination as he regarded his shivering son huddled in the corner. There were only two ways out: dead, or alive in the service of the Dark Lord. And Cassius knew he would do anything to see his son live - even if it meant his own death.

“Theo... Theo, listen to me...”

His son looked up with sunken eyes at his father but said nothing.

“You know what I have to do...” said Cassius Nott. “What you must do if you wish to leave these walls... alive!”

A distraught expression crossed Theodore Nott’s features as he continued to eye his father.

“Please, Dad... don’t do it! He’ll kill you anyway sooner or later - you know he will. I don’t want you to leave me.”

“I have to do it...” Cassius replied. “...for you - for your mother. If I do this, and he accepts me, the Dark Lord will give you a chance to prove yourself to him as well.

“I just want you to promise me one thing... if you see an opportunity to get away, take it! ... Get your
mother and run... run as far away as you can. And promise that you will do better than me if you survive...”

“Dad... please...” Theo interjected.

Cassius shook his head and went on, “This life we’ve led - everything I ever taught you... it means nothing! It’s brought us nothing but misery... and pain to those we’ve harmed - it’s a dead end! What bloody use is blood purity... or great wealth if we fritter it away on selfish acts? Dumbledore is right... he’s always been right!

“It’s too late for me... I’ve done too many horrible things - unspeakable things - and I might have to do some more if the Dark Lord will take me back. But you... you still have a chance for a better future if you can stay alive. Promise me that you’ll stay alive and do better... Promise me!”

Theo hesitated, tears running down his cheeks. He swallowed and slowly nodded. “Al...alright Dad. I will... I’ll do better... I swear!”

“Good... That’s good then. They’ll be coming for me in a moment... Just sit tight, and whenever you get your chance, you go!”

The approaching sound of footsteps and jangling keys echoed in the dungeon passage beyond the iron bars of the cell. A tall wizard, his chiseled features framed by grizzled hair and stubble, halted and peered through the bars. Theo shrank back when Rabastan Lestrange’s glacial gaze settled upon him. Those frozen eyes returned to Cassius.

“Nott... On your feet.” Rabastan’s voice was as icy as his demeanor. “The Dark Lord deigns to hear your pleas.”

Theo tried to stifle his sobs as his father was hauled out of the cell and led away through the dungeon halls, certain that he’d never see him again.

“I promise Dad...” he muttered to himself between sobs. “I’ll be a better person... I promise...”

Cassius Nott was roughly shoved through the entrance of one of the refurbished castle’s large halls and thrown to the ground in front of the Dark Lord. The seat which held Voldemort was probably the most opulent chair in the ancient muggle residence, an intricately carved mahogany armchair befitting a lord. It had clearly been chosen to be the Dark Lord’s “throne.”

To one side of Voldemort stood Wormtail, and to the other, Bellatrix Lestrange. A small number of Death Eaters - most of them liberated when Voldemort had taken Akaban - stood at attention in short rows on either side of Nott. With glinting red eyes, the Dark Lord looked down upon Nott from where he sat.

“Speak your piece, Cassius,” said Bellatrix, her voice razor sharp. “Tell us why you believe you deserve a reprieve from the Dark Lord’s righteous wrath.”

Cassius Nott swallowed nervously, steeling himself to make his case, and addressed Voldemort directly. “I... I was wrong to support Minister Umbridge. I know now that you are the only one who truly deserves my fealty. I beg your forgiveness my Lord, and ask to be reinstated as one of your soldiers.”

“But how can the Dark Lord trust you Cassius?” Bellatrix narrowed her eyes in suspicion at the wizard prostrating himself before Voldemort. “How do you intend to prove your worth after your betrayal?”
“I... I’ll do anything... anything you ask of me my Lord!” Cassius replied. “Anything... Just give me one task. And if... if I fail... my life is yours.”

The Dark Lord shifted slightly in his seat, his red slitted eyes piercing Nott’s. To everyone’s surprise, a thin smile crept to the Dark Lord’s lips.

“Yesss!” hissed Voldemort. “You will indeed, won’t you! You will do anything as long as I let your son live...” said the Dark Lord, his high, cold voice devoid of mirth, belying the sarcastic smile on his face. “Tut tut, it would appear that your true loyalty extends only to your family... How Noble of you Cassius!

“No matter... As long as your boy is in my possession, you will obey my every command. Very well... Nott, I do have a task for you. You will serve me as a Snatcher, and I shall have your son as a foot-soldier as well.

“Rabastan will oversee your first mission... and should you disappoint me again, he will return with your dead body as an example to your son of the price of disloyalty and failure...”

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Nearly a week had passed since Harry’s birthday. When Hermione returned from the library one afternoon, she found him sitting in their quarters in front of the mirror, shirtless. Her breath caught as she eyed his chiseled torso, wondering if Harry was preparing for a bit of fun. Harry looked around when he heard Hermione entering the room.

“What are you doing Harry?” Hermione asked eagerly with a golden flash in her eyes. “Something I can help you with perhaps?”

“Actually... yeah!” Harry grinned, knowing what Hermione was thinking. “I think I’m ready to test out these Chinese symbols now...” Harry waved one of his ink-brushes at Hermione and raised his eyebrows, smirking.

“Oh!” said Hermione, almost sounding disappointed. But she recovered herself quickly and began unbuttoning her blouse.

Harry looked puzzled for a moment, wondering what Hermione was up to as he had made his intentions quite plain. Hermione caught his questioning look.

“You were planning to use me as a guinea pig for the Chinese tattoos, weren’t you?” Hermione responded breezily to Harry’s expression.

“Oh... er... Yeah - of course!” Harry reddened and reached for his bottle of ink.

In fact Harry hadn’t been planning anything of the sort. He had been planning on tattooing himself and having Hermione throw things at him and try to knock him out. But he had learned not to refuse Hermione anything when she had that determined gleam in her eyes.

Harry started by painting the symbols on himself while Hermione waited patiently for her turn. He had to steel his nerves to ink Hermione; he had discovered before the Third Task that it required all of his concentration to focus on the runes and symbols and ignore the distraction of her enticing figure.

“Mmm...” Hermione purred a bit and quivered at the delightful sensation of Harry’s ink-brushes dancing across her skin. Harry smiled to himself, unable to entirely block out the intoxicating effects of Hermione’s unclothed presence
It had taken some time before Harry and Hermione managed to test the symbols, as they had both lingered over-long before dressing after the tattoo ink dried. But after Harry had cheerfully concluded fondling his wife’s nipples and bringing her to climax with his other hand in her knickers, and she had returned the favour with a quickie fellatio, they dressed and made their way to the Room of Requirement.

The Chinese symbols were a rousing success.

After some cajoling, Harry finally managed to convince Hermione to test his symbols first before he tried anything on her. First he had Hermione throw heavier and heavier objects at him with Banishing charms. Then, when he felt brave enough, Harry encouraged Hermione to use Bombardas of increasing intensity on statues very close to him - which Hermione finally did with great reluctance.

Harry was thrilled with the efficacy of the symbols. Not only did every object which Hermione conjured and hurled at Harry bounce right off him with minimal pain - if any at all - but the symbols also appeared to protect him from the worst of the concussive effects of blasting spells as well.

But Hermione drew the line and refused point blank to try and cut him with one of the bladed weapons on the wall when Harry begged her to. Finally, when it was obvious that Hermione was having none of it, Harry took a dagger and placed it against the palm of his hand, swallowing nervously.

“Harry... don’t!” she moaned. “What if it goes wrong?”

“It won’t Hermione. I’m sure of it...”

Hermione winced and closed her eyes when Harry drew the blade across his palm.

“Amazing!” Harry muttered, peering at the unbroken skin.

Hermione eyed Harry with great anxiety when he tentatively poked the knife at his ribs. Surely he wouldn’t dare. Hoping that Harry would be sensible and just give himself little jabs, Hermione braced herself.

Gulping, Harry squeezed his eyes shut and plunged the dagger with all his might. Hermione screamed loud enough to wake the dead.

Harry grunted from the exertion and a pinching sensation, and the blade bent in half, leaving nothing but a single drop of blood oozing from a pinprick. The only real pain he felt was in his throbbing eardrums, still ringing with the echoes of Hermione’s shriek of terror.

Hermione glared at Harry angrily and stormed out of the Room of Requirement.

She gave Harry the silent treatment the rest of the afternoon, only grudgingly following him up to the Room of Requirement after dinner when it was time to meet the others. Hermione glowered at Harry the entire time while he painted the symbols on everyone else.

One by one they all lifted their shirts and blouses, baring their midriffs for Harry’s ink-brushes. Not being ones for modesty, Fleur and Luna removed their tops completely, much to Neville’s dismay. Viktor chuckled when Neville turned beet red and averted his eyes.

Dora just grinned, feeling a little tingle of excitement at the sight of her topless partner. Ginny and Jennifer both blushed furiously when it came time for each of them to lift their shirts.
“That tickles...” Ginny giggled as Harry delicately inked her belly.

“Oui, zat it does!” said Fleur with a dreamy smile, recalling the sensuous touch of Harry’s ink-brushes before the Third Task.

“Now remember,” Harry admonished when everyone was inked and dressed, “This is no substitute for a Shield Charm, but it should protect you from physical blows or a long fall even if you don’t have your wand and can’t cast a Protego or a cushioning charm in time...”

“Got it Harry,” Dora nodded earnestly.

“...and it’ll even protect you from getting stabbed or cut.” Harry continued, glancing guiltily at Hermione who was still angrily scowling at him at intervals.

“Prat!” Hermione muttered. But Hermione could never stay cross with Harry for too long, especially not when his face was as stricken with guilt as it was. “Don’t scare me like that ever again!” she snapped.

“I’m really sorry Hermione... you were looking right at me,” Harry responded, his green eyes as big as saucers. “I just thought it was obvious - I thought you... er... I thought you knew what I was going to do. I was terrified too...”

“I know...” Hermione sighed, finally deflating and looking at Harry sheepishly. “I’m sorry too Harry - I just wasn’t quite ready to watch you stab yourself with a knife - especially not without having Madam Pomfrey at-the-ready just in case... I didn’t think you were really going to do it... Not as vigorously as that anyway. I’m just thrilled these symbols work like they’re supposed to!”

“You and me both!” said Harry, still looking very apologetic.

“Wait... what are you doing Harry?” Hermione asked, her face flushing when Harry lifted her blouse a bit, exposing part of her abdomen. Neville gulped and looked the other way again.

“I’m just adding a couple of basic Norse Runes. I just reckoned we should practice with a full slate of Protection Runes and Symbols for the next few sessions. The tattoos won’t wear off...”

Finally everyone was inked and eager to practice being attacked after Harry and Hermione demonstrated the effectiveness of the symbols.

Unfortunately, nobody was eager to take up the role of the attacker. It was one thing to practice stunning spells on each other, and basic holds, joint-locks and throws - which they had all gradually become used to, but everyone was too afraid of hurting each other with strikes and blows if something went wrong.

Harry was as reluctant as anybody to clobber someone. He sighed, remembering how he himself had been berated by Mad Eye for being too soft on Hermione during training for the Triwizard Tournament.

Fleur attempted to cajole Dora into whacking her with a Beater’s Bat to get things going, but Dora was having none of it. She just couldn’t bring herself to thump Fleur. Dora still couldn’t get the horrifying picture out of her mind of Fleur lying in the Hospital Wing in agony with two broken legs after the Third Task.

Finally, Luna suggested a game of Rock-Parchment-Scissors; the loser would have to be the assailant. Luna lost. Groaning and wishing that she hadn’t suggested the game, Luna picked up the Beater’s bat, closed her eyes, and swung it at Fleur.
“C’est Magnifique!” exclaimed Fleur when the bat shattered against her arm. All she had felt was a sting as if she had been on the receiving end of a strong slap, and the bat lay in pieces on the floor.

“Oh thank goodness...” Luna opened her eyes and let out a huge sigh of relief.

“Merlin!” Dora’s jaw dropped.

“That’s incredible,” gasped Ginny, goggling in amazement as she examined the splinters of the bat.

“Yes it is,” Hermione agreed, “But we should still be careful... we can still be injured or even killed. This just makes it loads harder...”

In no time, everyone was giggling and having fun breaking Beater’s Bats over each other’s heads and using Banishing Charms to chuck heavy objects at each other with no ill effects except for a few red marks, and a couple of scratches. Dora and Fleur were even brave enough to have a little knife fight.

Only Jennifer had yet to join in. Hermione spied Jennifer trembling and nudged Harry who was watching the others and chortling.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry. “I didn’t think... If you want, you can sit this out. I know the symbols will work... and honestly, I’m not comfortable with all the violence either.”

“It’s alright,” Jennifer shook her head. “I want to join in... Really! I know I ought to for my own good. I just keep freezing up.”

“Oh, I know,” Hermione said, brightening, “Cheering Charms... we haven’t done any today Harry.”

“Of course,” Harry smacked his forehead. “We should have started out with that... saved ourselves a bit of time. I forgot.”

One Cheering Charm later and Jennifer was gleefully cracking Beater’s Bats across shins and ribs with the rest of them.

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“Oh... well done, Rufus! Well done indeed!” said Minister Umbridge in her breathiest, girliest voice. “This exceeds all expectations. However did you manage it?”

Head Auror Rufus Scrimgeour hesitated momentarily, unmoved by the high praise, but he had to admit that the Aurors who had survived their encounter with Voldemort’s forces certainly deserved the accolades. They had managed to run down a small group of Voldemort’s Snatchers as they had attempted to burn down a Liverpool homeless shelter near St Luke’s Church Gardens and make off with its residents.

Among the Snatchers had been Cassius Nott and Rabastan Lestrange. Nott was now in recovery at St Mungo’s, grateful for his rescue - and Lestrange was in a Ministry holding cell with the Snatchers after undergoing a Veritaserum interrogation. Finally Scrimgeour responded to the Minister’s query.

“I cannot take the credit Minister - that belongs to the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol and the Auror on-site in Liverpool... and no small amount of luck. The attack on the homeless shelter was witnessed by local Patrol and the Auror assigned to liaise with their Unit... They happened upon the Snatchers quite by chance.

“The ensuing battle was fierce and the DMLE lost several of our finest,” Rufus sighed, “yet they still
managed to subdue and apprehend the culprits.”

Minister Umbridge would have rubbed her hands together and cackled with glee, but she didn’t want to give Scrimgeour the wrong impression.

“Well Rufus, please be sure to send the Ministry’s regards to the families of the fallen. Those who were lost must receive the highest honours. Now... do we have any actionable intelligence yet regarding the location of Voldemort?”

“Unfortunately no...” Scrimgeour sighed again. “Warlock Nott has no recollection of where he was being held. And despite the Veritaserum interrogations, I regret to inform you that Rabastan Lestrange and the Snatchers have been unable to provide any details regarding the current whereabouts of Voldemort... perhaps a secret keeping spell?”

Dolores calculated her options. It was a shame that the location of Voldemort’s base of operations continued to elude the Ministry, but that wasn’t particularly important for the moment. The most important thing was that Dolores now had a sizable number of hooligans to punish - including those which Mr Fortescue had captured during the Diagon Alley attack - and someone of note that she could haul before the Wizengamot.

With Lestrange in hand, this was the moment which she had been waiting for - a decisive turn of affairs which would cement a majority on the Wizengamot. Minister Umbridge smiled sympathetically at Scrimgeour.

“Never mind that Rufus,” Dolores responded. “The Department of Mysteries shall take over from here. I have faith that the methods of the Unspeakable Office will yield some actionable information... and if we do indeed obtain anything of use, I shall inform you immediately so that we can bring the rest of these criminals to justice. In the meantime, again - Good Work!”

Head Auror Scrimgeour’s forehead creased in consternation as he watched the Minister depart his office through narrowed eyes, a sense of unease settling over him. He couldn’t put his finger on any one thing in particular, but doubts continued to niggle at the back of his mind.

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His footsteps echoing through stone corridors and across marble halls, Wormtail anxiously scurried through the castle to the Dark Lord’s throne room, knowing that his Master would not be pleased.

When Wormtail arrived, Voldemort scowled menacingly at him. “What is the word Wormtail? What has become of Rabastan and the Snatchers?”

“My Lord,” Wormtail swallowed nervously, hoping that he would not be taken to account for Rabastan’s failures, “the Dark Witch has him, and the Snatchers who were with him. The word is that they have been turned over to the Department of Mysteries, and that Nott is once again in his Mistress’s hands, being cared for in St Mungo’s.”

“That is most unwelcome news.” Voldemort’s face darkened and his deadly gaze turned towards Bellatrix. “It is quite unfortunate that I cannot even rely upon those whom I had once counted as my most loyal Servants. I am wondering if the blame for Rabastan’s bumbling incompetence should be borne by him alone...”

“It matters little...” Bellatrix’s nostrils flared and she held her head high, pointedly looking in Rodolphus Lestrange’s direction. “Rabastan is not my blood, nor any longer my in-law,” she said haughtily, then with a shift of demeanor, speaking seductively she continued.
“Am I not the Dark Lord’s Consort? My loyalties lie with you and you alone my Lord - I am no longer beholden to the House of Lestrange. But in any case, it is not Rodolphus’s fault that he shares Rabastan’s blood. He has served you well, and should be judged on his own merits.

“Rabastan is undoubtedly already paying the price for his failures in the clutches of the Dark Witch. And Nott is no great loss - we already have what we need from him, and we have his son. And none who were taken were Secret Keeper...”

The Dark Lord carefully considered his Consort’s words. While they held much veracity, they belonged to someone of noteworthy guile, and the Dark Lord badly needed an outlet for the rage seething within. It took all of the Dark Lord’s effort not to strike everyone in the chamber dead; he would have to settle for killing some Snatchers in their stead.

“What of my Army of the Dead?” Voldemort hissed dangerously, trying to distract himself from his fury. “Where do our numbers stand?”

A smile crept to Bellatrix’s lips as she sensed the Dark Lord’s rage wavering.

“We are nearing completion... Master,” purred Bellatrix, batting her long dark lashes coquettishly. The Dark Lord began to relax. He knew that his Consort was just buttering him up, but he had to admit that it pleased him greatly when she called him ‘Master’ in such a subservient manner.

“Rabastan’s contribution to their numbers was minimal at best,” Bellatrix continued. She gestured towards the enormous television and library of video-tapes nearby. “And in any case, these muggle entertainments have given me an idea for a new breed of Inferi. With my latest modification, Inferi shall be able to pass on the Inferius Curse to the living through their bites... much as Werewolves pass on Lycanthropy.”

The Dark Lord’s features altered from an expression which promised danger, to one which indicated malevolent glee.

“Good, good...” Voldemort nodded, a poisonous smile crossing his features as he stroked his chin and contemplated the possibilities such magically endowed Inferi presented, “That will do nicely indeed...”

Wormtail quietly let out a sigh of relief. The Dark Lord had been treating him very well indeed for some time now, and Wormtail much preferred to keep it that way.

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Senior Undersecretary Percy Weasley was working late into the evening in mid-August when the reports of new Inferi attacks began to roll in. The first report was from Nottingham, and an hour later another assault was reported from Stoke-On-Trent.

The Senior Undersecretary was hopeful that this could be dealt with relatively quickly and easily as both muggle locations were in Central England, but his hopes were dashed when another report came in from a Bristol suburb which was home to a small wizarding neighbourhood.

Percy began to resignedly scribble a memo to send directly to Minister Umbridge but was interrupted by a scowling, disheveled Rufus Scrimgeour at his door.

“Senior Undersecretary, if that is a message for the Minister, I have some news to add...”

“Good or bad?” Percy asked in a voice which he hoped didn’t betray the panic he felt.
“A bit of both. A number of muggles and two wizards are dead, but we managed to contain the situation in all three cities. We were fortunate in that the numbers of Inferi in the attacks were small - no more than half a dozen at each location... to begin with.”

“To begin with? I don’t take your meaning, Scrimgeour...”

“Two of the muggles from the first attack.... they turned into Inferi within a half-hour of being mauled. Once we realised we were dealing with something new, I was forced to improvise a new protocol. All of the dead have been incinerated, not just the Inferi - muggle and wizard alike - just to be on the safe side.”

“The Clean-Up team certainly has their work cut out for them then...” Percy groaned. “This is terrible. I’m just glad we managed to contain this before it got out of hand. Thanks Scrimgeour. I’ll pass along the information to the Minister straight away.”

Rufus Scrimgeour nodded curtly and turned to leave. As he shut the door to the Deputy Minister’s office he overheard Percy Weasley muttering to himself. Rufus could just barely make out a few puzzling words of the Senior Undersecretary’s private rumination over the sound of the scratching quill, “...spin this... You-Know-Who or Dumbledore...?”

Rufus shook his head and wriggled a finger in his bad ear, wondering if he'd misheard.

~o0o~

The beginning of the school term was only a fortnight away. And when the Daily Prophet's and the Quibbler’s reports of muggle disappearances shifted to reports of random Inferi attacks the following morning, the headmaster of Hogwarts knew that an assault against Hogwarts by Voldemort’s forces was imminent.

Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall exchanged dark looks, then glanced down the staff-table at several professors too busily engaged in conversation to have read the papers yet.

“I must say Remus, it is simply splendid to see you with a professorship at long last,” said Professor Slughorn proudly. “You deserve so much more...”

“Really Horace?” Professor Lupin raised his eyebrows with a bemused expression. “My professorship was short-lived, and I am only temporarily serving as such again for Miss Watts’ sake. In any case, I was dreadful in Potions... ”

“Nonsense my dear fellow,” Horace responded, twitching his bushy walrus moustache. “I have no doubt that you shall be reinstated when term begins - as long as Albus is in charge at Hogwarts, none can touch you here - and I am certain that you will permanently regain your post when the current regime at the Ministry is brought to an end.

“As to Potions, you may not have been a match in Potions for Severus here...”

Professor Snape snorted and rolled his eyes, but Horace ignored him and soldiered on.

“...or a match for Lily Evans, but your work was always excellent. I expected great things from you, despite your... erm... condition. You were among the few students of your year to graduate Hogwarts with Honours after all.”

“That’s very kind of you Horace,” Lupin flushed slightly. “But if Voldemort’s curse on the DADA position is true, then there is some question as to whether I will still be here when term begins - I managed to finish out Lockhart’s year, and complete one of my own.
“Then Alastor took the position. But... well... we shall see soon enough I suppose. And I wouldn’t have been able to manage it at all if it weren’t for Severus’s Wolfsbane Potion. None can make it better than him,” Lupin concluded with a grateful glance at Snape.

Something almost like a smile flickered in Snape’s eyes, but he merely nodded curtly in response. Severus didn’t care for the personal direction of the conversation, and despite having gained a modicum of respect for one another, it wasn’t as if he would ever be best mates with Remus Lupin or Sirius Black.

“Ah, that is another thing I have been meaning to discuss,” Slughorn carried on, paying no attention to Snape’s obvious discomfort, “I think it is simply marvelous that you two and Sirius Black have managed to put aside past enmities and buried the hatchet. However did that come about?”

Snape and Lupin regarded each other uncomfortably, then Severus sighed and raised his eyebrows.

“I had... an epiphany!” said Snape finally.

Horace was not to be put off so easily. He gazed shrewdly at Severus.

“And did this ‘epiphany’ have anything to do with Lily’s son?” Horace asked pointedly.

“I suppose... one might say that,” Severus stiffly replied.

Slughorn was about to press for the juicy details, but the headmaster thought this would be a good time to interrupt the conversation and come to Professor Snape’s rescue.

“Ahem...” Dumbledore passed the Daily Prophet and the Quibbler down the table, “have any of you seen the news this morning?”

Once he had everyone’s attention, the headmaster began.

“I believe it is time. We must begin to make final preparations to secure the Castle immediately. I shall recall Kingsley, John, and Alastor - and as many members of the Order as we can spare to assist us in defending Hogwarts. However, I do not wish to leave the members of the school’s Board of Governors nor the publisher of the Quibbler unguarded...”
Chapter 50: Summer's End: Part 1

The Prime Minister stirred a spoonful of sugar into his tea and took a sip, eyeing the Minister of Magic shrewdly. There was something about her which reminded him strongly of the previous Prime Minister... who had been a formidable woman indeed.

He was quite pleased with the way things were progressing. His fortunes had turned considerably in his favour since June - quite possibly the lowest point of his career since Black Wednesday as his party and his Cabinet continued to be embroiled in one sleazy scandal after another.

He had offered up his resignation, challenging the other party leaders to put up or shut up. The leader of the faction trying to push him out should have won handily, but with Minister Dolores Umbridge’s assistance, the Prime Minister had not only defeated his opponent, but trounced him thoroughly, and now the PM was in a stronger position than ever.

It didn’t hurt that the recent zombie attacks and the Old Trafford Stadium attack had been handled most productively. The public was rallying, now clamouring for the increased security policies which had previously come under fire for being too restrictive, too “fascist” as the street protesters liked to call them.

He considered some of Minister Umbridge’s proposals - the advantages which he and his party would enjoy could not be denied. Certainly the more traditionalist wing of the party would be pleased, as would the bankers and corporate elite.

Privatisation policies would be able to move forward much more smoothly and quickly with the fortunes of the Opposition party in decline. And political opponents and whistleblowers could be dealt with much more effectively.

And without a doubt, his own personal fortune would benefit greatly.

Dolores took a sip of her own tea, regarding the PM cannily as he mulled over the opportunities presented to him. She had to give him credit - for a muggle he seemed remarkably cunning, though he could use a few lessons in ruthlessness. But the PM had come a long way already. He seemed unconcerned that an unknown number of contagious Inferi remained at large.

Exploiting the loophole in the Stone of Destiny’s magical protections was beginning to pay off handsomely. While the Stone of Destiny prevented wizards from ruling Britain directly, through the institution of the Crown, it did not protect the political process from manipulation by wizards to favour one group of muggles over another.

Seemingly having reached a decision, the Prime Minister smiled. He reached into a cabinet behind his desk and pulled out two crystal snifters and a bottle of brandy.

“Well, Minister Umbridge,” said the PM as he poured them both a stiff drink. “I know it is still early in the day, but it would appear that this is a momentous occasion. I propose a toast to a long and fruitful relationship.”

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“I am sorry that I cannot stay and celebrate Voldemort's demise with you and your relatives, but I must return to Hogwarts,” said the headmaster. “But before I depart, I need to inform you of the latest developments.”
Harry and Hermione peered questioningly at Dumbledore’s grave features. The headmaster reached into his robes and retrieved the latest issue of the *Daily Prophet*, passing it to Harry and Hermione.

“This is an important reminder, that although Tom Riddle is utterly dead, we are not yet out of the woods. The Minister is launching an investigation into the recent events at Hogwarts, and we shall all be under intense scrutiny.”

“An investigation?” Hermione squeaked as she skimmed the top article. Harry shook his head and sighed in resignation. “What on earth is there to ‘investigate?’” asked Hermione furiously.

“She’ll take any bloody opportunity,” Harry groaned. “She’s probably trying to work out a way to make us look bad for killing Voldemort.”

“Indeed...” Dumbledore gazed at his two students, and nodded. “She will no doubt draw this out and focus the investigation on me for the time-being. Your critical roles in turning the battle to our favour, and making it possible to defeat Voldemort once and for all are still unknown to the public.

“Your part in things will no doubt come out eventually, but I believe it ought to remain a secret for as long as possible, lest the minister should seek to use this as a legal excuse to detain you for ‘questioning.’”

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment as he considered the news, then he nodded.

“Yes sir! That makes sense...” Harry began, “I was wondering though - our relatives - they must be going mental after being stuck here for months - looking at the same walls all the time, not being able to go outside. I... I was thinking of sending them somewhere else for a bit. D’you think it would be safe if I sent them out of the country?”

Dumbledore’s brows furrowed and he stroked his beard as he thought silently for a moment. Finally he seemed to reach a conclusion.

“Yes... I do think that would be a wise course of action Harry. Notify me when your families have decided where to go, and I shall facilitate the arrangements for leaving the country. I believe the window of opportunity before the Minister turns her attention back to you is narrow though.

“When the Minister does set her sights back upon you, she will no doubt already be at the point of locking down all avenues of departure and monitoring Floo travel in Britain. So decisions should be made swiftly.”

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Tears of happiness streamed down Jean’s cheeks as she embraced Hermione and her son-in-law. She was thrilled that the monster who had caused Harry so much suffering would never again walk the earth, nor be able to hurt another soul.

Everyone who had been waiting patiently for their return since early morning gave Harry and Hermione a hug, including Madam Bones and Mad Eye Moody. To Harry’s shock, even Petunia tearfully pulled him into a tight embrace.

The years fell away and the memories flooded into Petunia’s mind. So long ago... back before college, before Lily had received her Hogwarts letter, before the headmaster’s reply to Petunia’s own letter explaining why she couldn’t go to Hogwarts too, before even that Snape boy...

Petunia was small again, maybe six or seven years old. Petunia wasn’t certain. But she could finally see clearly the one last perfect day before the magic - the day before Petunia’s fear and jealousy had
come between them and driven them apart. Petunia remembered her younger sister - her best friend Lily.

“Th...thank goodness you’re alright Harry,” Petunia sobbed. “And... and thank you - thank you so much for ridding the world of Lily’s murderer... I miss her so much!”

“Well, it was really all of us,” Harry gasped for air. “Dumbledore’s the one who did him in at Hogwarts, and if it weren’t for Hermione, it... it just wouldn’t have been possible at all.”

Petunia wept even louder and threw her arms around Hermione, startling the unprepared young witch. For the first time in her life, Hermione was on the receiving end of a hug as bone-crushing as one of her own, or Hagrid’s. After a few moments, Hermione’s Auntie Joanne put her own arms around Petunia, allowing Hermione to escape.

“There, there dear,” said Joanne kindly as she held the sobbing woman in her arms. “Let it all out...”

“I’ll make some tea then,” Abbie Brixton offered, pointing her wand at the kettle.

“And you two must be famished. You haven’t eaten yet today,” Hermione’s mother said to Harry and Hermione as she rooted in the pantry’s magical cold-box. “Why don’t we all have an early Tea? Bangers and mash alright dears?”

“Oh... er, yes please,” Harry replied, suddenly feeling quite hungry. He grinned when he heard Hermione’s tummy give a little growl. Hermione gave Harry a little shove and blushed.

“None for me, thanks, Jean,” said Moody, looking pointedly at Amelia Bones “I’ve got to be gettin’ on with things. Gotta talk to Dumbledore...”

“Oh... er, yes, indeed!” Madam Bones added, “I’ll come with you Alastor. I ought to speak with Albus as well.”

After Mad Eye Moody and Madam Bones left, Hermione and Harry chatted and played videogames in the parlour with Susan and Dudley until Tea was ready.

“I suppose Auntie and I don’t really need to stay any more,” Susan beamed as her thumbs mashed away at the buttons on the videogame controller. “We’ll probably leave tomorrow. Thanks loads for letting us stay here Harry. It’ll be nice to see Mum and Dad again for a bit before school starts though... they’ll be thrilled to see us both.”

“You’re welcome Susan. Any time...” Harry swallowed, reddening, not sure what else to say. He was just happy that Voldemort hadn’t had the opportunity to kill off any more members of the Bones family.

Dudley seemed quiet. He wasn’t shouting at the pixels on the screen in front of him as he usually did when playing his games. Harry wondered what was wrong with his cousin.

“You alright Dudley?”

“Wha... oh, I suppose,” Dudley mumbled.

Harry was just about to press Dudley to open up a bit when Abbie poked her head in the parlour and told the teens that Tea was ready. When the piles of bangers and mash had been demolished Harry knew the moment had arrived. Everyone was still seated, either sipping a drink or leaning back looking full.
Harry swallowed nervously and glanced at his wife before turning back to face the small gathering. Hermione nodded at Harry and squeezed his hand comfortingly. Harry cleared his throat.

“We... er... I’ve been thinking,” began Harry, peering at Hermione’s mother and auntie, and at Petunia, “well... Tom Riddle - Voldemort - he’s gone for good. But the Minister - I expect she’ll still be after... er... me. I don’t really know for certain if she’s more inclined to obsess about chasing after family as Voldemort was or not...”

“But I know it must be maddening for you to still be cooped up here after so many months, and I was thinking you might all like a... er... long holiday of sorts.”

“I... I can afford to send you - all of you - anywhere in the world you want to go. I think you.... er... should be safe out of the country. You can all go somewhere nice if you want. Anywhere - I mean it!”

“But what about you and Hermione?” Jean asked, frowning.

“We’ll be alright Mum!” Hermione replied earnestly. “I promise! We’ll be at school with Professor Dumbledore.”

Hermione’s mum continued to look skeptical, but she knew it would do no good to argue with her daughter. There was much discussion around the table, and finally a decision was reached about where to go. Following the deliberation, Harry and Hermione took to Number Twelve’s library for a bit of quiet by themselves.

“Well that was easier than I thought it would be,” Harry said with a smile as Hermione plonked herself on his lap.

“You were right Harry,” Hermione murmured, “Nobody likes to be stuck in one place for too long without being able to come and go as they please.”

“I was really surprised though,” Harry shook his head in amazement. “I can’t believe that they all wanted to stay together when they go to Canada. I didn’t think Aunt Petunia got on very well with your mum and auntie...”

“I’m as shocked as you are,” Hermione giggled, “I think they’ve all just got used to each other - and nobody wants to be alone again.”

“I’m glad that Abbie Brixton said she’ll stay on with them too,” said Harry, looking relieved. “I feel loads better knowing that they’ll still have a wizard looking after them! D’you think they’ll like Canada? I thought they’d want to go to a tropical island, or somewhere exotic...”

“Well, it’s possible that they’re going to be gone from the UK for a while, so it makes sense for them to want to be somewhere that still feels a bit familiar,” responded Hermione. “Dudley will be able to go to school there until...”

Hermione paused, feeling a lump in her throat. Sensing her sadness, Harry kissed Hermione's forehead.

“I know Hermione,” whispered Harry. “I’ll miss them too. But we’ll get through this and deal with the Minister - they’ll all come home again eventually...”

“Are you sure Harry?” Hermione’s eyes brimmed with tears. “What if Minister Umbridge hangs on to power and Britain just gets worse?”
“Do... do you want to leave as well?” Harry asked sincerely. “We can both quit Hogwarts and go to Canada too if you’d like. I’ll just be happy being with you - wherever you want to go. And we can invite our friends to come with us...”

Hermione shook her bushy head without hesitation.

“No...” Hermione sighed, “We’re needed here Harry - we managed to get rid of Voldemort and we have to help the Order stop the Minister from turning Britain into a nightmare... This is our home. And besides, it’s not fair to ask everyone else to leave their families behind... we need to help them.”

“Good,” returned Harry softly. He cupped Hermione’s chin with his fingers and leaned his head forward to kiss her properly. “I’d go to the ends of the Earth for you Hermione. But I’m really glad that you want to stay and fight, because I do too!”

Later that evening, Harry and Hermione undressed and clambered into bed, pulling the covers over themselves. They didn’t bother with nightclothes, as the sensation of being at home again in their own bed, with their own silk sheets against their bare skin felt nice.

Harry was about to reach for the book on the nightstand when he noticed Hermione’s expression, the expression she always wore when she was thinking deep thoughts about something.

“So what was it like Harry?” Hermione asked as she snuggled into the crook of Harry’s shoulder, an arm across his chest.

“Pardon?”

“Your experience with the potion... What was it like? What happened?”

“Oh... er... It’s a bit hard to explain really...” Harry thought about it for a moment then tried to describe the sensations. “At first it was like... I saw ripples in the air, then the ripples sort of became a huge wave which knocked me over and I was falling - and everything went dark. Then there were all these lights... coloured lights - spinning around me and I felt dizzy.

“But then the colours began to form into shapes - mostly spirals and pinwheels at first - but then they sort of... I dunno...” Harry trailed off, not sure whether to tell Hermione. Maybe she’d think he’d gone mad. But as he looked into her earnest eyes, Harry knew she wouldn’t.

“Then they turned into more intricate patterns - they sort of pulsed, breathed - they seemed alive, like real beings... not just my imagination. They talked to me in a language I didn’t understand - they tried to tell me something...

“And that’s when things got really weird. It... it was like I was everything - everywhere all at once - everywhere in the Universe...

“For a moment I knew everything... Everything that anyone could possibly know... and... and I don’t really know how to describe it... but knowing everything sort of became feeling everything... It felt a bit like when we’re casting Patronuses in the Room of Requirement - magic swirling all around - sort of an overwhelming happiness... love...

“Then somehow - it all turned into a dark forest - but that bit was sort of like a dream... and then... then...” Harry swallowed, feeling a deep ache in his middle, his features anguished, tears trickling. “I was there Hermione... It was real - I know it was! I was in my house - my parents’ house, and I was me - as a baby I mean, but somehow I was me as I am now too, but inside the baby.

“I... I watched Voldemort... I saw him kill my mum. And... and then he tried to kill me - but his curse
rebounded somehow - something my mum did before she died stopped it from killing me.

“Then... at the same time I think... I... er... I think... No, I know it wasn’t just accidental magic or his rebounding killing curse, Hermione. A killing curse couldn’t blow up a house like that - even if it was somehow ricocheting.

“It was sort of like when we do our Patronuses - but without a wand... the light just came out of me - the Corporeal Patronus came out of me... but it was somehow even more intense than it is for us now, if that’s possible - because of you - I felt you with me, loving me - and because of my mum loving me too.

“And... and Voldemort sort of burned up like the Inferi - from the inside out - and then exploded - that... that’s what destroyed my parents’ house - Voldemort exploding.

“I was there Hermione - me now, back then. Somehow I was connected through time with my baby self... and... and I killed him - killed Voldemort then... and killed the bit of him inside of me now - I mean earlier today - both at the same time. They’re both connected - both times connected I mean - I know it doesn’t make any sense...”

“Actually, I... I think it does make sense... I think I understand, Harry...” said Hermione, her brow furrowed in deep thought. “If Einstein is right - and nearly everyone thinks he is - then time stops at the speed of light - at least it does for massless particles like photons - and that means all times are connected somehow - all happening at the same time - sort of like a frozen lattice made entirely of light... sort of like a hologram.

“It’s only because we usually experience things as particles with mass - as matter - particles which move slower than the speed of light - that we experience time. In the state your physical brain was in, thanks to the potion - your mind, your soul, must have been set free to travel to any point in time - past or future - and to any point in space too, for that matter. That part of us - our souls - must have no mass - like photons have no mass...”

Harry looked completely confused, and Hermione knew that she’d lost him. “I’ll try to explain it again later Harry. I know you’ll eventually get it...

“Anyway, that must be when you convulsed - when you killed the last bit of Voldemort in you now, it must have released all of the Dark magic trapped in you - sort of like when he exploded in the past.

“The potion experience probably wouldn’t have been so risky for you otherwise - it’s probably relatively safe for most people... The released Dark magic must have exploded in your brain, and the Patronus light forced it out when your scar burst. That black stuff which comes out of horcruxes - that oozed out of your scar right after the light came out of it.”

“Yeah...” Harry nodded. “That bit makes sense...” Then he grinned. “At least I get that bit, Hermione.”

There was something about Hermione’s expression which caught Harry’s attention - the yearning in her big brown eyes.

“You want to try it too, don’t you?” Harry smirked. “That’s why you think it’s probably safe for most people...”

Hermione blushed; Harry always could read her expressions. She nodded, not sure exactly what to say to convince Harry.
Harry chortled. “I suppose you want a chance to know everything too... even if just for a moment.”

“Don’t be silly Harry,” she said, grinning and giving him a playful swat. “I just want to have an experience that we can both share together.”

“Yeah... I know, Hermione,” he murmured with a gentle look in his eyes. “I was just teasing.”

Harry leaned his head forward slightly, and Hermione met his lips with her own. They melted into one another as the kiss deepened. When the kiss was finished they both settled back in position, sighing contentedly.

After a few moments of peaceful bliss, Harry lifted the book from beside the bed with his free hand, and he began to read it aloud to Hermione as her hand gently stroked his chest. Hermione dozed off happily while she listened to the sound of Harry’s voice as he read to her from *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*.

~o0o~

It was late in the evening and Head Auror Rufus Scrimgeour uncomfortably peered at the few core members of the Order of the Phoenix gathered before him. He knew that some still didn’t trust him. And it didn’t help that he bore ill-tidings.

“It is out of my hands,” Rufus Scrimgeour said with a frown. “I did everything I could to close the investigation. The Minister overruled my recommendation for closure, dismissing my Final Report as ‘incomplete’...” Scrimgeour huffed. “She has directly taken over the investigation and has brought the Department of Mysteries in...”

“You don’t mean...?” gasped Professor McGonagall.

“Yes. Dolores has Unspeakables leading the ‘investigation’ now,” Scrimgeour scowled.

Albus Dumbledore was disturbed, but not at all surprised, and his features remained as inscrutable as Snape’s as he absorbed the information. He glanced at Madam Bones, who seemed equally unsurprised. But Madam Pomfrey looked as appalled as McGonagall.

“It was to be expected of course,” sighed Dumbledore. “You are confirming what I have already gleaned from reading between the lines of the rather misleading report in the *Daily Prophet*.”

“So whaddya gonna do about this Rufus?” growled Alastor Moody.

“All I can do is keep forging ahead with my own investigation of the Minister,” Scrimgeour sighed. “I have managed to root out a mole in the Archives and Propaganda subdepartment of the Unspeakable Office. But I have nothing actionable yet to counter her with, and it is clear that Dolores has garnered the support of several key Wizengamot committees...”

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Hermione was the first to wake, quite early the following morning. Too early really. It wasn't even light out yet, but Hermione felt too restless to go back to sleep.

She smiled to herself, remembering the stories Harry had read to her the night before as she drifted into slumber. For some reason, one story in particular kept replaying in her mind. It had been a story about three brothers, wizards all, who had encountered a personification of Death.

But for the life of her, Hermione couldn’t work out why the fable had caught her attention.
Something about the story niggled at the back of her mind, ringing a bell which seemed familiar. Not being able to solve a mystery always unnerved Hermione, and she had been feeling a bit unsettled to begin with.

Hermione knew that she and Harry were at a crossroads in their lives together, a juncture between the past and things to come. Harry had finally got the closure he deserved.

They should be celebrating, moving on with their lives, and enjoying the next few years at Hogwarts with nothing more than normal teenage things to worry about. Well, at least normal enough for a pair of teenage wizards who had married very young and helped defeat a powerful maniac.

But the future was still so uncertain. And for some reason that story with the three brothers kept insinuating itself into Hermione’s thoughts. Hermione tried to put it out of her mind. She closed her eyes and just paid attention to Harry’s gentle breathing next to her, his chest rising and falling, his heart beating under the palm of her hand.

Hermione pressed herself even closer to Harry and gently stroked his messy black hair with the back of her fingers.

Hermione smiled to herself; Harry always looked so peaceful when he was asleep. Unable to help herself she tenderly pressed her lips against his and he stirred. Harry’s eyelids flickered as he awoke to feel Hermione’s amourous affections.

“Morning Hermione! Bit early isn't it?” Harry grinned at her adorable blushing face and reached out a hand to caress her bushy golden head. He returned her kiss humidly, his passion rising.

“Morning Harry,” Hermione murmured, bearing an expression of longing. Moments later, Hermione was atop him, Harry’s hands wrapped around her waist as they kissed again even more vigorously.

Harry gasped with pleasure as she nestled her heated entrance against the tip of his erection. Hermione rocked back and felt his shaft sliding inside her. She let out a moan to feel Harry filling her completely, and began to ride him. Harry met the gyrations of her hips with thrusts of his own, burying himself within her.

Hermione’s sheath tightly gripped Harry’s lance as he plummeted to her depths, the covers tumbling away. Harry’s lips encircled Hermione’s again and he had both hands on her breasts, fingers tugging on her hardened nipples as they continued to writhe in unison.

A current of bliss swept them both away and they lost themselves. Hermione squealed as she peaked. The delicious sensation of Hermione’s climax was too much for Harry. Groaning ecstatically, Harry burst, filling Hermione’s chamber with his seed.

Hermione fell sweatily back against Harry’s chest, both of them panting. Hermione lay there purring serenely on top of Harry, his fingers tangled in her messy coils of hair. Hermione didn’t want to move. It felt nice just to lie there peacefully in Harry’s arms with him still inside her.

Harry's head swirled with intoxication as he breathed in Hermione’s aroma. He couldn’t tell where he left off and Hermione began. He didn’t know how long the two of them lay like that, completely absorbed in one another, but after awhile, Harry felt the eddies of ecstasy begin to move him again.

Soon, the bed rocked as Harry and Hermione resumed their passions. This time, Hermione was underneath, her legs tightly wrapped around Harry’s backside as he plumbed her depths once more.

Magic crackled and sparked when the pair of them merged in an explosion of euphoria for a second time and the walls trembled.
Having accomplished completion, the Potters lay together in a blissful daze yet again, joined as one, for an indeterminate, seemingly eternal moment of nirvana.

When Harry next woke, he realised that it was several hours later, well past breakfast time. He also realised that he and Hermione were still entwined. He couldn’t really move without stirring Hermione and they both roused themselves.

Hermione felt much clearer-headed. She cleaned her teeth while Harry used the loo, then they shared a hot shower together. Something clicked in Hermione’s brain as they both dressed and got ready to meet the rest of the day.

“Harry?”

“Yes?”

“Do you remember the story - about the three brothers? You were reading it to me last night.”

“Yeah...” Harry finished buckling his belt and peered attentively at Hermione. He wondered if she had had a similar feeling of deja vu. “Can’t forget that one really. There’s something about that story - the Invisibility Cloak for one thing...”

“And the Resurrection Stone...” Hermione said excitedly. Harry, I think the story is based on real people...”

“Come off it. You’re joking...” Harry peered at his wife with a thoroughly bemused expression. “Death can’t be a real character. He’s an anthropomorphism - it’s just a fairy tale for wizards Hermione...”

Hermione stared back at her skeptical husband and giggled as the absurdity and the irony of the situation struck her.

“Are you teasing me Hermione?” asked Harry, still with a look of bewildered amusement plastered on his face.

“No,” Hermione shook her head. “I mean it. Of course Death isn’t a real person - you’re absolutely right, but the rest of the story... Do you remember when we found the Ring of Peverell with Dumbledore?”

Harry nodded.

“It’s the Resurrection Stone Harry - don’t you see?” Hermione’s brown eyes gleamed brightly, “You and Dumbledore have two of the three magical artifacts in the story. The three wizards in the story are the Peverell brothers, and you’re descended from the one who owned the Invisibility Cloak. It all fits logically...”

“You’re serious about this aren’t you?” Harry interjected, stunned by the seeming credibility of the revelation.

“Absolutely,” Hermione responded adamantly. “When we found the ring, Dumbledore said something very interesting to Mr Moody. Dumbledore called the insignia on the Stone in the ring, ‘the Peverell Coat of Arms - the Deathly Hallows’...”

“YES!” Harry’s own eyes widened in excitement as it hit him, “I remember the symbol. It looks a bit like an eye in the middle of a Triangle - but a slitted eye. It’s not an eye, it’s the...”
“...stone in the ring, yes!” Hermione finished for Harry. “And that slit wasn’t a slit, it was a wand...”

“...and the triangle was a cape - a cloak - my Invisibility Cloak. You’re right Hermione, it all fits, it makes sense. Invisibility Cloaks as good as mine are supposed to be really rare - it’s impervious to nearly everything...”

“I know; it’s perfect Harry,” Hermione gushed. “The cloak didn’t get torn or damaged at all when I was wearing it as we crashed through the ceiling of Gringotts. And the charm on it is as strong today as it must have been when your father owned it. That’s unheard of. The Peverells must have been incredible wizards...”

“The Elder Wand... That must be amazing,” Harry mused. “I’m not sure that I’d want it though. Seems more trouble than it’s worth, something like that. I’d rather have the cloak.”

Hermione nodded vigorously in agreement, “Me too... though I thought - given your parents, you might like the Resurrection Stone...”

Harry shook his head, “Maybe at one time - but honestly, I’m not so sure about that. It’s weird. I do want to see them - have a chance to talk to them - but I don’t as well. I... I’m not sure why. Maybe I’m just not ready yet...”

“I... I think I understand Harry.” Hermione bit her lip, and smiled at him tearily. Harry reached out and caught a tear with the back of his forefinger as it trickled down her cheek.

“It’s alright Hermione,” said Harry softly. “I’m fine... really. I’m just trying to say why, if I had to choose - at this moment in time - why I would choose the Invisibility Cloak instead of the Resurrection Stone or the Elder Wand. Right now, I’m just mostly curious...”

“...Who has the Elder Wand?” Hermione concluded with a nod. “Maybe Dumbledore can tell us more about the Deathly Hallows, and what they mean...”

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Madam Bones and Susan departed shortly after a very late breakfast, both of them thanking the Potters profusely for their hospitality. Susan then gave Dudley a hug and a kiss on the cheek before stepping into the green flames, thanking him for keeping her company during the summer.

Harry grinned at the goofy expression on Dudley’s reddening face. He hoped Dudley would have a chance to make some nice friends in Canada, maybe even meet a girl. Dudley deserved it. He was almost a completely different person now.

Harry barely recognised Dudley as the boy whom Harry’s horrible Uncle Vernon had trained to be a bully. All that seemed to be left of the old Dudley was an obsession with movies and videogames that featured lots of gunfire and explosions. Susan had assured Hermione and Harry that Dudley had been the perfect gentleman the entire summer.

Moody caught Harry’s eye after the Boneses had gone.

“Well Potter,” Mad Eye growled, “I’ll be about for a bit until we’ve got your relatives moved - which’ll likely take us till the end of the week. But I know you’ll be headin’ back to Hogwarts tomorrow mornin’... You and your missus need to know that there was an emergency Order meetin’ last night for some of us in the ‘inner-circle.’”

“There’s nothin’ you need to worry about just yet. Dumbledore’ll fill you in on anything which affects you when you get back to Hogwarts. For now, just remember to stay vigilant.”
After Moody had departed, Harry and Hermione were left with Dudley who peered at them a bit awkwardly.

“Er... Thanks loads Harry... for...erm... sending us on a trip.” said Dudley with a sad smile. “It... er... it’ll be nice to get outside and see other people again.”

Harry returned Dudley’s smile and nodded, “You’re welcome Dudley. I’m sorry that Aunt Petunia vetoed your vote to live in Tahiti or the Bahamas.”

Dudley and Harry both began to laugh and Hermione giggled. After a few chuckles, Dudley became serious again.

“I... I’ll really miss you Harry. I... I know I’ll have a chance to make new friends, but it’s not the same. It’s not really fair. All those years... I wasted on bullying you...”

Harry grew alarmed, seeing where this was heading. “Look... Dudley! That’s all water under the bridge. You’ve already apologised. You’ve been really nice since..., and anyway, I blame Uncle Vernon more...”

“No... that’s not what I mean. I mean... er...” Dudley floundered momentarily, then pulled himself back together. “What I’m trying to say is... is that I’m sorry that I didn’t have a chance to be your friend as a kid - before you went off to wizard school. I think you’re really cool to hang out with - and... and I just wish we had more time to be friends now...”

Harry’s eyes felt a bit watery, then a sense of resolve set in.

“Hey!” said Harry firmly, “I’ll see you again... That’s a promise Dudley! Here... take this.”

“What is it?” Dudley peered at the hand-mirror which Harry had given him.

“It’s a bit like a mobile phone,” Harry replied. “If you touch it or hold it and say my name, I’ll be able to talk to you on one too. This one is an extra one in case mine gets broken. If you need anything... or just want to talk, call me. Just try not to forget that you’ll be in a different timezone!”

Harry smirked and Dudley grinned back at him.

“Wicked! Ta Harry... does it... er... take messages?”

“Er... yeah I think it does actually! We haven’t really tried that yet... Do you want to give it a go then?”

“Er... alright,” said Dudley.

Dudley said Harry’s name and spoke into the mirror. Harry waited a minute or two then picked up his own mirror. As soon as Harry touched the mirror he heard Dudley’s voice emanating from it and saw Dudley’s moving features. Harry nodded in satisfaction as he listened to the message.

“Well, looks like it definitely works then,” Harry grinned.

Harry and Hermione spent the rest of the day cheerfully playing videogames and watching action films with Dudley. For a special treat, Abbie Brixton went out and brought back a take-out feast for everyone from a nearby Indian Restaurant: a sumptuous spread of spicy curries, tangy rice, and samosas. Full and happy, before going to bed, Harry and Hermione prepared to return to Hogwarts the next morning, feeling ready for whatever came next.

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Daphne distractedly dipped the piece of toast in the runny yellow yolk of her boiled egg. She glanced the others, wondering if they felt the same as she did. The afternoon before last, Dumbledore had cheerfully informed the Potters’ friends that Harry and Hermione’s mission had been a roaring success.

Daphne was thrilled and relieved that the scourge of the wizard world was no more, with the surety that he would never return. Nevertheless, she couldn’t help feeling a bit empty and confused.

She hadn’t expected to feel a bit lost. In some respects, the wizard who had fashioned himself into a “Dark Lord” had defined her entire existence - everyone’s existence for that matter. Voldemort had been a looming presence over everyone in Britain for many decades. Even during the fourteen years that people had believed him to be dead, most people had still been too terrified to say his name.

Now that Voldemort was gone, Daphne was unsure of herself, uncertain of her purpose. She knew that the Minister was the biggest threat to Harry and Hermione now, but Daphne had no idea what she could do about that. The Minister couldn’t be fought directly as long as the rest of wizarding Britain perceived her to be the legitimate head of the Ministry.

All Daphne could envision in her own immediate future was several more years at Hogwarts. But that was no longer enough for her; she needed more, something to fill the gap, some knowledge of her destiny. And Daphne hoped that eventually she would find it.

Doing her best to put it all aside, Daphne looked around the table again, to see what everyone else was up to. Everyone was giggling or roaring with laughter. Daphne grinned when she saw that Dora had changed her features to mimic a bear snout as she ate her porridge.

Daphne’s own giggles were interrupted by a gentle hand on her shoulder. She was surprised to see Professor McGonagall standing beside her. Somehow McGonagall had pulled a Dumbledore and managed to sneak up on the Mingling Table without anyone noticing.

“Professor?” mumbled Daphne as she hurriedly chewed and swallowed the piece of toast in her mouth.

“My apologies Miss Greengrass,” began Professor McGonagall kindly, “I don’t mean to disturb you, but I need to inform you that you have a visitor - your father is here. When you have finished your breakfast, you will be able to find him in the headmaster’s office.”

Daphne’s eyes went wide and her chest tightened.


“It’s alright dear,” Professor McGonagall continued, all eyes upon her now. “There is no cause for alarm. As far as I am aware, your sister Astoria is well and at home with your mother. Your father simply wishes to speak with you in person before term begins.”

“Thanks Professor,” Daphne nodded, her trepidation changing to excitement at the news. Hastily Daphne finished her breakfast and dashed off to wash up before joining her father in Dumbledore’s office.

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Saying goodbye to everyone at Number Twelve had felt very different from any of the previous goodbyes in either of the Potters’ memory, but they had both taken some comfort in the fact that their relatives would have each other and a witch to keep them company.
They had shared a quiet breakfast with the others before leaving. And even though Harry and Hermione were both satisfied that Mum, their respective aunts, and Dudley, would be safe in Canada and well looked after by Abbie Brixton, farewells were still quite tearful.

Harry and Hermione emerged from the green flames in the fireplace of the staff-room at Hogwarts to be eagerly greeted by a grinning Professor Lupin.

“Well, aren’t you two a sight for sore eyes,” said Lupin to the young couple after Harry had regained his balance and stopped coughing. “I trust all is well?”

“I bloody hate floo travel. We barely managed to keep ourselves together when we went to Gringotts.” Harry grimaced as he and Hermione brushed the ash and soot off their clothes. “I wish we could’ve just caught a train to Hogsmeade and had you meet us there.”

“Well, we might be able to do something about that Harry,” said Lupin with a thoughtful expression. “You are both technically of age after all. I’ll speak to Dumbledore and see about getting apparition lessons for you both - though of course...”

“...You can’t usually apparate directly into Hogwarts,” Harry muttered, not sure that he would like apparating any better than floo travel. As far as he was concerned, broomsticks were the best means of transportation in the Wizard World, especially with Hermione snuggled against him.

“Indeed!” Lupin responded, smiling. “Most of the time anyway - unless Dumbledore temporarily takes down the anti-apparition charms. I was actually meaning that for the time being until the problem of the Minister has been dealt with, that for you, direct travel is perhaps for the best. The less time you are exposed in public, the better.

“In any case,” Lupin continued, looking even more cheerful, “I believe some sort of celebration is in order. Perhaps you and your friends would like to join me and Sirius at the Shack this evening for a bit of a soiree.”

“That sounds great,” said Harry, finally smiling himself. “Yeah, I’d like that. Does that sound good to you Hermione?” Harry asked his wife.

Hermione returned Harry’s look, then regarded Lupin astutely, sensing that he was holding back some joyful tidings.

“Well... that would be lovely, but I think Professor Lupin has some good news to tell us first Harry!”

Lupin groaned. He had wanted to surprise the Potters at the party, but Hermione’s keen observational skills had caught him out. Harry questioningly peered back and forth between Hermione and Remus.

“You’d better spit it out Remus...” Harry said with a grin, “Hermione can be quite stubborn at ti... ow!” Harry bit his tongue and smirked at Hermione who was giving him a mock glare after swatting his shoulder teasingly.

“Hark who’s talking,” Hermione retorted. Then she set her sights firmly back on Lupin, a bit of a smirk on her own lips. “Still... Harry’s not wrong! I’m not budging until you tell us now, Remus!” Hermione’s features softened and gave Lupin her best doe-eyed look. “Please!?"

“Alright, you win,” Lupin shook his head with a laugh and rubbed his forehead. “This isn’t exactly how I wanted to tell you - but here it is then... I’m not entirely certain how it happened, but I’m cured. I am no longer a werewolf!”
“Shut up! You’re joking!” Harry gasped.

Hermione’s jaw dropped in shock. “But that... that’s impossible, isn’t it?”

“Well - so Snape and Pomfrey keep reminding me,” Lupin chortled. “They are as astounded as you two. But the results of Pomfrey’s tests are quite clear, and undeniable. The only thing... Dumbledore, he didn’t seem quite as surprised as he ought to. Especially when I revealed my own thoughts on the matter to him...”

Professor Lupin gazed shrewdly at Harry and Hermione. Suddenly it hit them both.

“Our Patronuses!” Harry blurted out, looking very sheepish.

Hermione’s eyes widened guiltily, “Please don’t be cross with us Remus. Dumbledore said we should keep it a secret, but we still meant to tell you and Sirius...”

“...But somehow we never got round to it...” Harry finished.

“Oh, heavens no! I’m not cross in the least,” Lupin reassured the two young students, “Nor will Sirius be. We both understand the need for keeping some things a secret - in as small a circle as possible. None of us knew how we survived the battle with Voldemort. By rights Hogwarts should be in ruins, and we should all be dead. And we might be if anyone untoward had stumbled across whatever your secrets are...

“All of us in the Order assumed that Dumbledore had some secret weapon which he had put you and Harry in charge of... But judging from your reactions, am I right to presume that your Patroni had something to do with that as well?” Lupin asked.

“Yeah, erm... they’re... er... ‘superpowered’ Patronuses, I suppose...” mumbled Harry awkwardly, turning pink. He looked at Hermione who was blushing furiously.

“Ah... say no more Harry,” said Lupin, light suddenly dawning on him. “I understand... Sirius and I always knew you were both eminently suited for each other, and there’s no need for the details.

“I must assume that your... erm... activities have something to do with the Castle-Quakes. And would I also be correct to assume then, that your ‘superpowered’ Patroni were indeed responsible for the destruction of the Dementors at the conclusion of the Third Task?”

“Yes...” Hermione squeaked. “But we had no idea that would happen at the time...”

“...and it was only a guess on my part that they would kill Inferi too,” Harry added. “We first gave them a go against the Inferi in the maze...”

“And it was a brilliant guess, a very logical inference actually,” said Hermione. “Er... I suppose you’re right,” she continued, “We might not have survived the attack on Hogwarts if it weren’t for our Patronuses...”

“And now that my Lycanthropy is cured, we know of at least one more effect of such potent Patroni,” Lupin nodded with a satisfied expression on his face. He noticed the Potters’ eyes flicker towards each other uncertainly.

“Perhaps two more then?” Lupin raised his eyebrows as something clicked in his brain. “Should I also conclude that your Patroni had something to do with Jennifer Watts’ newfound magical abilities as well?”
Harry swallowed nervously and Hermione bit her lip anxiously.

“It’s alright,” Lupin said gently. “Don’t worry... Jennifer Watts’ secret is safe with me and Sirius. That is even more dangerous information to possess than the ability of Patroni to destroy some of the Darkest curses and Dementors...

“And I must say... it is quite incredible. Never in recorded history - at least not that I know of - have muggles ever been turned into wizards. It is as unheard of as a permanent remedy for lycanthropy...”

“And I cannot thank you both enough for giving me my life back, inadvertently or not,” Lupin’s voice cracked, his eyes glistening wetly. “Words are truly insufficient to convey my gratitude...”

By the time Harry and Hermione left Lupin, they had both cheered again in anticipation of the celebration of Tom Riddle’s demise, and buoyed by the knowledge that Lupin’s lycanthropy was cured.

“I still can’t believe it Hermione. Lupin’s going to have to learn how to be an animagus now if he wants to be a wolf again. He’ll have total control when he transforms.”

“It really is amazing Harry. Our Patronuses - we’ve gone further with that magic than anyone has ever done. We’ve accomplished things with them that the vast majority of wizards will probably never be able to do...” Hermione paused, her face awestruck.

“Until just now - the way Remus put it - even after you used your Patronus to destroy Voldemort - I... I haven’t really quite thought about it like that before Harry - what it all means about our place in the wizard world.”

“I know... me neither really,” said Harry. “It’s almost like our Patronuses are ‘Curse-Busters’ of a sort. They seem to destroy certain types of really Dark Curses...”

“...because they’re the opposite of death and despair - they’re the embodiment of life and joy...” Hermione continued as she embraced Harry tightly. She gazed into Harry’s lustrous green eyes and whispered, “They’re love...”

Harry and Hermione’s lips met in a long, rapturous kiss as they stood in the hallway opposite the delighted portrait of Aphrodite.

The ancient Greek Sorceress known to the muggle world as the Goddess of Love waited patiently as the young couple kissed. When the Potters finished kissing, Hermione was the first to realise that something was different when she spotted Aphrodite smiling blissfully at her.

“Er... isn’t our corridor supposed to be here?” asked Hermione, looking bewildered. Harry was equally puzzled, wondering if they had somehow taken a wrong turn.

“Yes indeed,” said the portrait of Aphrodite, batting her eyelashes coquettishly. “While you were both gone, the headmaster thought it might be wise to add another layer of protection for you and your friends. I am now the guardian of the portal to your quarters. Only those with the right passport may pass through me...”

“Er... passport?” said Harry questioningly. “Don’t you mean password?”

Aphrodite tittered, sounding a lot like Fleur. “Just a little kiss... and if you taste right, you may pass unchallenged.”

“Taste right?” asked Hermione. She gasped and her eyes widened as it hit her. “It’s to make sure that
we’re not polyjuice or metamorphmagus imposters, isn’t it!”

“Right in one, dear! Now... just a little kiss, right on the lips…”

The Potters blushed furiously as the life-size portrait beckoned them forth and they both gave Aphrodite a kiss on her painted lips. The magical canvas shimmered as Aphrodite tasted the truth of their essence.

“That’s it - now step into the frame…” said Aphrodite.

“Er... really?” Harry raised one eyebrow skeptically. This was a new one on him and Hermione.

“Harry...” gasped Hermione, “…I think she means like in *Voyage of the Dawn Treader!* Remember how Lucy, Edmund, and Eustace jump into the painting of the Narnian ship?”

“Wow...Yeah, I do...”

“Then come on Harry,” said Hermione excitedly, grabbing Harry’s hand.

She stepped over the frame, pulling Harry with her. The Potters appeared to flatten as they joined Aphrodite inside the painting. When they stepped out of the frame again, they were on the other side of the wall, facing what was now a Secret Corridor, hidden from the rest of Hogwarts.

“That is seriously cool!” exclaimed Harry, feeling awed. “I love magic,” Harry grinned. “It’s weird - I almost feel like I’m turning two dimensional when we step into and out of the frames, but from inside…”

“...the painting feels three dimensional and the outer-world looks two dimensional. It’s like another world in there Harry…” said Hermione.

“I bet Neville’s going to have a heart attack when he has to kiss Aphrodite to visit us though,” Harry chortled.

Hermione giggled but never got another word out because there was a squeal as the door to their common room opened and Daphne pounced on the Potters.

“I thought I heard voices out here,” Daphne beamed radiantly, giving each Potter a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “I missed you - we all did.”

There were hugs all the way around as Harry and Hermione entered the Unaffiliated common room. Everyone was there except for Neville and Viktor. Hermione spied schoolbooks and papers strewn across the coffee table and the end tables by the sofa and cozy armchairs.

“We’re all helping Jennifer study for exams...” Luna explained.

“There’s less than a week before term begins on Friday, so Dumbledore is setting Jennifer's exams for Wednesday,” Parvati added.

“And she’s bloody brilliant!” said Dora eagerly. “Dumbledore said they’ll only be testing for the essentials, so there’s a good chance that she’ll be joining you lot in fifth year…”

“...Except for Luna and me of course,” Ginny sighed, wishing they could skip fourth year and take classes with their friends.

“Jennifer c’est magnifique,” Fleur added, “So much material in less than two months!”
Jennifer hid her crimson face behind her long dark bangs, “I’ve had loads of help - I couldn’t have got this far without all of you, really...”

Relief flooded Jennifer when everyone began clamouring to hear details from the Potters about the mission to retrieve the last horcrux. Everyone listened intently and shivered at all the scary bits. The girls giggled and Harry grinned, turning slightly pink, when Hermione recounted how she and Harry had been caught snogging and seriously making out by Dumbledore at the lake.

Daphne wanted Harry and Hermione to stay longer after they had finished their tale, but she knew that her father didn’t have all day.

“Harry, my father has some important things he needs to discuss with you - the both of you. He’s with Dumbledore, probably still in Dumbledore’s office...”

“Oh, alright then,” said Harry, feeling nervous suddenly, “Er... d’you know what it’s about Daphne?”

“I’m not sure exactly, but I think it has something to do with the Wizengamot,” Daphne replied. Daphne looked like she was about to say something more, but after a moment’s hesitation she gave the Potters a hug and sent them on their way.

Hermione could sense Daphne’s anxiety as surely as she had sensed Professor Lupin’s barely contained glee. Harry glanced at his wife as they made their way to the headmaster’s office, a gnawing feeling growing in his own gut.

“Hermione, Daphne seemed a bit worried about something. D’you think she’s alright?”

Hermione bit her lip.

“I... I’m not sure Harry,” she replied. “She’s definitely anxious about something. Maybe we’ll find out what’s bothering her from Mr Greengrass.”

“Yeah... I suppose we’ll find out soon enough then,” said Harry.

Moments later, the two young wizards were greeted warmly by Mr Greengrass and the headmaster, and seated themselves in two cozy armchairs. Harry swallowed nervously and Hermione instinctively took his hand. Though the greeting had been friendly, they both knew that this was no social call.

“Harry, Mrs Potter,” the Headmaster began, “As we all know, despite the final demise of Tom Riddle, we still face an uphill climb. It would have been a boon to us all if we had more time to devise a proper strategy for dealing with the Minister, alas, we do not... perhaps I should allow Mr Greengrass to explain...”

Cyril Greengrass sighed. He hated to be the bearer of bad news.

“Well Harry, the Wizengamot has been called to a full session for this upcoming Thursday at nine am. Your godfather and I had hoped to shepherd you through your first legislative session. However, given the circumstances, I think it would be best that you not participate directly.”

Harry thought about it for a moment. After dealing with Voldemort’s army and Voldemort himself, the task of entering the heart of the Ministry and facing Minister Umbridge again didn’t seem so daunting.

“Why not?” he said. “I’m not scared of the Minister...”
Cyril Greengrass couldn’t help smiling at Harry’s directness and fortitude.

“Good,” Mr Greengrass responded. “Be that as it may, I believe that it would be far too dangerous for you to enter the Ministry at this time. The Minister now has the support of three key committees... and controls a majority on the Wizengamot...”

“Which has been confirmed independently by Rufus Scrimgeour, Head of the Auror Office,” Dumbledore interjected.

“Indeed,” Mr Greengrass nodded, “But most disturbing, is how the Minister has achieved this. Four members of the Wizengamot have been indefinitely detained for ‘questioning’ following Voldemort’s failed attack on Hogwarts - all of them members of the governing board of Hogwarts.” Mr Greengrass paused to let the information sink in.

Hermione tried not to squeak when Harry’s grip on her hand tightened. Harry’s nostrils flared, his face flushed and his stomach clenched. He opened and shut his mouth twice, swallowed uncomfortably, and steadied himself before speaking.

“So what am I supposed to do?” Harry asked as evenly as possible, his anger building, “I can’t just sit here and do nothing. If the Minister is looking for a legal manoeuvre to get into Hogwarts, I should try and stop her by speaking out at the Wizengamot session.”

“I believe it is already too late for that Harry,” Mr Greengrass replied somberly. “And if you were to show up for the session, I think that you too will find yourself in detention under armed guard - and your godfather agrees. The only suggestion I have, is that you should appoint a proxy to at the very least vote on your behalf.”

Harry glanced at Hermione. She was as appalled as he was.

“Alright then,” Harry sighed in resignation. “The only problem is, I don’t really know anyone. Who should I appoint - and how will they know the right way to vote?”

Mr Greengrass smiled again; there was at least some small means by which he could help Harry Potter.

“My wife, Hippolyta, has already agreed to sit in your seat Harry - pending your approval of course...”

“But sir,” Hermione anxiously interrupted, sensing Harry’s skyrocketing alarm, “What if the Minister tries to arrest you and your wife too. I... I don’t think we could live with ourselves...”

Harry jumped in, “Hermione’s right Mr Greengrass. I... I really appreciate the offer; I really do. But... but I can’t let anyone else take the fall for me. I’d never be able to forgive myself if Daphne lost her parents.”

Several emotions crossed Cyril Greengrass’s features as he peered admiringly at Harry.

“That should be of little concern Harry,” he replied. “Our family is quite well connected. I do not believe the Minister will wish to risk losing her recently found majority on the Wizengamot by going after us.

“I suspect that she would have done so already otherwise - as apparently, she has been harbouring the Malfoys and is preparing to have the Wizengamot ratify her Pardon of Draco...”

Hermione couldn’t help herself and hissed furiously. Harry’s head began to swim as his blood started
to boil.

“So you mean...” Harry hoarsely started to say.

“Yes!” Mr Greengrass’s features went icy and rigid, “Draco Malfoy will likely be returning to Hogwarts...”

“And there is absolutely nothing I can do to prevent it,” Dumbledore quietly added.
Chapter 53: Moving Pictures

When the Potters arrived at the Mingling Table for breakfast, they found an annoyed Lavender dressing down an abashed looking Neville. Lavender had a very Hermione-ish expression on her face, of the sort that Hermione wore when telling someone off for doing something which they might possibly regret doing later. Harry recalled being on the receiving end of some of those looks in first year - especially before the Troll Incident - and he didn't envy Neville.

“...Honestly Neville, we’re both prefects,” Lavender was saying crossly. “You should have supported me...”

“I’m sorry Lavender... I know I should have said something. It’s just - Fred and George - they’re our friends...” Neville moaned.

“Neville, you have to be able to stand up to people, even if they are your friends... What they’re doing could be dangerous - even if they don’t mean it to be. You wouldn’t want them to get in trouble for accidentally hurting someone do you?”

“No,” said Neville in a small voice, looking very much like he wanted to crawl under a rock and hide.

“What’s going on?” asked Hermione. Harry thought he had a very good idea of what the Twins might be up to.

“Fred and George,” Lavender answered with a scowl. “They’re trying to rope students into being test subjects for some of the skiving-off sweets they’re making. The sweets supposedly make you temporarily sick enough to ditch class...”

Harry smirked as Hermione bit her lip and thought for a moment; he was fairly certain that Fred and George would be very soon forced to alter their plans.

“That does sound a bit unsafe,” Hermione agreed. “I suppose if Fred and George want to test them on themselves they’re entitled to, and I’d say the best way to stop them from using other students as guinea pigs is to tell them you’ll inform their mother... I doubt either of them would want to receive a Howler from Mrs Weasley.”

“I think you’re on your own on this one Lavender, but I know you’re up to the task,” said Harry, grinning. He raised his eyebrows at Neville. “And I’m sure Neville will have your back from now on... right Neville?”

“Er... yeah! Of course! ... I promise!” said Neville, peering pleadingly at Lavender.

“Oh alright!” Lavender huffed. “I’ll deal with the Weasleys myself then. But I’ll hold you to that promise Neville.”

Neville breathed a sigh of relief and shot Harry a grateful look as the others began to arrive for breakfast. Fred and George took one look at Lavender, deciding that perhaps it might be best to eat at the Gryffindor table. Harry was just digging into his scrambled eggs and bacon when the Wiz-vision screen flickered to life.

The Ministry flag rippled in the wind above a country manor as a rousing march played. A large gathering of witches and wizards saluted Minister Umbridge as she rode a carriage pulled by a number of miserable looking house-elves.
A single row of wizards and witches of regal bearing stood at attention in front of the crowd. Harry presumed that they were the most prominent heads of the Pureblood Houses as one of them looked like Lucius Malfoy.

Senior Undersecretary Percy Weasley bowed to the Minister, then introduced her to the acquiescent throngs, extolling the virtues of loyalty to the Ministry, and of an orderly society in which everyone knew their proper place.

At the end of the sequence the Wiz-Vision displayed a new message for Hogwarts staff and students:

**Educational Decree #24:**

_Henceforth, all Student Organisations, Societies, Clubs, Teams, or Groups are hereby disbanded. An Organisation, Society, Club, Team, or Group is defined as a regular meeting of three or more students._

_Permission to re-form may be granted only with the express approval of the Inquisitors. Any student in contravention of Educational Decree #24 will be expelled forthwith._

The Great Hall erupted with sounds of shock and fury. “That’s rubbish!” could be heard over the din, coming from the direction of the Gryffindor table. Harry and Hermione looked to see Fred bellowing angrily. Indeed, the loudest sounds of outrage appeared to be emanating from all of the members of quidditch teams throughout the Hall.

Only one table appeared to be immune to the wave of indignation sweeping through the Great Hall. Malfoy and known members of the Slytherin quidditch team sat grinning and looking insufferably smug. The Potters and their friends glanced at each other, their faces ashen.

“Bloody hell!” gasped Harry. “Hermione, you don’t suppose we had something t’doo with this, do you?”

“I really don’t see how we could have, Harry,” Hermione replied, looking a bit shaken. “There’s no way anybody else could have found out yet - it has to be a coincidence. It must be an intimidation tactic...”

“Professor Dumbledore will be able to do something about it, won’t he?” asked Ginny, looking very worried. “I’m trying out for the quidditch team this year too.”

“Well, it looks like Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall are working on it already,” said Luna, pointing towards the staff-table.

Sure enough, the headmaster and headmistress appeared to be deep in animated conversation with the Carrows. Several minutes later Dumbledore stood up to address the students and the Great Hall fell into silence. Everyone awaited his pronouncement with bated breath. Dumbledore’s rich voice rang through the Hall.

“Please calm yourselves,” said the headmaster. “After some discussion with the Professors Carrow, the quidditch teams have all been reinstated...”

At this, the smug looks of the Slytherins evaporated and turned to glares, most of them directed at the Gryffindor table, and great sighs of relief could be heard from everyone else.

“However,” Dumbledore went on, “all other clubs must petition to be reinstated. And as headmaster I shall be reviewing the petitions subject to final approval by the Inquisitors. Now, by all means,
please continue with breakfast.”

While most pupils returned their attention to their plates, somewhat mollified, many at the Mingling Table moodily picked at what remained of their breakfasts.

“It’s a good thing you came up with the plan to work in small groups who don’t know everything, Harry,” Dora muttered, “or we’d probably be finished before we’d even got started. It’ll be ‘ard enough as it is just for us all to meet up now without lookin’ suspicious.”

Harry nodded, sighing heavily. He and Hermione were both distracted much of the day, but all things considered, things went relatively smoothly. Malfoy and McLaggen both seemed to be keeping their distance, though Draco could be heard loudly boasting about his father’s “special relationship” with the Minister at every opportunity to anyone who would listen.

“Bloody git,” Ron muttered as he and Seamus made their way to Care of Magical Creatures with the Potters and their other fifth year friends. “The way Malfoy goes on about the Minister, anyone would think that she’s his new mum.”

“She might be more or less,” Hermione responded quietly. “The Minister has obviously been harbouring the Malfoys personally since Narcissa Black left Mr Malfoy, and since she sneakily got Draco out of Azkaban. And that was months ago. For all we know, Minister Umbridge and Mr Malfoy have developed an intimate relationship.”

“Urgh... You can’t be serious,” said Harry. “She’s hideous...”

Daphne wrinkled her nose in distaste and made a retching sound. “I can’t imagine Mr Malfoy even being attracted to her - she looks like a toad. What would someone as high and mighty as him even see in her?”

“Well, looks aren’t everything,” said Parvati. “People can be attracted to each other for different reasons. But I admit the Minister is as revolting on the inside as she appears to be on the outside.”

“You’re right Parvati,” Hermione nodded. “I don’t think looks really come into it. I expect it’s more a matter of convenience for Mr Malfoy. The Minister has what he wants - political access to the Ministry. He’ll probably do anything to keep her happy to stay close to Power. He’s probably just using her...”

“And she’s using him too,” Harry interjected. “She’s manipulating Lucius Malfoy just as much as he is her. It’s obviously a mutually beneficial relationship. I just hope the Order has Madam Black well protected,” Harry concluded darkly as they entered the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest near Hagrid’s hut.

Jennifer - who had opted to take Care of Magical Creatures with the others - remained silent as she followed the conversation; she had never met Lucius Malfoy, but he sounded as horrid as his son or any of the other followers of Voldemort that she’d come across. But the topic was soon forgotten when Hagrid introduced the class to creatures that were invisible to most of the students except for Harry and Hermione, and those who had been with them at the battle for Hogwarts.

Parvati gasped in surprise. Daphne and Jennifer shrank back from the eerie black skeletal horse-like creatures with bat-wings. Neville gulped, thinking the creatures looked rather ominous and forbidding. Hermione peered at them in fascination, and a strange feeling came over Harry which he couldn’t really describe.

“She’s using him too,” Harry interjected. “She’s manipulating Lucius Malfoy just as much as he is her. It’s obviously a mutually beneficial relationship. I just hope the Order has Madam Black well protected,” Harry concluded darkly as they entered the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest near Hagrid’s hut.

Jenni
“Right yeh are Hermione,” beamed Hagrid. “Very misunderstood creatures they are... They pull the carriages that bring you lot up ter the castle from the Hogwarts Express.”

“Oh...” said Harry, as recognition set in, “I remember them from Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them. But why haven’t I seen them before then? And why are we the only ones that can?” he asked.

“Because we’ve seen Death, Harry,” Hermione responded sadly. “And lots of it... Though I’m not sure why you haven’t seen them before. You were there when your mother was killed...”

Harry swallowed, blinking back sudden tears. “Maybe... maybe it was because I never really understood what I was seeing at the time - I was too little. I... I really only saw it properly... only when Snape helped me... er...”

Hermione nodded and took Harry’s hand. “I know Harry,” she said gently. “You don’t have to say it.”

Harry took a deep breath to steady himself and mustered a smile. He reached out a hand to a small Thestral which appeared to be a foal and it let him stroke its snout. Its shiny black coat was surprisingly soft and velvety.

Harry still didn’t know what to call that feeling the Thestrals aroused within him, but if he had to describe the feeling he might have said it was bittersweet, a sort of yearning for something beautiful that he’d lost but was yet still a part of him, something tantalisingly just out of reach, yet within his grasp.

It felt like a beloved memory too painful to let go of, and too painful to hold onto. It felt like seeing a picture of his mother for the first time, or like seeing his parents in the Mirror of Erised.

“Thestrals...” Harry murmured as a tear broke free and rolled down one cheek, “they’re not so bad really...”

“Quite righ’ Harry...” Hagrid cheerfully agreed as he chucked large slabs of raw meat at the Thestrals.

“Very gentle creatures Thestrals are!” he continued as the creatures began ravenously tearing the chunks of bloody meat to shreds with their razor sharp fangs.

After classes let out for the day, Hermione could see that Harry still had a brooding look about him. She waved off their friends, knowing that Harry just wanted to be alone. They both retired to their quarters for the evening, not even returning to the Great Hall for dinner.

Harry lay on the bed, settling in Hermione’s warm embrace as she stroked his messy black hair and kissed him tenderly. Crookshanks purred as he looked down from the top of the wardrobe, his bushy tail curled around Hedwig...

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Friday eventually rolled around, and with it came the apprehension of knowing that Amycus Carrow’s class was looming. Harry was distracted from his rumination by the morning’s Wiz-Vision broadcast. This one was quite a bit lengthier than the previous ones, being the first ever wizard daily news programme.

A rousing musical introduction was followed by an impeccably groomed wizard discussing the Daily Prophet’s top stories with a brassy looking witch who appeared to be doing a remarkably good impression of an older Rita Skeeter with pointier features, far too much make-up, and redder hair.
“That reminds me,” Harry whispered to Hermione as the announcers launched into the first topic of the day, “I wonder where Rita Skeeter’s going to hide now. I haven’t seen her since the battle with Voldemort...”

“That’s a good question Harry,” Hermione replied quietly. She shook her bushy head in disbelief, “I still can’t get over her joining the Order. She’s in as much trouble as the rest of us might be if the Minister catches her...”

Sitting next to Hermione, Luna couldn’t help overhearing.

“She’s working with Daddy now,” Luna murmured with a grin. “I found out after I spoke to Daddy the other day... He told me that they’re working on a way to break into the Wiz-Vision broadcast so that they can do their own pirate broadcasts eventually. The Order bought a Wiz-Vision screen for them to experiment on. It might take a while before they work it out though.”

“That’s brilliant!” Harry whispered excitedly. “That reminds me...”

“Harry!” Hermione hissed, tugging on his sleeve. Harry turned back to look at the giant screen to see what had caught her attention.

“....Muggleborn Wizard Dick Turpentine was arrested by Aurors today on suspicion of stealing wands,” the fabulously coiffed wizard announcer was saying. “The investigation has been ordered to be turned over to the Unspeakable Office in the Department of Mysteries by the Minister - as the stolen wands were allegedly being distributed to muggles for their own use in an apparent scheme to challenge the authority of the Ministry.”

“Surely not, William!” gasped the brassy witch co-anchor in clearly feigned surprise. “How could a muggle possibly make use of a wand?”

“Ah, Endora... well, that is the million galleon question,” William the wizard news-anchor replied. “And that is why Dick Turpentine has been turned over to the Department of Mysteries for investigation.”

“Well, Head Auror Rufus Scrimgeour certainly can’t be happy about that...” Endora the witch co-anchor responded. “Could this possibly explain some of the recent statistics showing an uptick in the apparent birth of muggleborn wizards?”

“Indeed, perhaps this is even related to the recent events at Hogwarts and the second death of He-who-must-not-be-named,” William replied. “Who can be certain until the investigation is completed? But surely it is an open question given the muggleborn promoting proclivities of the headmaster...”

“This could possibly even call into question the very notion of wizards ever actually being sired by muggles. Could this be the culmination of a centuries long conspiracy to breach the Statute of Secrecy by stealing wands and teaching muggles how to use them? If so, then every so-called muggleborn is plausibly suspect.”

Audible gasps of shock filled the Great Hall. Harry’s nostrils flared angrily; he glanced at Hermione who was livid. Dora’s expression was nothing short of murderous and Jennifer swallowed anxiously. Appalled glances were shared around the Mingling Table by those who were aware of the circumstances surrounding Jennifer’s recent “discovery” of her magical abilities.

“Well, William - that is certainly food for thought,” Endora said unctuously. “And with that, we conclude the very first broadcast of WVN’s Morning News Headlines in conjunction with the Daily Prophet. This has been Endora Le Fay...”
“...And William O’Hannity! Bringing Fair and Balanced news to you daily, because we’re looking out for you!” the wizard news anchor concluded bombastically.

After the half hour news programme had finished, the screen displayed once again Educational Decrees twenty three and twenty four. Except for a few shortles from the Slytherin table, the Great Hall was silent.

All eyes turned to the Carrows whose countenances bore thin cruel smiles. Even the headmaster turned to face them with the coldest expression Harry had ever seen on Dumbledore’s visage... at least the coldest he had seen since the day that Draco Malfoy had been arrested for the kidnapping and sexual assault of Daphne’s sister Astoria.

Gradually a murmur filled the hall as the students resumed eating their breakfasts and discussed the chilling turn of events. Many more students glanced fearfully at the Carrows that morning.

Classes were subdued that day, and most of the Professors were all on edge, but they did their best to reassure the students that the speculations of the newscasters were entirely baseless and without merit.

History of Magic was the biggest surprise since breakfast though. Professor Binns made not a single mention of Goblin Uprisings or Giant Wars. Instead, his entire lesson was devoted to a lecture on the history of the accomplishments and valiant deeds of muggleborn wizards.

Harry and Hermione were even more determined than ever to focus intently on their subjects. After they both performed the Vanishing Charm flawlessly within the first twenty minutes of practice, Professor Flitwick took them aside while the rest of the class struggled - though Parvati and Jennifer both appeared to be doing quite well.

“My word, Mr and Mrs Potter!” Professor Flitwick led the Potters from their desks to a corner of the room away from the other students, speaking quietly so as not to be overheard, “It would appear that your skills may outstrip the current year’s syllabus. And I must say, I was quite impressed that you both managed to hold your own during the battle against Voldemort.

“Why don’t you give me an idea of the charms you already know so that I can teach you something more appropriate to your skill levels? Don’t bother with listing the charms you have learned in my classes the last four years - I already know that you are both highly proficient in those, and while they are revised for each year’s level, I don’t doubt that you could both perform them at OWL level were I to test you at this very moment.”

“Well... we both studied all the coursework for this year over the summer,” said Hermione as she took a deep breath before she launched into a full speed recitation. “And as you said, the fifth year spells are nearly all revisions of charms from earlier years except for the Vanishing Charm and some of the combat spells being introduced this year... But Harry and I already know those because we practiced them with Professor Moody during the Triwizard Tournament...”

“Ah, yes, of course!” Flitwick interjected with a nod, “I recall Dumbledore mentioning as much, and Mr Potter’s successful completion of the second and third tasks was certainly an indication of his advancements. Alright then... can I presume that you are both well acquainted with stunning and shielding...”

“...and Bombarda and Incendio...” said Hermione.

“...and the Reductor Curse and Aguamenti...” Harry continued.
“...and of course we practiced the advanced versions of those spells - Bombarda Maxima, Protego Maxima, and Protego Totalum over the summer...” Hermione added. “Not to mention that we can both perform Corporeal Patronuses... Professor Lupin taught us in third year...”

“Good Lord! You can both produce Corporeal Patronuses?” Professor Flitwick sputtered, his eyes bulging. “I knew that you had both had some training in the basic Patronus shield, but Dumbledore never mentioned... though I suppose I ought to have suspected...

“And most of the charms you have mentioned aren’t even taught until sixth and seventh year.” The diminutive professor stroked his goatee thoughtfully. “Tell me - have you either of you practiced performing any spells nonverbally?”

“Er... nonverbally?” Harry looked puzzled.

“I mean without saying the incantations out loud.”

“Oh... er... I do loads of them nonverbally,” responded Harry uncertainly, “except for the Patronus Charm, I usually forget to say them out loud - I just do a lot of the spells automatically without thinking once I've learned them. Hermione does too... That’s alright isn’t it?”

“Wait, did you just say you simply forget to say them out loud?” Flitwick looked a bit faint. “Yes... indeed! That’s perfectly appropriate Potter - usually people have to learn how to ‘forget’ - in Sixth Year...”

“Professor Moody said you’d be pleased when you found out,” Hermione beamed. She reached into her book bag and pulled out the “ridiculously advanced” Charms book they had been reading and handed it to Professor Flitwick.

“We’ve also been studying the spells in here sir,” she continued. “We’re working on Pictura Portus at the moment, but we’ve also been looking at the Undetectable Extension Charm, and Protego Horribilis...”

“...and the Disillusionment Charm,” said Harry, grinning.

Professor Flitwick looked up from the thick book, smiling and nodding in satisfaction. The Potters had been the most proficient pupils in his class that he’d seen in a number of years, but he hadn’t been aware of quite how advanced they had become since the Triwizard tournament had begun.

“Well, Potters... It would appear that it behooves me to create a structured Independent Study syllabus for you both to follow, so you won’t have any gaps in your knowledge as you move forward...”

Hermione basked in the glow of Flitwick’s praises the rest of the day, the distress of the morning news forgotten. Harry was slightly less pleased as Hermione seemed eager to regale all of their friends with an accounting of his academic progress.

“...and the only class that Harry is still struggling in is Arithmancy,” Hermione was proudly telling Lavender, Parvati, Daphne, Jennifer, Neville and Hannah as they all made their way to the next class.

“Well, I doubt I’ll ever be any good at it,” Harry muttered, blushing furiously and wishing that Hermione would shut-up. “I’ll just be happy if I can continue to scrape Acceptables. And I’m not very good at Astronomy either.”

“Don’t be silly Harry - I’m sure you’ll eventually be getting E’s in Arithmancy, and you’re doing just
fine in Astronomy,” Hermione said airily. “It doesn’t matter anyway. You’re advanced in many of the most important classes. It’s no wonder that Remus and Sirius think you could easily take an extended leave of absence from Hogwarts without damaging your academic record…”

“We’re both already doing sixth year Potions, you’re brilliant in Ancient Runes, you should probably be in a seventh year Defence Against the Dark Arts class, and you could easily pass your OWL’s in Transfigurations with an E…”

To Harry’s dismay, Hermione kept gushing about his prodigious skills and exceptional study habits at every opportunity without pausing to take a breath. Hermione didn’t stop until it was time for Amycus Carrow’s class.

The Inquisitor’s class was their last full period of the day. Amycus Carrow held it in the Great Hall to accommodate the fifth year students of all the Houses all at once. Professor Carrow oozed a malignant joy as he launched into his lesson which focused on the Blood lineage of the most prominent pureblood families in Britain.

Professor Amycus Carrow cast his gaze across the Great Hall, his eyes narrowing and a thin sly smile creeping to his lips when he spied Harry Potter.

“Well, well... Here we all are!” the Inquisitor drawled, “Finally, at long last, Hogwarts will be providing the knowledge which is necessary for a proper appreciation of the Traditions and Heritage of our ancient wizarding culture.

“The Ministry believes that for far too long have those with less than full... genetic potential been allowed to join wizard society with a less than adequate respect for their superiors, and an unacceptably low level of understanding of our Culture for complete assimilation…”

Hermione bristled angrily, and it took Harry an incredible amount of restraint - every ounce of his will in fact - to prevent himself from objecting in a furious outburst to Amycus Carrow’s vile rhetoric. He knew it would do nobody any good to deliberately antagonise the Inquisitor.

Professor Carrow’s first lesson consisted mostly of an examination of the Sacred Twenty Eight - those families which had been considered the most Pureblood family lines of the surviving Pureblood Houses when the Pureblood Directory had been created in the 1930’s.

Every student received an updated copy of the Directory to study, and the lecture was accompanied by images on the Wiz-Vision screen of the most important historical and current Heads of Houses, interspersed with diagrammes of some of the family trees.

As Professor Carrow explained it, there were still roughly fifty Houses in Britain, even today, but the Pureblood Directory only contained those whose families were deemed the “Purest” for one reason or another.

Early drafts of the Directory which had been discovered, had apparently contained 29 family names, and Professor Carrow seemed to relish revealing the fact that - although they were one of the oldest lines - the Potter family had been excluded by the time of publication due to their appalling lack of respect for blood-status.

Amycus smirked nastily and looked right at Harry as Draco Malfoy and a number of Slytherins chortled gleefully. Harry rolled his eyes and yawned to show that he couldn’t care less. But he was interested to see that as the Directory had originally been published in the 1930’s, the Gaunt line appeared to end with a question mark.
By all indications, Tom Riddle had chosen not to update the status of the Gaunt Family with his name in order to hide the fact that his father had actually been a muggle - a fact that was apparently only known to members of the Order of the Phoenix, the Potters, and some of their friends. Harry whispered his bemusement to Hermione.

“I expect only Wormtail knew,” Hermione quietly responded. “He was the only one at Riddle Manor when he returned Voldemort to a proper body. I suppose Voldemort could have told some of his followers too - like Bellatrix - but it’s doubtful. Obviously he didn’t see fit to tell anyone at all during the first war.”

Harry nodded and returned his attention to Mr Carrow’s lecture.

Decades had gone by with the Directory containing only the Sacred Twenty Eight. A fair number of students looked thoroughly embarrassed to see their family names included on the list, including Daphne, Neville, Ernie MacMillan, and Hannah Abbott.

Harry wasn’t too surprised when Professor Carrow explained that the blood-status of the Black Family and the Weasley family had recently been downgraded to “Questionable” due to the “lack of respect” shown for their heritage by the current Heads of those Houses. Harry knew that Sirius and Narcissa Black wouldn’t care, and he presumed that Arthur Weasley didn’t give a rat’s arse either.

“Hey Weaselby,” Draco taunted Ron under his breath, “How does it feel to be disowned.”

“Shove it Malfoy!” Ron retorted bitterly. Ron honestly didn’t give a fig that his family was known as blood-traitors, but he hated that Malfoy had another piece of ammunition to goad him with. Ron hoped that the quidditch tryouts after classes would improve his mood.

After they left the Great Hall, Theo, Blaise, and Pansy caught up with the Potters, all peering around nervously to make sure that the rest of the Slytherins had gone.

“Er... just thought you probably ought to know Harry,” said Theo, “I overheard them... Draco and Crabbe and Goyle - they’ve been talking about how Dumbledore must’ve given you a secret weapon to use against V...V...Voldemort’s army - and they’ve been saying that they and the Carrows have been ordered to try and find out what it is... by any means necessary....”

“But they’re biding their time for a bit,” Blaise added. “They’re just waiting for the Minister to get around to removing Dumbledore...”

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It was an excited Ron and Ginny who joined the Potters at the Mingling Table that evening for dinner. Ron was accompanied by Seamus and Ginny by Luna, both of whom looked quite proud of their respective companions. Fred and George arrived too, apparently having got over their berating by Lavender who was sitting with Viktor at the end of the table with a satisfied smile on her face.

“I can’t believe it Harry,” Ron gasped, “I actually made the Quidditch team this year... I got the Keeper position.”

“I know - I was there... remember?” Harry grinned after listening to Ron for the hundredth time. Ron had been repeating himself until he was almost hoarse, still trying to process the amazing fact that he had made the team

“We can’t believe it either,” snorted Fred, “I don’t know what Angelina was thinking...”

Ron and Ginny both glared, and George shot Fred a reproving look. Fred shut-up immediately, an
apologetic expression replacing the teasing one.

“Don’t listen to him, Ron,” said George kindly, “Fred’s only joking. We’re both really proud of you - aren’t we Fred?!”

“Of course we are,” Fred hurriedly agreed. “Sorry Ron. Old habits... You’ve been practicing really hard - you deserve it... really, I mean it!”

Ron looked mollified and nodded his acceptance of Fred’s apology.

“And I can’t believe that I’m going to be the Seeker this year,” Ginny squealed.

“That’s bloody brilliant!” said Harry with a grin. He was really pleased that Ron was finally getting his chance to shine at something. “I can’t wait to see you both play in the first match...”

“I’m so thrilled for you both!” Hermione beamed.

Everyone around the table congratulated Ron and Ginny, and Ron was especially pleased when Viktor Krum offered his praises.

“They’ll have to change the name of the team to Team Weasley...” Luna giggled.

“Too true!” George mused. “Mind you, not all of the Gryffindors are pleased about that...”

“Too bad for McLaggen...” Fred laughed. “What an idiot! ... I can’t believe he thought he stood a chance. Angelina hates him!”

“Towler accused Angelina of favouritism,” chimed in George. “Which is stupid, because Ron and Ginny won their spots fair and square.”

“Who else ees on ze team?” Fleur asked politely.

“Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet are still on the team as Chasers,” Ginny responded gleefully, “That’s why I didn’t bother to try out for that position. But it means for the first time in fifteen years the girls will outnumber the boys - according to McGonagall.”

Fred made a face and rolled his eyes, but then he grinned and winked to show that he was just joking.

George gave Ron a serious look. “Of course that means you’ll have to be on your best behaviour Ron.”

“I’ll do my best t’be nice...” Ron mumbled, swallowed nervously, his ears turning pink. “I promise!”

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The rainy week had cleared up by Saturday, leaving naught but a few puffy white clouds scudding across the sky. The cheerful morning sun glimmered on the surface of the Black Lake as some ducks dove for fish. Harry peered around to make sure that they were still alone, and shared a look with Hermione before turning back to Viktor, Lavender, and Cedric and Cho.

“... And whatever happens Harry, you can count on me,” Cedric was saying as he smiled sincerely. “I’m in! I’ll start training some of the other Hufflepuffs - but only the ones I’m sure of - and Cho of course. And we’ll give Padma and a few of the other Ravenclaws as much help as we can to form their own defence team as well.”
“Excellent! Thanks loads Cedric,” said Harry, returning his smile. “Hermione, Dora, and I have our hands full as it is. This’ll make it easier for Susan and Padma if they can train with you a bit too during the week... And it’ll be much safer for all of us to work in small groups when it’s most convenient - especially given our different schedules...

“The Twins are fast learners. I’m sure they’ll be able to pick up enough on the weekends with us to pass it on to the Gryffindors the rest of the week. I don’t know how much time we have before the Minister makes her next big play - but I’m sure she’ll try to gin up a good excuse to sack Dumbledore sooner or later.

“After that, all bets are off on how long we have before she comes after me and Hermione. So we’ll just have to train up as many trustworthy people as best as we can in the meantime. And don’t forget - protecting muggleborn students are the top priority once Dumbledore’s gone...

“I don’t think the Minister is keen on harming any purebloods - and she’s more concerned about halfbloods ‘knowing their place’ than doing them in,” Harry concluded.

“Except for Harry... and anyone who openly tries to help us of course!” Hermione exclaimed crossly.

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Following lunch the Potters and their friends made their way to the Room of Requirement through the drafty stone corridors, carefully avoiding being spotted by the Carrows thanks to the Marauders’ Map.

“Wicked Harry!” Fred grinned when he saw the training room for the first time.

“Isn’t it though?” said Ginny, “We’ve been training here with Harry and Hermione since before the Third Task of the Triwiz.”

“This is bloody brilliant!” said George in an awed tone, “We had no idea this room even existed.” Fred and George peered at Ginny with admiration, seeing her with new eyes.

“Good on you oh sister of ours - you’ve done the Weasley name proud...” said Fred.

“You managed to keep Harry and Hermione’s secret good and proper...” George continued. “Not to mention helping to fight the Noseless Wonder’s army...”

“Dad and Bill didn’t even tell us that,” Fred sniggered. “I suppose he didn’t want to alarm Mum. She’d scream blue murder if she ever found out.”

“Anyway - remember, you’ve got to keep this a secret,” Harry warned. “It wouldn’t do for the Carrows, or any of the cretins like Malfoy or McLaggen to find out about the Room of Requirement.”

“Don’t worry Harry. You can trust us,” Padma promised as she gave him a hug.

“I know I can,” Harry said, his face reddening. “I just meant to make sure you’re careful that no-one sees you when you meet us here...”

“And thanks for inviting us,” Susan Bones beamed and threw her arms around Harry too, giving him a kiss on the cheek as his blush deepened. “Hermione told me that we were the only ones you trusted enough to let us in on everything.”
“So, where do we start, Harry?” George asked.

“Well... I reckoned probably with a few muggle fighting techniques,” said Harry with a grin. Ten minutes later, Fred and George were both laid out, sprawled on the mat.

“Bloody Hell Harry! I hurt all over,” groaned George. “What did Mad Eye and Dora teach these girls?”

“Just a few tricks we picked up in muggle gyms,” Dora chuckled. “Mad Eye’s one of the few Aurors to bother makin’ the effort. Only those ‘oo trained under ‘im at boot-camp really know how t’do it.”

“Remind me never to prank this lot,” Fred moaned at his twin as he looked up at Ginny and Daphne from the floor.

“Are you alright?” asked Daphne, worry etched on her features. “I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to hurt you. I held back as much as possible.”

George guffawed. “Blimey, if that was you two holding back, I never want to be on your bad sides! Some Beaters we are... if Oliver could see us now, he’d cut us from the team.”

“That’s why we're lucky Angelina’s captain of the team this year...” muttered Fred.

“Nice work on Fred, Daphne,” giggled Ginny. “And I never thought I’d see the day that I could clobber Fred or George at anything.”


“Don’t worry. We’ll focus on combat spells tomorrow,” said Harry sympathetically. “It’s good to know a few muggle fighting techniques too though. Once you’re halfway decent, you should start training some of the other Gryffindors.”

Following the practice in the Room of Requirement, Harry spent the next two hours painting Runes and Chinese symbols on his wife and their friends in the Unaffiliated Common Room, minus the newest recruits who had returned to their respective dorms.

Neville chose to be inked first, knowing what was coming next. He fled as soon as Harry was finished with him, and Viktor followed soon after.

Harry grinned when all of the girls stripped off their blouses revealing their undergarments, ready to be tattooed. Apparently modesty was a thing of the past in the completely private Unaffiliated common room. Hermione smirked, thinking that perhaps the others had decided that Harry should be considered an honorary “girl” since seeing him morph into one, and no doubt hoping to hold him to Harriet’s promise of a fashion show. Lavender blushed, but seemed comfortable enough to remove her shirt when she saw that the other girls were alright with it.

“I visited Remus and Sirius earlier today,” said Dora as Harry inked her last. “Remus told me I should teach you lot ‘ow to apparate seein’ as he can’t come up to the Castle at the moment...”

“I spoke to Dumbledore about it,” she continued, “and he says we can practice in the Room of Requirement. We won’t be able to go beyond the Room of course, but ‘e says the Room’s magic should allow us to apparate from one spot to another within its confines.”

Harry’s brows furrowed in thought. “Alright... it looks like we’ll be spending a lot of time in the Room of Requirement on the weekends then. We can practice apparating in the mornings. I’ll tell the Twins and Padma and Susan to come for training in the afternoons just after lunch.”
“Sounds like a plan Harry,” Dora agreed.

Harry looked around when he heard the piano, spying Hermione and Jennifer both playing together. He smiled when he heard Parvati’s lilting voice joining in. Luna, Ginny, Fleur, and Daphne had finally managed to convince Parvati to sing for everyone after ganging up on her.

Harry thought he recognised the tune as a particularly soulful Celtic folk song that Aunt Petunia would often listen to when Vernon wasn’t around. The only time he could remember Petunia ever listening to music was when Uncle Vernon had been at work.

She had been particularly fond of folk music and opera which Uncle Vernon had despised. Harry felt his eyes grow watery as the memories mingled with the present, not entirely sure why. He took off his glasses and wiped his blurry eyes so that he could see properly to finish tattooing Dora.

“Cor!” Dora marveled. “Parvati’s got a lovely singin’ voice... and I ‘ad no idea that Hermione could play the piano too.”

“Yeah, Hermione just started playing again recently,” Harry said creakily. He cleared his throat. “...She’s really good.”

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Harry was worn out and thought that he and Hermione might spend the rest of the afternoon lazing around a bit, but Hermione apparently had other ideas. Shortly after he’d finished inking everyone, Hermione dragged him to the unused classroom - now storeroom - which had contained the Mirror of Erised.

He assumed that they would be practicing the Pictura Portus Charm on the paintings stored within. But Harry’s assumption wasn’t entirely correct. While making certain that the door was well and truly locked, Harry felt Hermione’s arms entwine around his waist and her chin on his shoulder as she began to nuzzle his neck.

Harry turned around, smirking when he realised that Hermione had other plans, and returned her affections. Out of the corner of his eyes, Harry caught a glimpse of a sunny meadow - grasses and wildflowers waving in the breeze, cotton ball clouds sweeping across the sky - by a glistening blue lake in the painting behind Hermione as their kisses grew more heated. Lips parting wetly from hers to take a breath, Harry had to ask.

“Er... what’s up Hermione? Why are snogging in here?”

“Because we’re celebrating, Harry,” she replied with a naughty golden gleam in her eyes. “I’ve done it... I finally managed to perform the Pictura Charm and I thought we should test it out properly... by continuing this inside the landscape painting...”

Harry’s eyes lit up and he grinned. “That’s an absolutely brilliant idea Hermione! Let’s give it a go then...”

Hermione chanted the incantation and performed the intricate wand movements. The surface of the painting began to shimmer. Taking Harry’s hand, Hermione stepped into the frame and giddily pulled him through.

Moments later they were rolling around in the golden meadow, shedding clothes as their passions intensified. One hand behind Harry’s head and the other pressing into the small of his back, Hermione parted her thighs for him as she reclined on the painted ground.
Cradling one of Hermione’s bottom cheeks with a hand while the other encircled a breast, Harry slid his length inside her. Hermione cried out, gasping as he rocked her. It wasn’t long before the fervor took them both, sweeping them away in a torrent of ecstasy. With a groan, Harry emptied himself into Hermione’s depths as she trembled in the throes of bliss.

When they were finished, Hermione sighed in contentment, snuggled under one of Harry’s arms, a hand caressing his bare chest. They lay together in the field of long golden grasses and purple wildflowers by the shimmering deep-blue water of the lake, basking under the bright sun.

It felt amazingly lifelike even though every brush-stroke was visible in every blade of grass which surrounded the Potters’ naked figures, and in every ripple on the surface of the lake. A large wooden frame hung in mid-air nearby, through which they could both still see the unused classroom on the other side.

The only other thing besides the painted textures of their surroundings which made it obvious that the apparently three dimensional world they were in wasn’t quite “real,” was the fact that to either side of the frame the world faded into a colourless blankness at an angle concomitant to the perspective at which it had been painted. It was as if they were inside a life-size diorama - the snowcapped mountains behind the rolling green foothills even appeared to be quite some distance away.

“I reckon we could keep walking that direction and climb those mountains Hermione,” Harry marveled. “I suppose there’s no backside to them though...”

“I think you’re right Harry - it would seem that each painting is a finite space only containing whatever was in the visual field that the painter could fit onto the canvas. I expect if we walked off into the blank bits of space at the sides, we’d emerge into the ‘world’ of the next nearest picture in the classroom, just like the wizard portraits do.”

“It would be really weird if this was a lot less realistic picture - like a cartoon,” Harry mused.

Hermione giggled. “That wouldn’t be so bad. Can you imagine being inside an Impressionist, the later period ones I mean - or even worse - a Cubist painting?”

Harry thought back to some of the paintings in the London art museums that he had been to with Hermione and his mind boggled.

“Er... some of those Post-Impressionist ones like some of van Gogh’s would be really interesting actually - Starry Night would be amazing - but Cubist... no... definitely not! I think I’d go mad inside a Picasso. I wonder if someone saw us in a painting though, would we look like we were painted in the style of the painting too?” Harry wondered.

Hermione thought for a moment, imagining herself as a Monet girl, or even a Renoir nude. She began to flush and her nipples perked again at the very idea.

“Well... have a really good look at me Harry,” Hermione giggled again as she shimmied her breasts in front of Harry’s face. “Do you see any paintbrush-strokes?”

Harry grinned, tickling Hermione’s ribs. As she shrieked with laughter he captured the pink tips of Hermione’s bouncing little globes with his fingers and shook his head.

“Only the ones that I painted on you myself,” he replied with a chuckle as he eyed the Runic and Chinese symbol tattoos. “Shame really... you’d be a gorgeous Early Impressionist painting Hermione...”

Hermione beamed radiantly. Harry suddenly found himself in another heated embrace with
Hermione atop him amidst the painted grasses and wildflowers...
Chapter 55: The End of the Line: Part 1

Of all the Unaffiliated, Harry’s sense of premonition was perhaps the most finely attuned. He woke with a start the morning following the quidditch match, his heart pounding. Casting his eyes towards the window, he noticed that the cold light of dawn had a wintry hue. Crookshanks yawned and peered at Harry with amber eyes. He climbed onto Harry’s chest where he lay for a few moments and purred as if to tell Harry to go with his gut instincts. Then Crookshanks jumped off and trotted out of the room.

Harry put on his slippers and dressing gown, got out of bed and padded over to the window. Sure enough, a thick blanket of white lay upon the ground and the snow was coming down in heavy flurries. Hermione stirred, reaching out an arm to put around Harry. When she found nobody in the bed beside her she opened her bleary eyes and yawned, spying Harry staring out of the window.

“Mmm... Harry, it’s still early and it’s Sunday. Why don’t you come back to bed!? ... Harry? ... Earth to Harry!”

“Hunh...? Oh, Hermione - you’re awake. Sorry!”

“Come back to bed Harry. Are you alright?”

“Er... yeah! I’m okay I s’pose. I’m just feeling a bit out of sorts... Something bad is going to happen soon - I just know it! I think we should start getting ready to do a bunk.”

“I agree Harry,” Hermione sighed. Then she gave Harry a naughty smile and pulled her nightie over her head. “But I think we’ve got a bit of time left...”

Harry’s brooding look was replaced with a lopsided grin. He couldn’t resist the sight of Hermione undressed and felt a stiffness tenting his pyjama bottoms. He pounced back onto the bed eagerly between Hermione’s open legs, tugging off his pyjamas. He planted little kisses along her inner thighs until he reached her inflamed vulva.

Hermione let out a little gasp of pleasure and wrapped her thighs around Harry’s head as his tongue darted between her pink folds, seeking out the fleshy pearl hidden within. Hermione’s humid sheath contracted when his wet tongue entered her. Harry’s tongue alternated between flicking Hermione’s little nubbin and delving inside her.

“Oh... ah... oh!” Hermione squeaked, feeling the first tremors of ecstasy rippling through her. Harry continued his ministrations without pausing to allow Hermione time to recover.

She climaxed twice in rapid succession, and as the third wave of bliss swept her away Hermione registered Harry trailing his kisses up across her belly - up along her ribcage. She felt his hands on her breasts, kneading, his lips reaching and encircling first one of her tender pink peaks and then the other.

Harry alternated sucking each nipple as he continued to massage Hermione’s firm little globes. Hermione squealed when the fourth orgasm rocked her. Still lost in the throes of euphoria she felt the crown of Harry’s erection nestled in her sopping entrance.

With one jerk of his loins, Harry was inside her. She felt his lance plunge to her depths, building up a steady rhythm. Her hips moved, meeting his thrusts as he continued to rock her. The cascading tide of ardour flooded Hermione again when she felt Harry stiffening, then convulsively erupting, filling her chamber with his essence in rapid pulses as he groaned.
Harry and Hermione gave themselves over to the maelstrom of passion which swirled around them, the magic crackling and arcing in a dazzling rainbow of colours, shaking the bedroom - both falling into oblivion upon completion. As Hermione came to in Harry’s arms she showered him with little kisses - happy to see him looking more relaxed.

“Thanks Harry! That was nice... I feel much better now.”

“Yeah... me too!” Harry grinned. “I think we both needed that.”

The Potters shared a hot bath before dressing and getting on with their day. An hour and a half later they were in the Room of Requirement for a confab with their friends, making arrangements for any potential set of circumstances.

“...and so we’ll probably be needing a distraction,” said Harry after laying out the general plan.

“...Distractions are our speciality,” Fred told Harry, grinning. “We’ll have the mayhem ready as ordered Harry...”

“...Just give us the word,” George added cheerily.

“Right then,” said Dora, “As a teacher’s assistant Fleur can stick with you lot through all of your classes. I’ll manage to be around in one form or another and we’ll stay in contact with the mirrors.”

“Excellent!” said Harry, nodding in agreement. “Any of us who are going should stick close together. That could be an issue for you Luna if you’re still coming with us...”

“Of course I’m coming, Harry!” said Luna firmly. “I said I would and I meant it! Just mirror-call me when it’s time... Are you sure you won’t join us Ginny?”

“I wish I could,” Ginny moaned. “But we can’t risk it with the Trace on me. I’d just give you lot away. Don’t worry Luna, I’ll be fine... really! Percy still seems to like me and I doubt the Carrows will want to risk upsetting him.”

“Okay,” said Harry, “Now what about you Parvati? You’d probably be relatively safe here too. I know you don’t have the Trace on you anymore, but you don’t have to come with us...”

“I’ve made up my mind,” said Parvati, “I’m going with you and Hermione too.”

“And of course Daphne and Jennifer are coming too,” said Hermione. “That just leaves you and Hannah, Neville. You’re both pureblood so you should be safe as long as you keep your head down. Promise me that you and Hannah won’t do anything rash while we’re gone...”

“Erm... yeah!” said Neville uncertainly. “I promise, Hermione.”

Harry raised his eyebrows, detecting a hint of ambivalence in Neville’s tone. Neville glanced away. Harry shook his head and sighed, hoping that Hannah would keep Neville in line. For all of Neville’s generally mellow nature and rocky self-confidence, Harry knew that Neville had a headstrong streak in him not altogether unlike his own.

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The Potters were rather surprised when they found Mr Carrow sitting in on Potions Class on Monday with his clipboard. For once Mr Carrow seemed to be relatively satisfied, looking bored if anything, and apparently seeing little to criticise in Snape. Professor Snape appeared as inscrutable as ever, seemingly doing his best to ignore Amycus Carrow.
The atmosphere of the classroom, often heavy with steam and smells, was thick with the almost unbearable clouds of smugness emanating from Draco Malfoy. Harry and Hermione shared a look. Hermione shook her head and they returned their attention to the potion which they were working on.

At the end of the lesson when Malfoy turned in his potion, Snape was forced to acknowledge him. Draco, never particularly good at keeping his thoughts or mood in check at the best of times, could barely contain his glee. Snape’s dark eyes glittered angrily as he watched Draco depart the dungeon classroom, following the Inquisitor.

Professor Snape spied the Potters looking at him with concern, and for a moment they could almost discern him trying to imperceptibly communicate with them. Then Snape’s walls went up and the door to his mind slammed shut.

Silently, Harry turned in the potion which he and Hermione had been working on. He raised his eyebrows questioningly at Snape, but the Potions professor said nothing.

“What do you think that was all about Hermione?” Harry quietly asked her as they left the dungeon, falling slightly behind Daphne, Parvati, and Jennifer. “It seemed like something was up between him and Malfoy.”

“I think you’re right Harry,” Hermione replied with nearly a whisper. “I’m not sure how much longer Snape is going to be teaching Potions. Professor Slughorn may have to fill in after all...”

“Blimey... are you serious?” Harry’s blood ran cold. “I would have thought they were going after Dumbledore first...”

“I think they still are Harry...” Worry crossed Hermione’s features. “This was something else... definitely something to do with Malfoy, like you said. Snape must have read Draco’s mind. There’s no way to know what Snape saw though.”

Harry considered the possibilities and his features darkened. There was only one thing which made any sense him.

“Narcissa Black... Lucius Malfoy is going to try and get revenge on her for leaving him. I just know it! And Snape means to stop him... even if he has to kill him!”

“You might be right Harry...” Hermione bit her lip and peered at Harry thoughtfully, wondering if he’d somehow naturally picked up a bit of Legilimency.

~o0o~

As he watched his students leaving the Potions classroom, Severus Snape hoped that the Potters’ latent abilities - which all humans had, even muggles - were enough to pick up at least the gist of the information which he had been trying to convey without tipping off Draco Malfoy or Amycus Carrow that he had gleaned an inkling of what was to come from their minds.

Of the two, Snape suspected that Harry’s natural skill level as a legilimens was more advanced, due to having a modicum of practice given his connection to the now defunct Dark Lord. On the other hand, Mrs Potter’s mind was more focused and disciplined giving her a clear advantage as a legilimens.

In any case, that wasn’t what concerned him the most at the moment. Severus swallowed anxiously as he pondered the efficacy of the Protection Charms which warded Narcissa Black’s estate. He reached into his desk for his mirror, briefly considering the irony of using a device based on the ones
owned by Sirius Black and James Potter. They had quickly become a ubiquitous item among Order members once Dumbledore had reverse-engineered those belonging to the Marauders.

Snape tapped the mirror, uttering a name, “Filius Flitwick.”

“Ah... Severus, I was hoping to have a chance to speak with you today,” the diminutive Charms Master responded moments later. “I wanted to confer with you regarding the Potters - to be certain that we are all providing them the tools which they will undoubtedly require in the very near future.”

“Quite,” the Potions Master said drily. “Well, you shall have ample opportunity Filius. If you would be so kind as to meet me at Narcissa Black’s Estate after classes today. I wish to appraise and fortify the Protection Charms...”

“Of course,” Filius Flitwick replied without hesitation. “It is imperative that the Order maintain top notch security for our meeting place.”

“It is more than that...” Severus began stiffly. He paused uncomfortably, still unused to discussing things which reflected on his personal feelings with his colleagues, even insofar as he had come to consider some of them friends. “I believe that Madam Black - Narcissa - she is in danger...”

“I see,” Filius regarded Severus’s pained countenance gravely.

When Severus was no longer forthcoming, Filius was certain that the Potions Master was holding back on some information, still too reticent to completely reveal himself. But Filius Flitwick was no intellectual slouch. It was clear enough from Snape’s expression that he intended to personally kill Lucius Malfoy if the opportunity presented itself... and that the Potions Master believed the opportunity to be imminent.

~o0o~

Severus Snape awoke with a start. He sensed that it was well after midnight, but he knew immediately that something wasn’t right. At the conclusion of the Quidditch match on Saturday, Severus had been left with a deeply unsettled feeling. But not because the team of the House for which he was the Master had lost the match.

To the contrary, he had felt a measure of satisfaction at the outcome. No, Severus had been disturbed because he had discerned that events were coming to a head. And now... now he sensed that someone else was in the room with him.

“Light!” Severus muttered, and the warm glow of the bedside lamp lit part of the room, casting eerie shadows. A tall figure stepped out of the darkness.

Snape’s eyes widened in recognition of the lanky wizard with long platinum blond hair pointing his wand at him. Wildly, Severus looked around for Narcissa, but she was nowhere to be seen in the bedchamber.

“Looking for someone?” snarled Lucius Malfoy, “My treacherous bitch of a wife perhaps?”

“She is no longer yours,” Severus said coldly as he quelled his disquiet. “Your loss was of your own making...”

“Perhaps so, old friend,” Lucius hissed sarcastically through gritted teeth. “And perhaps I shall make her mine again - if only to show her the true meaning of pain...”

“Where is she?” Severus asked calmly as he stared into Lucius’s glacial blue eyes. “What have you
done with her?"

“Oh, nothing yet,” replied Lucius evenly. He tapped his temple with his forefinger. “And don’t bother looking here. You will not find anything without your wand. My defences are strong.”

Severus cursed inwardly. Lucius was correct; Snape could not break through those walls without his wand. But there was something off about Lucius Malfoy’s demeanor.

“You don’t even have her, do you?” Severus raised an eyebrow.

Lucius faltered slightly, wondering if his old friend’s abilities were more prodigious than he had believed. Lucius snorted.

“Heh, she will be mine again soon enough,” sneered the elder Malfoy, “Narcissa cannot evade Warlock Nott and the others for long. And after we find her, I shall... no... we shall teach her a lesson that she will never forget, and then... then I shall put an end to her miserable life... and your own as well!”

Severus couldn’t help himself; his nostrils flared and a hiss of anger escaped. If only he had his wand.

“How did you get in?” he asked, stalling for time as he reached out with his mind to locate and retrieve his wand.

“These old manors all have secret passages,” Lucius sneered, “It wasn’t difficult to find an entrance with the right spells at my fingertips. Now get up... slowly...”

Snape sighed. Of course there were hidden tunnels which linked the estate to the outside world, and plausibly one which even Narcissa had never been aware of.

“I suppose you have my wand already,” Severus muttered as he slowly climbed out of bed and pulled on his trousers. “...No doubt hidden in your robes. Quite stealthy of you I must say... How long have you been here?”

“Not long... but long enough,” Lucius smirked. “And nice try, old friend, but you shan’t be overpowering me and reclaiming your wand - I gave it to Cassius to hold onto. Now move... we’re going to take a little walk and we’re going to find my ex-wife!”

At Lucius Malfoy’s wandpoint, Severus silently traipsed through the Manor House from room to room looking for Narcissa, and he dared to hope that she had already escaped. Perhaps she had got up to relieve herself and discovered that her home had been invaded.

“Well, somewhere on the grounds perhaps!” Lucius exclaimed wearily, “No matter... she shall not evade me forever. Come on - outside!”

As the clouds above parted, the cold moonlight cast a pearly glow across the otherwise shadowed estate. The blades of grass felt crisp and frosty under Severus Snape’s bare feet, and the bitter chill of the night air crawled across his shirtless torso, raising goosebumps. Nearly fifteen minutes passed as the pair strolled across the lawn and through the gardens. A rustling sound at the end of a hedgerow caught both of their attentions.

“There you are Mr Malfoy... Sir!” said a pleased looking Snatcher with a shaved head. “We got ‘er... just around the corner. Me an’ Bob an’ your mate, Mr Nott... we caught ‘er tryin’ to get outta the gate not five minutes ago.”
“Very good...” a cruel smirk crept to Lucius Malfoy’s lips, “It would appear that the Minister’s recruitment efforts were not in vain. I must admit I had misgivings about the Minister’s plan to bring you and your... compatriots... into the fold.”

“Yeah... I s’pose so,” snorted the hooligan clad in leather jacket, chains, and blue jeans. “Well, not alla us managed ta graduate from ‘ogwarts. But that don’ mean we didn’ learn nuffink... We know enough ta get by and make our way in the world quite comfortably really...”

The three wizards stepped around the corner of the hedge and spied two more wizards holding a witch in a nightgown at wandpoint further down the path.

“Severus,” moaned Narcissa, “I had hoped you might have escaped...”

“And I... you,” sighed the Potions Master as he struggled to maintain control of his breathing and heart-rate.

“Yes... yes, this is all very touching, I must say!” Lucius sneered. “Much more intimate than I have experienced with my dear wife in some years... Well, I think I will enjoy a moment of ‘intimacy’ with you myself before I make our goodbye permanent... Narcissa...

“And no doubt these fine young lads and Cassius would like to join in the fun. Severus, you can watch. But first, Narcissa, perhaps a taste of the punishment which is to follow...”

Severus regarded the Snatcher named Bob, and Nott with a keen eye. There was something about the elder Nott which seemed odd - almost beseeching. Severus peered deeper into Warlock Nott’s unblinking eyes.

Cassius Nott had learned through the Minister that his son had been “captured” by Dumbledore, and been given some measure of reprieve. Pleased that Theodore had taken the opportunity to escape and had been given safe haven at Hogwarts by the headmaster, Cassius knew that his own time to redeem himself had finally arrived. Opening his mind wide, Cassius allowed Snape to see all that he needed to see.

Lucius raised his wand and pointed it at Narcissa. “Crucio...” he incanted, and Narcissa fell to the ground screaming in agony.

Then something happened which Lucius had not anticipated. Cassius flung Snape’s wand into the air and fired a green bolt of lightning from his own wand at the Snatcher beside him. For a very brief moment shock halted Lucius in his tracks.

In that instant, Severus summoned his wand from midair as the Snatcher named Bob fell dead. Lucius Malfoy recovered himself at the same time, his eyes still on Nott.

“TRAITOR!” roared Lucius, a green arc of magic leaping from the end of his own wand towards Cassius Nott.

Cassius collapsed to the ground. As the light went out in Warlock Nott’s eyes, and his last rattling breath escaped his lips, his final thought was for the safety of his wife and his son.

Enraged, Lucius whirled around to face Severus, but it was already too late. The bald-headed Snatcher beside him already lay dead, and the green lightning from Snape’s wand struck Lucius in the chest.

Severus Snape stood stock still for a moment, hardly believing what had occurred in such a short space of time. His nostrils flared as he felt a swell of satisfaction at ending the life of one who had
been present for the murder of Lily Potter. With the Dark Lord, MacNair, and Wormtail dead also, Severus’s eternal beloved was finally avenged in full.

The sound of sobbing brought Snape back from his brief reverie and he was reminded that there was one who still needed him, one whom he had come to care for more deeply than he had thought possible.

“Narcissa,” he murmured, kneeling down beside her and taking her in his arms.

Severus held the weeping witch to his bare chest as her pain from the Cruciatus Curse ebbed, pressing his lips to her forehead. The night no longer seemed cold as Severus felt Narcissa’s warmth stir near his beating heart. Narcissa was alive and that was all that mattered.

As the world around them faded, Severus lost track of the passage of time. Never had he believed that another could possibly make him feel as Lily had. Severus had thought himself destined to wallow in bitterness and loneliness to the very end of his days.

Severus knew then that somehow, through Lily’s son and her daughter-in-law, he had been given a second chance at living and love - a chance to get it right. He had been given a second opportunity to care about another, and to put their life and their suffering before his own.

Severus had no idea how long he had been holding Narcissa when he felt her wet cheeks and her lips against his. They shared a deep kiss, and when they parted, gazed into each other’s eyes as he brushed the strands of hair from her glistening lashes.

Slowly Severus helped Narcissa to her feet and they turned their attention to the four bodies which lay before them as reality intruded on their interlude. They both regarded the fallen Malfoy coldly, but Severus sensed a stab of regret course through Narcissa.

“Severus, what are we to do? My son...”

“...was quite aware of his father’s designs, I can assure you,” Snape murmured. “I wish it were not so. But when I witnessed the plans of Lucius for you in his mind... I saw nothing but the savage joy of vengeance in Draco’s heart.”

Severus felt Narcissa flinch as she released another sob, and gave her another sorrowful kiss.

“Perhaps... Draco might come around... if he knew his father is dead...” Narcissa said hopefully.

“No doubt he will soon enough,” sighed the Potions Master, “but it shall only further harden his heart.”

With one final look, Snape waved his wand and blankets covered the bodies. “These can wait until morning. We can make a decision after Dumbledore inspects the scene. For now, it would perhaps be best if we returned to bed.”

~o0o~

Under the grey skies of dawn five wizards examined the tableau as a sprinkle of rain began to patter on the graveled path beside the hedgerow. Severus conjured an umbrella and held it over Narcissa.

“Never thought scum like Nott had it in him,” snorted Alastor Moody. “Comin’ round like that in the end. Good for him!”

“Indeed!” Dumbledore replied, his voice grave. “For which I am most grateful - Severus and
Narcissa might not be standing among us now otherwise.”

“So, what should we do with them Albus?” asked Madam Bones uncomfortably, gesturing towards the dead. “We cannot simply turn their bodies over to the Ministry under current circumstances, nor can we allow Severus to be arrested. And yet...”

“I quite agree Amelia,” Dumbledore nodded, stroking his long white beard which was dampening as the raindrops continued to fall. “It would be most uncivilised to dispose of them without any regard for human decency. For now, perhaps it would be best to simply preserve them in the estate’s mausoleum until such a time as we can arrange for proper burials... if Narcissa would not mind.”

“Of course Albus...” Narcissa quickly agreed. “It would be fitting.”

She swallowed as she regarded her ex-husband’s corpse. As much as she had come to revile him, Narcissa could not forget that at one time - before his eager contributions to the horrors of the first war had come between them - she had grown to love him. And she recalled the hope that had come with the birth of her son, a hope that now seemed broken beyond repair.

“And my son - Draco - should he be told?” Narcissa raised her eyebrows, a tear trickling down one cheek.

She already knew the answer. Severus had shown her what he had seen in Draco’s mind in her Pensieve before the arrival of Dumbledore. But she still found it difficult to accept in her heart how completely her son had disavowed her. Narcissa had seen the flashes of Draco’s abhorrent imaginings of gleefully participating in her punishment for betraying the Malfoy “Honour,” and the pain cut her to the bone.

“I am afraid we cannot, Narcissa,” sighed the headmaster. “Not without putting us all in great jeopardy. No doubt, the Minister shall presume that Lucius is dead, and shall inform young Draco herself - and I also have no doubt that the Minister will suspect the involvement of someone close to you- most likely Severus.

“In which case, I believe it best if Severus remained with you here, where it is completely safe now that we have determined how Lucius and his companions gained entrance to the estate and sealed it. It would not do for the Carrows to detain Severus and turn him over to the Minister.”

Dumbledore glanced at Snape; the Potions Master sighed, having suspected as much. Still, it was a welcome price to pay for the death of Lucius Malfoy. Severus could not imagine a more gilded cage, to be shared with someone whom he had come to love.

“I understand Headmaster,” Snape remarked resignedly. “But Madam Nott deserves to see what I saw in Warlock Nott’s mind before he sacrificed himself... She needs to know the truth of his passing, and of what his hopes were for his family’s future. I must visit her briefly, and reveal to her what I witnessed in his consciousness. Then I shall come back here and remain with Narcissa.”

“Very well,” Dumbledore agreed. “But I must insist that Alastor and Amelia accompany you to make certain that you are returned safely.”

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She stirred in several more spoonfuls of sugar, added a dollop of cream, and sipped her third cup of tea as she waited, growing more and more impatient as the morning wore on.

A feeling of doom gnawed in the pit of Minister Dolores Umbridge’s stomach when Lucius and his raiding party had not victoriously returned. Instinctively, the Minister knew something had gone
Her nostrils flared as a spark of rage caught flame. If Lucius or any members of the raiding party had still been alive, at the very least he would have sent the Snatchers back to the Ministry with a message for her. But only one memo had arrived by floo - and it was on a completely unrelated but no less disturbing matter.

The idea of Dolores's beautiful man laying lifeless somewhere was almost unbearable. It would be far too much to say that she had loved Lucius; she trusted him not at all, and knew that he did not trust her. Such was the nature of those drawn to Power and Control above all else. But Dolores had always liked pretty things, and Lucius had been very pretty indeed... not to mention extremely useful.

They had both shared the same goals after all, and had both been working on Cornelius Fudge, the previous Minister, to turn him against Albus Dumbledore since the day that Harry Potter had first turned up at Hogwarts after having been hidden from the wizard world for ten years. Their partnership had been mutually beneficial in more ways than one... particularly once she had taken Lucius into her home. Lucius had shown his gratitude in a most desirous manner.

And to add to Dolores's distress, it had just been brought to her attention that Head Auror Rufus Scrimgeour had surreptitiously reopened Amelia Bones's investigation into the Minister's activities. The Minister had no idea who the lead investigator was, but it didn't matter - the investigation could not stand.

Hands shaking with fury, the Minister began to scribble a memo to the lead Auror of a team that she knew was loyal to her, and her alone, directing him to send investigators to Wiltshire immediately. Dolores couldn't bring herself to go to her office at the Ministry today. And she could deal with Rufus later; for now the most important thing was discovering what had become of Lucius.

Several hours later Minister Umbridge received a reply which confirmed her suspicions. Madam Black's Devon estate was inaccessible and still clearly in her hands. No bodies had been recovered, but there was no doubt in her mind - Lucius was dead.

But certainly Madam Black could not have managed to overpower two Warlocks and their henchmen on her own. She must have had help. Surely it was too much to suspect that Albus Dumbledore had been involved... but perhaps not. Narcissa Black had turned her back on her husband and son - but had she turned her back on her heritage as well?

There was only one who knew Narcissa Black well enough to answer the Minister's questions. And she was currently overseeing the establishment of the Unspeakable Office's largest Secret Installation while still recuperating from a grievous injury sustained during the Battle of Hogwarts.

Burying her anger, the Minister drained her umpteenth cup of tea and flung some sparkling powder into her kitchen hearth. She spoke the name of the secret installation and stepped into the green flames.

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Draco Malfoy wondered why Snape wasn't in class today. Instead, that bloated walrus Professor Slughorn was overseeing the lesson.

Malfoy grew anxious, knowing that something was amiss. He had heard nothing from Father or the Minister at breakfast. But they had promised that he could have the day off school to celebrate with his father once the mission to kidnap Mother had been accomplished.

Draco scowled at the Potters as they hovered over the potion they were working on. Whatever had become of his father, he knew they had something to do with it. He was sure of it! Draco's own
potion began to turn a putrid green and boil over.

“Oi... watch it Crabbe!” snapped Draco, flexing his reattached prosthetic hand warningly. “You were supposed to add the rat spleen after the beetle eyes... Now we’ll bloody have to start all over again...”

Hermione frowned and glanced at Malfoy while Harry added the sopophorous beans to their Euphoria Inducing Elixir. They were over halfway through Snape’s Sixth Year Potions Book and Professor Slughorn had asked them to brew up something just for fun as a demonstration of their skills. Harry added the wormwood, stirred the potion counterclockwise six times, and let it simmer. He reckoned that ought to do it. Then he noticed Hermione's distraction.

“You alright Hermione?” whispered Harry.

“It’s Malfoy,” Hermione quietly replied. “Something’s gone wrong... and I don’t think it’s his potion that’s bothering him.”

“Well that’s good then,” said Harry, sounding relieved. “I was worried that something had happened to Snape. But if Malfoy’s worried, that means that his father must have failed when he went after Madam Black, doesn’t it?”

“The thing is Harry, Snape might have killed Lucius Malfoy...”

“Well... yeah! I thought he might if he got a chance - and I know it might sound a bit cold Hermione, but that’s good too! Malfoy was there when Voldemort killed my mum. He was keeping watch outside...”

“He... he was? How do you know?”

“I... I’m not sure really...” Harry puzzled over it for a moment. For some reason he had several clear images in his mind, and he wasn’t sure where they had come from. “I just know that Malfoy, MacNair, and Wormtail were there too. Maybe... maybe when I went back in time to when I was a baby I saw them somehow...”

Hermione peered at Harry uncertainly, then decided to take him at his word.

“Alright! But that’s not what I meant Harry... I think things are about to get very ugly! By this time tomorrow...”

Hermione trailed off and turned to face her husband. She really didn’t know what was going to happen next. Harry could see how scared Hermione was and gave her a hug. Sensing a change of mood, Parvati looked up from the potion she was working on with Lavender and glanced at the Potters.

“It’s alright Hermione,” Harry murmured, “Everyone’s all packed, and ready to make a hasty exit at a moment’s notice. And we both know they won’t make a move on us until they’ve managed to force Dumbledore out. I doubt the Minister will move that quickly - she’s very cautious. We’ve probably still got a day or two at least...”

Harry went quiet when Professor Slughorn approached, beaming broadly.

“Well, what have we here Mr and Mrs Potter?” asked the rotund Professor “My word! It appears to be the Elixir to Induce Euphoria - and a most exceptional one at that. Is that a hint of Peppermint I detect?”
Harry nodded and grinned.

Hermione couldn’t help feeling a bit chuffed, despite everything. Harry was right, there was little point in worrying about Draco and the Carrows while Dumbledore was still headmaster. Curiosity piqued, Daphne and Jennifer both paused to see what was happening.

“Splendid!” continued the impressed Professor Slughorn, “Simply marvelous! Sev... I mean Professor Snape - was absolutely right - a proper pair of potions prodigies you are. I dare say you would have both given Mr Potter’s mother a run for her money...”

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Dolores Umbridge sat on the other side of the desk, facing the witch she had put in charge of overseeing the new detention centres. She was quite surprised at what she had just heard, to say the least.

“Severus Snape?” said Minister Umbridge, her tone skeptical.

Dolores knew that Snape and the Malfoys had fallen out over the Greengrass incidents - but that was quite understandable given that it had created an unfortunate rift between two of the most highly respected Pureblood families in Britain. Just as it had been equally unfortunate, but quite understandable, that Warlock Greengrass had thrown his support behind Harry Potter for protecting his youngest daughter.

But prior to that, Lucius had always expressed nothing but the highest regards for his old friend, assuring Dolores that Severus Snape had always been dedicated to the Pureblood Agenda, and that he had tricked Albus Dumbledore into supporting him at the end of the first war.

“Severus Snape?” Dolores repeated. “Are you certain of this?”

“Oh yes...” the other witch smirked, “I never trusted Snape. He was far too enamoured of Lily Potter - he asked the Dark Lord to spare her life. But my dear sister... she always had a soft spot for Severus, though she would never admit it. And it was Lucius who kept watch with Walden MacNair when the Dark Lord killed the Potters... If anyone helped Narcissa kill Lucius, it would be Severus.”

“Thank you! Your information is immensely helpful.” The Minister flared her nostrils and pursed her lips. She had been planning to make her play for Hogwarts by the start of the Christmas holidays, but now it seemed that the regrettable demise of Lucius had nonetheless presented her with an opportunity that could not be ignored. With a bit of finesse, the Minister reasoned that she could move her timetable up and take Hogwarts completely by the end of the week.

Dolores turned her attention back to the other witch, and looked her over. Narcissa Black’s sister looked much better than she had the last time the Minister had seen her. Apparently the blood rituals had remarkable healing effects on the injurious dark curse which the witch had sustained. And though Dolores much preferred wizards, she had to admit that the beguiling witch was a vision to behold in her revealing dark-leather outfit.

“I trust you are well,” simpered Dolores, “But if you need anything more from me... anything at all, just ask.”

“Oh thank you Dolores!” purred Bellatrix as she fluttered her eyelashes at the Minister. “But you have done so much for me already - the Pardon, the medical assistance, the job as head of this new institution, the underlings, the use of these delightful facilities, and the screams of the mudbloods you have provided for my amusement thus far.
“I knew you were a dedicated Slytherin Dolores, but I confess, I had no idea that we had so many pleasures in common. I cannot wait for the next phase of your campaign to go into effect and this detention centre becomes fully operational...”

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The praises of Professor Slughorn and Harry’s reassurances had made her feel a bit better for awhile, but Hermione’s trepidation continued to grow throughout the day. The Professors all appeared to be on high alert. Fleur and Dora joined the younger members of the Unaffiliated for lunch and they took it outside to eat in the courtyard despite the light sprinkling of snow.

“Dumbledore pulled us both aside towards the end of last period and told us that Lucius Malfoy was killed by Snape last night when ‘e tried to storm Narcissa Black’s house,” Dora said quietly as she glanced around to make sure nobody was listening nearby.

“So it did happen then; I knew it...” Hermione gasped, quivering with agitation. Her words tumbled out one after the other in a rush as she tried to explain.

“Harry knew it I mean... Harry said Mr Malfoy might have a go at Narcissa Black after Snape gave us a look in Potions. He said that Snape might do anything to protect her - I wasn’t certain, but what Harry said seemed logical - and then this morning I knew Harry was right - I don’t think Draco knows for certain yet though. He just seemed very worried in Potions, and Snape was gone, and I just put 2 and 2 together...” Hermione finally paused to take a breath.

“Ze Headmaster told us to let you know... and we are to try an’ remain with you as much as possible when classes are not in session,” Fleur murmured. “E is not certain, but ‘e believes that ze Minister may escalate ‘er investigation very soon.”

“Good,” Harry replied, nodding. “Now we know for sure that Snape killed Mr Malfoy. If the Minister suspects Snape was involved, it’s only a matter of time before she tries to have Dumbledore arrested as a co-conspirator...”

As the Potters continued their day, they also received special attention from both McGonagall and Flitwick, who fussed over them and appeared quite concerned to be sure that Harry and Hermione were both prepared for any eventuality.

By the end of the day, Hermione was in a high state of anxiety. Harry noticed that despite her best efforts to remain calm, Hermione kept picking at her food and glancing at Draco and the Carrows all through dinner.

There was little outward indication at breakfast the following morning that something significant had altered in the British Wizard World or at Hogwarts. Though nothing yet was being mentioned on the morning news report, Hermione and Harry both picked up on the clear signals from the mood of the Inquisitors and the Professors that Lucius Malfoy’s death had triggered the imminence of a substantial shift in power at Hogwarts.

The lack of Draco Malfoy’s presence was hardly unexpected, but it was still unnerving.

“I wonder what he’s up to,” Harry muttered.

“He’s probably just upset, Harry,” Hermione mused, unable to help feeling badly for Draco, despite everything horrible he and his father had done. She had to remind herself that Draco had tried to kill them both after violently assaulting Astoria, but she still felt too nauseous to eat.
Draco Malfoy whipped out his wand again.

“Avada Kedavra,” he uttered malevolently for the hundredth time; a bolt of green lightning emerged from the tip of his wand and turned one of the stone busts he was aiming at into rubble.

Draco nodded in satisfaction. His aim and speed were improving. But the satisfaction wasn’t enough to quell his rage - and he knew that he would have to be much faster and aim better to kill Potter. The last time Draco had tried to kill Potter had been a debacle, and he had no desire to lose another hand.

The Carrows had delivered him the message of his father’s presumed death yesterday afternoon. Draco’s world was collapsing around him. His father was dead, and he didn’t care that “Aunt Dolores” had placed the blame squarely on Professor Snape. Draco knew that it was Potter and the Mudblood’s fault... oh, and Greengrass’s too of course; somehow they had turned his mother and Snape against Draco and his father.

When the Inquisitors finally took Hogwarts, Draco would have his vengeance. The Carrows had promised him that much. They had approved time off from regular classes to continue his practice with the Unforgivable Curses so that Draco would be ready to take his place as their deputy, and to wield the power necessary for achieving his goals.

He was going to torture and rape the Mudblood in front of Potter and then he was going to kill them both - after they had given up the details to the Carrows regarding the Secret Weapon they had used to destroy the Dark Lord’s Army.

By the end of classes, after discharging much of his rage practicing against moving targets, Draco was feeling much better about things. And the benefits of his father’s demise began to seem more apparent. Draco was the heir to his father’s fortune after all, and he no longer had the burden of trying to live up to his father’s academic expectations.

Hogwarts really didn’t matter anymore, except as a stepping stone to bigger and better things which were now within his grasp. Aunt Dolores and the Carrows were encouraging and preparing him to take up the mantle of Warlock, a position which Draco would have likely had to wait decades for before his father’s premature death.

In fact, the more Draco thought about it, the more this seemed like an opportunity to celebrate rather than a misfortune. And if anyone did anything which he didn’t like, he could threaten them with the Minister or the Inquisitors.

Much to Draco’s delight since returning to Hogwarts with the Inquisitors, he had recently discovered his new threats to be a far more effective refrain than, “wait till my father hears about this.” Instead of rolling eyes and snorts of derision, Draco’s warnings finally brought the level of obsequious respect that a Malfoy deserved.

Draco almost felt giddy with power. When the Minister made her announcement on Friday, Hogwarts was as good as his, and everyone who had ever disrespected him, or stolen what rightfully belonged to him, would pay in spades.

The sun had woken up on Friday morning, but had apparently decided to drink a cup of hot cocoa and go back to bed upon seeing the cold grey skies of an early winter below. One could barely make out its presence through the dark churning clouds and the blizzard conditions. The wind howled as
squalls of snow whipped around the castle.

Glad for the comforting warmth of his fire at this early hour, Albus Dumbledore sighed as he squeezed some lemon into his tea and mentally prepared himself for what was certain to be a day as tumultuous as the weather outside.

Fortunately, Auror Mulligan continued to be a valuable asset to the Order, and the advance notice had allowed the Order and the Unaffiliated to make provisions and back-up plans for any number of possible occurrences. Fawkes uttered a soft musical note indicating the arrival of unwelcome guests.

“Thank you Fawkes!” said the headmaster, quickly draining his cup of tea. “Phineas... it is time - the Aurors and Unspeakables are here for me. Remember your promise...”

“Yes, yes... of course...” the portrait of Phineas Nigellus replied in his most weary put-upon tone, “Provide the Potters with whatever assistance they require... look after all the students of Hogwarts to the best of my abilities...etc, etc...”

“Very good Phineas,” Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled and there was a knock on his door. “You may enter.”

Professor McGonagall opened the door, her features distraught.

“Headmaster, you have some... ahem... visitors...” she said with a strong hint of disdain.

“Indeed!” Dumbledore gave the Professor a stern look. “Remember Minerva - Hogwarts needs you!”

“Thank you most kindly Minerva,” said Senior Undersecretary Percy Weasley, who looked positively gleeful. He pushed past Minerva McGonagall followed by several Aurors and a dozen Unspeakables.

“And what may I do for you this fine morning, Senior Undersecretary Weasley?” the headmaster asked sprightly, his eyes twinkling merrily as Fawkes flew from his perch and settled on Dumbledore’s arm.

“Not even breakfast time yet - but here you are, bright and early. Would you like some tea?” Dumbledore politely offered, stroking Fawkes’ carmine and gold feathers.

Percy Weasley was slightly taken aback by Dumbledore’s cheerful demeanor, but he chalked it up to the headmaster’s deviousness and encroaching senility.

“Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore...” began the youngest Senior Undersecretary in Wizarding Britain’s history, in the most pompous and authoritative voice he could muster.

“...By order of the Minister, and by Law, I hereby place you under arrest for the crimes of Abetting in the Murder of Warlock Lucius Malfoy, Harbouring the Murderer of Warlock Lucius Malfoy, Treason and Sedition, Conspiracy to commit Treason, the Illegal Manufacture of Experimental Weapons, Corruption of the Innocent, Illegal Use of School Property for Private Gain, and various and sundry other crimes and misdemeanors.

“Now, if you would be so kind as to follow these gentlemen, they shall escort you to the Ministry where you will be formally charged, and then to a High Security Facility where you shall await trial...”

Percy faltered when he heard Dumbledore softly chuckling. Perhaps the Old Coot was madder than
he had suspected.

“You find this amusing?” Percy frowned.

“My dear boy,” Dumbledore responded in a slightly patronizing, sarcastic manner, “you and these fine upstanding officials with you, appear to be operating under the delusion that I am going to ‘come quietly’ as the muggles say... I can assure you, I intend nothing of the sort...

“Indeed, my only aim is to expose the treasonous crimes of Minister Umbridge herself: political assassination, attempted assassination, colluding with muggle officials to commit treason, use of public finances for private political gain, bribery, corruption of Wizengamot and Ministry officials, illegal manipulation of the media for purposes of propaganda, corruption of the young and foolish...”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows and looked pointedly at Percy Weasley whose face began to redden.

“Furthermore,” continued Dumbledore, “I am quite certain that the Minister and those under her command are committing many more crimes, such as the torture and murder of muggleborn - particularly given her collusion with known Terrorists... two of which have taken up residence in this very school. I must say Mr Weasley, I am very disappointed in you!”

Percy began to turn purple, knowing full well that the Minister had been recruiting Voldemort’s Death Eaters and Snatchers to round up and suppress the muggleborn insurgents who were intent on overthrowing the Ministry. The Unspeakables began to look at each other uncomfortably, wondering who among them might be a mole working for Dumbledore.

“Now look here Dumbledore...” Percy barked in outrage. “The Carrows were never proved guilty in a court of law...”

“In any case,” Dumbledore said loudly, cutting Percy off, “I can hardly affect the restoration of a legitimate and fully accountable political leadership to the Ministry from prison can I? So my dear boy, for now - as my dear friend Madame Maxime might say - I bid you adieu!”

Upon Dumbledore’s final word, Fawkes flared as brightly as the sun and Dumbledore was gone in a dazzling blaze of light.

Professor McGonagall tried to hide a smirk at the flabbergasted expressions on the faces of the crowd in Dumbledore’s office as everyone recovered from their temporary blindness. Minerva caught the eye of the portrait of Phineas Nigellus who gave her a sardonic wink as Senior Undersecretary Weasley stormed out of Dumbledore’s office with the Unspeakables and Aurors in tow...
Chapter 58: Captive Innocence

Sunday was a lazy day for Harry and Hermione and their friends as Dora and Fleur had both insisted that everyone needed more time to recuperate from their ordeal. Daphne really couldn’t disagree. She had woken up in the wee hours of the morning, plagued by nightmares of blood dripping from her hands as she stood over Draco’s horribly mutilated corpse with a knife.

And as she had fallen asleep in the parlour with the others, they had all woken as well, taking it upon themselves to comfort her. Dobby had been more than happy to provide them all with steaming cups of hot cocoa, and eventually they had all drifted off again. Daphne fell into a deep slumber, comforted by Jennifer’s warm embrace.

Hermione was the first to stir in the morning, pleased to see the sun streaming through the window - unimpeded by clouds - for the first time in weeks. It was well up, indicating that it was quite late in the morning. She sighed contentedly, snuggled as she was on the sofa in the safety of Harry’s arms, listening to Crookshanks purring who was sprawled across her and Harry’s laps.

Hedwig uttered a gentle hoot and Harry began to rouse as well, yawning and feeling more than a bit out of sorts, remembering that he and Hermione were now fugitives. Feeling Harry tensing up, Hermione shifted to face him, giving him a wan smile before planting a wet kiss on his lips.

It wasn’t long before everyone stirred awake, peering at each other blearily and yawning, all looking very much like they wouldn’t mind going back to sleep. Luna woke up feeling very glum, remembering that Ginny was still at Hogwarts; Luna was glad enough to be cuddled up on a settee with Parvati, but Parvati wasn’t Ginny.

Harry stood up and stretched his aching body; he felt a bit better after the kiss but his agitation wasn’t so easily dispelled. The visit to Diagon Alley and the Wiz-Vision programming had really brought it home how bad things were getting.

It wasn’t just about an “investigation” at Hogwarts anymore - Wizarding Britain was now completely under the thumb of Minister Umbridge and the Purebloods who had once upon a time been supporters of Voldemort. Harry instinctively knew that it was only a matter of time before they began rounding up the muggleborn everywhere... if they hadn’t already been at it surreptitiously for some time now.

Hermione frowned, knowing that the brooding look on Harry’s face indicated that he was still unsettled despite the kiss. There was one thing that she knew would relax him even more.

“Harry,” she said gently, “I know it’s a bit late in the morning, but there’s really no need for us to get up properly yet. We could go upstairs and have a bit more of a lie in after a shower and some breakfast...”

“I dunno,” Harry muttered. “Everything’s going to pot and I have to do something Hermione...”

“No you don’t!” said Dora firmly. “Not today anyway. We all still need some time to recover and process things - Daphne certainly does...” Seeing that Harry looked like he was about to interrupt and say that he was fine, Dora quickly pressed on before he had a chance. “And I know you Harry. Despite what you think, you’re still in as much shock and as exhausted as anyone else...”

“Dora ees correct!” Fleur chimed in. “If we ‘ad all not been prepared, you and Hermione and Parvati and Jennifer might still be languishing in a cell at ‘Ogwarts - or worse,” she said darkly.
Anyway, we oughta give things a few days - find out what Dumbledore’s planning,” Dora added.

Harry opened and shut his mouth, deflating. He knew he was fighting a losing battle. And when it came right down to it - even though he couldn’t bring himself to admit it out loud - recent weeks at Hogwarts, the eventful Friday, and the chilling effects of coming across the Wanted posters yesterday had all taken an emotional toll on him. And Hermione must be feeling even worse, he surmised when he looked into her anxious brown eyes.

“Yeah... okay,” Harry sighed. “I suppose I could use some time off from things. Alright Hermione, breakfast it is, then back to bed for a bit.” Hermione beamed, looking relieved.

Dobby bustled around the kitchen, and soon they were all digging into their favourite morning dishes - Fleur with her croissants, fruit, and coffee, and the rest munching on a proper English fry-up of a breakfast with piles of bacon, juicy bangers, fried tomato, baked beans, chips, every variety of eggs that one could think of, crumpets, toast, a pot of tea and orange juice.

Hermione was dipping her buttery crumpet into the runny yolk of her fried eggs, frowning pensively as she watched Dobby who was thoroughly pleased to be eating at the table with everyone.

“Dobby, whatever happened with Winky?” Hermione asked. “She must be miserable at Hogwarts without you to keep her company.”

“Oh! No Mistress Hermione,” Dobby squeaked. “Winky is being much happier now. She is looking after her Master again. Master Crouch is at home after being in hospital for sad people who is drinking too much. He takes Winky back and is being much nicer.”

“That’s wonderful Dobby!” Hermione beamed, squashing her discomfort with House-Elf slavery. She was just happy that Winky was feeling better.

Harry was cheered at hearing a bit of good news, despite his own mixed feelings. “Yeah! That’s great Dobby. Tell Winky we’re both really happy for her when you see her again.”

“Yes sir, Master Harry sir,” said Dobby happily. “Winky is being pleased to hear that Mr and Mrs Potter thinks of her.”

After breakfast, true to his word, Harry meekly followed Hermione upstairs wondering if “lie-in” was a euphemism for something else. He grinned when Hermione dispensed with a nightie after a quick shower and clambered into bed.

When Luna returned to her own room, she rummaged through her bag and found her mirror, wondering if Ginny still had hers. She lay on her bed and frowned when Ginny didn’t answer, but continued to peer into the mirror, holding out hope that eventually Ginny would reply.

Jennifer bit her lip pensively as she cuddled Daphne in their own bed, trying to think of something to distract her or cheer her up. One thing in particular occurred to Jennifer, but she and Daphne had never got beyond a bit of snogging. And frankly, Jennifer herself was anxious about taking the next step, not sure if she could handle it yet, and also afraid that Daphne might say no. She sighed and stroked Daphne’s hair, settling for just holding her close.

Daphne lay quietly with Jennifer’s arm curled around her waist and felt her shifting, pressed against her back with nothing but a thin piece of fabric between her and the other girl. Remembering how the kiss that Jennifer had given her the night before after the evening news had made her feel, Daphne couldn’t help shivering slightly at the tingles of arousal coursing through her.

She hadn’t diddled herself in months, feeling too embarrassed to with Jennifer sharing the same
quarters with her - and more often than not, the same bed. Daphne was still uncertain as to why she felt just as nice with Jennifer as she had imagined she would with a boy. Though she had to admit, there was something about Jennifer which reminded her a bit of Harry.

Maybe her black hair? Or perhaps her hazel-green eyes, which seemed to look much more green than brown? But there was something else - something almost ineffable - something inside Jennifer, a certain boldness of spirit perhaps. Daphne was far beyond feeling shy about snogging Jennifer now, and was wondering what it might be like to go a bit further.

Daphne was a bit scared and bashful to ask Jennifer. What if she said no? What if Jennifer freaked out because of what that creepy wizard - Wormtail - had done to her? But the more Daphne thought about it as the minutes ticked by and she felt Jennifer’s presence, felt Jennifer's warm body next to her own and hardened nipples against her back, the subtle fruity aroma of Jennifer’s body-wash inflaming her senses, the more Daphne became willing to take the risk.

“Er... Jennifer,” Daphne began tentatively, trying her hardest to sound as if she was just curious, “Have you ever... erm... you know... done it with anyone before - boy or girl? Before... er... you know... what that horrible wizard did to you?”

Jennifer’s heart did a little flip and her breathing quickened. Was Daphne really asking what Jennifer thought she was asking... or just being inquisitive?

“Erm... just a bit really,” Jennifer replied. “I sort of let a boy I’d been hanging out with feel me up once - it was nice but we never went any further. Then there was a girl I really liked. We... er... messed around a fair bit and went pretty far. What about you?”

“Oh... er... me?” Daphne said a bit awkwardly, her heart beginning to race. “No! To be honest, I’ve never even really kissed anyone properly before you. There was a boy I kissed once when I was in third year, but he was seventeen and when I said I wouldn't have sex with him he stopped halfway through the kiss and got a bit shirty with me... Then there was one other boy who kissed me, but it was really uncomfortable - I wasn’t into him. And Draco doesn’t really count because he forced himself on me...”

Daphne trailed off, not sure how to progress the conversation without seeming too forward, but absentmindedly, her fingers brushed against the back of Jennifer’s hand - the hand attached to the arm around her waist - as if to take it and guide it to a more sensitive region. Jennifer’s hand involuntarily twitched and Daphne quickly pulled her own hand away.

“I’m sorry,” Daphne squeaked, “I didn’t mean to...”

“Don’t be sorry,” Jennifer murmured, her lips touching Daphne’s golden hair, just behind her ear. “I’m honestly not sure how far I’m up to going myself, but I expect you’ve been depriving yourself... because of me. I could at least make it up to you... if you’ll let me...”

Daphne could feel Jennifer’s hand gently caressing her lower belly now, through the silky fabric of her sheer slip, stroking in little circles. She let out a little gasp, suddenly feeling an intoxicating surge of pleasure, thinking how nice it would feel directly against her bare skin.

“Al...alright,” Daphne panted, “I think... I think I’d like that...”

Jennifer kissed Daphne’s ear, trailing her kisses to Daphne’s neck as her hand pushed Daphne’s slip above her navel. Then her hand slid down the bare skin of Daphne’s lower abdomen, reaching further southward, drawing ever nearer to Daphne’s knickers. Another swell of euphoria came over Daphne as she trembled at Jennifer’s touch.
Jennifer’s fingers slipped under the waistband of Daphne’s knickers, stroking the downy trimmed patch on her mound. Daphne bit her lip and let out a little moan. Finally Jennifer’s fingers reached Daphne’s heated entrance, slipping between her dampening folds, rubbing gently, two of them pressing forth and entering Daphne’s clenching sheath as her thumb toggled Daphne’s fleshy pearl.

Daphne’s head swam, the room spinning as she climaxed for the first time at another’s touch. Somehow it felt even better than fingering herself. Jennifer heard Daphne’s squeaks and felt her shudder ecstatically, but she didn’t stop... Her fingers plunged deeper, again and again in rapid succession as her thumb continued to flick and rotate Daphne’s little button.

Daphne had never imagined feeling so good; her hips tilted, moving rhythmically to meet Jennifer’s thrusting digits as another tidal wave of bliss swept her away. Daphne lost herself to the cascading transports of delight and fell into oblivion.

The fog of ecstasy began to lift as Daphne came to, finding herself now facing Jennifer who was planting little kisses on her cheeks and lips, wrapping both arms around her, one hand behind Daphne’s head and the other pressing into the small of her back and sliding down under her knickers to cradle her bottom.

Jennifer grinned when she saw Daphne returning to her senses. “So... did you like that then?” she asked.

Daphne fluttered her eyelashes and nodded, shyly grinning back.

“So much!” she replied. “That was the best... I’ve never... that felt great!” Daphne sighed happily, doubting that any nightmares would penetrate her shield of joy when night fell once more. “I love you Jennifer,” she murmured as they both began to drift off.

It was mid-afternoon by the time everyone had finished their naps, and they spent the rest of Sunday lounging in the parlour watching television or reading and listening to music. Luna was particularly happy when Ginny finally returned her mirror-call and assured her that all was as well as could be, all things considered.

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As Andrea Mason came to, everything was black and she groggily realised that her hands were cuffed to the arms of a metal chair. Whoever had taken her, they must have drugged her. Suddenly the sack covering her head was yanked off and she blinked, blinded by a bright light. She couldn’t quite make out the figures surrounding her.

“Where’s the disk?” growled one of her captors. “The one you were going to give to the reporter!”

“You can’t do this to me,” she gasped. Now she was absolutely certain that either an MI5 or MI6 special operations unit had her. “You can’t hold me illegally...”

“I’d say we can. This is by order of the Prime Minister himself,” said another voice in more measured tones. “And if you don’t give us the location of the disk, we shall do much more than detain you. I believe you have already been informed that we have your daughter...”

Andrea heard a rustling sound and her blood ran cold when she heard the scream that followed.

“Mummy!” a little girl wailed. “Why are they doing this to us? ...”

“Al...Alright,” Andrea pleaded, “I’ll tell you where it is - just don’t hurt my daughter. Let her go... please!”
Senior Undersecretary Percy Weasley arrived at the Ministry early Monday morning, bright eyed and bushy tailed, ready to start the day. He grabbed a cup of tea and a newspaper at the concession stand in the atrium before making his way to the Minister’s office.

“Good Morning Margaret,” he said to the Minister’s secretary, a bespectacled curly haired witch.

“Mornin’ sir. The Minister’s already waiting for you in her office.”

Percy nodded curtly and pushed open the Minister’s door. He felt a growing sense of trepidation, not at seeing the Minister - he was always delighted to spend time in her company - but at what he knew he would have to do today.

“Good Morning Minister...” he began.

“Percy dear,” said the Minister sweetly, interrupting him. “Please, no formalities are necessary between us - Dolores is quite alright. We are friends after all.”

“Er... Yes, of course Min... Dolores...” Despite the initial sense of awkwardness, Percy felt a warm glow swelling within. He was slightly giddy when Dolores addressed him again.

“Are you sure you’re up to the task, Percy dear? I can still assign Rookwood if you’d prefer...”

“No... No, you’re quite right Minister.” Percy shook his head. “It probably is better coming from me. We should give him a chance to avoid any unnecessary unpleasantries. I’m sure he’ll talk given the right motivation.”

“Very good,” said the Minister, nodding. “I wish you the best of luck then.”

Fifteen minutes later, Percy found himself in the secret detention wing of the Department of Mysteries, staring at the door of the interrogation chamber. He took a deep breath to steady himself, hoping that sitting in a cell all weekend would have made his father open to reason.

Percy really didn’t want to do this, but his father had left him no choice. Percy’s father had always been one of Dumbledore’s staunchest supporters, and it was long past time for him to see the error of his ways. Percy had agreed with the Minister that his father might be more inclined to be cooperative with him than with any of the Unspeakable Interrogators.

Finally feeling ready, Percy gave the heavy iron door to the chamber a push and it swung open with a groaning sound. Arthur Weasley coldly regarded his son Percy. Percy loomed over his shackled father and scowled.

“Hello Father. I hope that this little time-out has brought you to your senses.” When his father didn’t respond, Percy sighed and had another go.

“Please don’t make this harder than it has to be. I only want what’s best Father... It’s too late for Fred and George, they’ve made their bed. But I don’t want Ginny and Ron to go the same way...”

Arthur Weasley stiffened, but he still said nothing.

“Did you hear about Draco Malfoy? He was killed by Daphne Greengrass, and according to the Minister, Ginny was involved.”

“What? The Malfoy boy is dead? ” Arthur gasped in shock, finally moved to speak to his estranged
son. Having been arrested the afternoon of the same day that the Unspeakables had been dispatched to Hogwarts to detain Dumbledore, he had heard no news since then. “Ginny... what’s happened to her? I suppose you've arrested her too have you?”

“No... and she’s alright for the moment,” Percy responded, pleased to have got his father talking. “The Minister won’t be seeking charges against the Greengrass girl - but that’s just politics - and the Minister is willing to let Ginny’s role in the affair go... Thank Goodness!

“But it’s really all down to Potter. Ginny’s head is still full of the Saviour nonsense you and Mum fed us all with. We know it’s really Potter who’s to blame...”

“That’s ridiculous!” spat the elder Weasley. “If Draco Malfoy is dead, then he brought it on himself, and he only has his Death Eater father to blame for bringing him up so poorly!”

“Lucius Malfoy only did what he believed was necessary to counter Dumbledore’s political meddling,” said Percy, his voice rising. “Warlock Malfoy was sick of Dumbledore undermining our wizarding heritage and promoting the dilution of our bloodlines. Yes, Warlock Malfoy acted outside the colour of authority, but the Minister and I know the truth now. We know that Dumbledore has been plotting for years to overthrow the Ministry with an army of muggles...”

“You can’t be serious - talk about filling heads with nonsense!” Arthur snorted. “That’s absolutely preposterous! You don’t seriously believe the swill the Minister has been pushing about muggles stealing wands do you? I thought you were smarter than that!”

“The Unspeakables are still working on that,” Percy admitted. “We don’t know how he's doing it, but if anyone could figure out how to teach muggles to use magic, it’s Dumbledore. The man is a genius - a mad twisted genius, true - but brilliant nonetheless!

“We know that Dumbledore invented some sort of weapon which destroys dark creatures. You were at Hogwarts when Potter used it to wipe out thousands of Voldemort’s Inferi and a swarm of his Dementors - not to mention killing and injuring a horde of Giants and Mountain Trolls. We’re hoping you can tell us about that...”

“Honestly Percy, I have absolutely no idea how Harry Potter managed that.” Arthur peered at his son as if he were a three headed cat. “Dumbledore never told a single one of us how that was accomplished. I admit that the man does play some things close to the vest... but Dumbledore’s only goal has ever been the preservation of life and justice for all... wizards and muggles alike!”

“That’s not entirely true father,” Percy interrupted. “Did you know that before they had a falling out, that the Great Protector of the Muggleborn was once Gellert Grindelwald’s best friend?”

Percy noted the look of stunned disbelief on his father’s face with satisfaction and continued.

“That’s right... Dumbledore never cared a whit about muggleborn. It was all part of his grand conspiracy to take over the Ministry...”

“That’s utter nonsense! If it were true, then Dumbledore would have accepted the post of Minister when it was offered him after Voldemort fell the first time around!” Arthur snapped. “Open your eyes Percy! These are all lies! I raised you to be better than this.”

Percy sighed and shook his head, seeing that he wasn’t getting through to his father.

“You’ll say anything to protect Dumbledore and Potter, won’t you?” Percy snarled as pulled his wand from his robes. “Well what about your family? What about protecting us - protecting Ginny
and Ron?” Percy’s voice rose as his blood began to boil.

“Is that why you never accepted a higher paying position in the Ministry?” Percy bellowed, his face and ears turning purple. “...So that you could waste all your time helping Dumbledore promote his allegedly pro-muggle agenda? To help him pollute our gene pool and spit upon our culture?

“So that you could perform Secret Experiments on muggle artifacts at Dumbledore's behest? You’re just as obsessed as he is with destroying the fabric of our society, and YOU had something to do with creating that Secret Weapon of his - I KNOW IT!”

“Come on, just admit it!” Percy growled, raising his wand. “Don’t make me do this...”

The blood drained from Arthur Weasley’s face when he realised to what lengths his son was willing to go. He swallowed, wondering how he had managed to fail Percy so utterly.

“Percy, please... think about what you’re doing...” Arthur began, trying to reason with his son. “You don’t have to do this...”

“I am truly sorry that it has come to this... Father,” sneered Percy, bitter tears stinging his eyes as he pointed his wand at Arthur. “Believe me, I’d much rather not have to do this - but the Minister’s other methods of interrogation are far more damaging and potentially lethal. And despite everything between us, I would rather not see you injured - you are still family after all.

“I was hoping that you’d see reason... It would be to the Greater Good and to your own good - to our Family’s good - if you would simply renounce Dumbledore and Potter... Tell us where they are and everything you know about the Secret Weapon...”

“Never! I don’t know, and even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you or the Minister!” Arthur looked at his son imploringly. “Percy, you have to know that the Minister is manipulating you - filling you with lies - she is as evil as Voldemort ever was...”

Percy peered at his father incredulously.

“Evil? ...Seriously? Let me tell you what Evil is - Father... Evil is perverting and denying our wizarding heritage with your unhealthy obsession for muggles and your misguided loyalty to Dumbledore. Evil is taking that obsession to such a degree that you have put our family name to shame and ruined our family financially...

“Did you know that due to your obsessions, our family’s social and political blood-status has been downgraded to ‘Questionable?’ ... Did you know that because of you, our name is a laughingstock? ... But you don’t care, do you father? You don’t care that you’ve betrayed me - betrayed us all - your family... your Blood!

“This is going to hurt me as much as it hurts you!” Percy shouted as his bitter tears began falling. “I’ll give you one more opportunity Father - it’s not too late to stand up for what’s right. Tell us where Dumbledore and the Potters are - give up the Secret Weapon!”

“Percy, please...” Arthur beseeched. “Wake up before it’s too late...”

The red arc of the Cruciatus Curse erupted from the tip of Percy Weasley’s wand, and the screams of his father echoed throughout the secret detention chambers in the Department of Mysteries.

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“I’m sorry Dolores... he won’t talk!” Percy said dejectedly as he slumped in the seat before the
Minister's desk. “I was so sure I could make him see reason... see how much he’s hurting the family...”

“There, there dear,” Dolores said soothingly as she patted Percy’s hand. She poured him a steaming cup of chamomile tea. “Never mind Percy - you did your best. And despite his recalcitrance, I have no wish to cause your father any great injury - he is still your family after all. I have a much better idea for achieving our goals...”

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The next few days passed busily at Number Twelve for the Potters and their friends as they spent a bit of time working out a schedule to keep up with their schoolwork and continue their training. They managed to clear out one of the rooms in the basement, jamming everything except for a few statues into the other basement-room.

When it had been cleared, they strengthened the walls, floor, and ceiling, with every silencing and fortification Charm and Rune sequence that they could find in their schoolbooks and in the books in Number Twelve’s library.

It was no Room of Requirement, but by the time they had completed the task, it was adequate enough to stand up to combat spells without causing problems for their neighbours. Harry and Hermione had just finished testing a bombarda and a repairing spell on the statue upon which they had been practicing when Dora called down the stairs to the basement.

“Harry, Hermione... you two might want to come watch the WVN news yourselves. The Ministry’s supposed to be makin’ some sort of announcement.”

“Thanks Dora, we’ll be right there.”

Moments later, everyone was in the parlour in front of the Wiz-Vision. As with the previous special announcement which they had seen at Hogwarts, William O’Hannity the news-anchor introduced the Minister. But this time the impeccably groomed announcer also introduced somebody else... someone who was all too recognisable - Percy Weasley, looking as stiff as a board.

“Thank you once again for your kind introduction William,” the Minister began warmly in saccharine tones. “As I had previously mentioned I would do, in the Ministry’s bid to keep the public informed, I have returned to update you on current affairs in regards to the investigations at Hogwarts, and into Albus Dumbledore’s dirty dealings at large.”

And as before, the Minister’s voice grew stonier as she continued.

“Now that the initial investigation into the events last Friday at Hogwarts has been completed, I can reveal to you that yes - a student was killed at Hogwarts. Young Draco Malfoy - who had been set to take on the mantle of Warlock following the assassination of his father by Dumbledore’s associate, Severus Snape - was himself assassinated.”

“NO!” gasped O’Hannity. “You don’t say!”

“Yes!” the Minister returned. “And as indicated in the brief Ministry release on Saturday, the evidence points to Mr Potter and his wife. They fled the scene shortly after the commission of the assassination, accompanied by none other than Fred and George Weasley, who had started a riot to cover their escape from Hogwarts.”

“Is there any truth to the rumours that muggleborn students were involved?” asked the slick
“Not directly in regards to the assassination of young Mr Malfoy,” the Minister replied, “however, it is true that during the riot, the muggleborn students also fled Hogwarts. We believe that this was due to leaks regarding the Ministry’s next phase of the investigation into the treasonous activities of Albus Dumbledore and the muggleborn revolutionaries.

“As part of our ongoing efforts to secure the future for our ancient heritage, and to maintain Order, the Ministry is announcing the formation of the Muggleborn Registration Commission. All persons of muggle descent - those with no wizarding parentage whatsoever - who purport to be wizards, must register themselves with the Ministry so that we can closely monitor their activities, and also to determine their true magical status... or lack thereof!

“And it was with an eye towards these efforts, that the Ministry had been planning on expelling all muggleborn students from Hogwarts in any case; however, not before such a time as each and every muggleborn student could be registered, and then removed to a more fitting facility.

“Someone - perhaps one of Dumbledore’s spies in the Ministry - must have leaked advance notice at Hogwarts... The flight of the muggleborn from Hogwarts thus represents a minor setback in terms of rounding up for examination these new entrants into our magical society.

“As to our other efforts to uncover the extent of Dumbledore’s conspiracy, a purge has begun within the Ministry. I should preface this next bit to say that my deputy, Senior Undersecretary Percy Weasley, is beyond reproach - he has denounced the actions of his brothers, Fred and George Weasley.”

“It is to be understood that these young men are likely being manipulated by Albus Dumbledore, and if they turn themselves over to authorities, renounce their affiliation with the Potters and Albus Dumbledore, and throw themselves at the mercy of the Ministry, they shall receive a fair hearing, and leniency shall be shown. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the Head of House Weasley - perhaps it would be best if my Senior Undersecretary explained...”

Percy nodded at Minister Umbridge with an icy expression and took up the narrative.

“Thank you Minister, I would be delighted to...” Percy began. “Much to my great distress, my very own father - Ministry Employee, Warlock Arthur Weasley - has been determined to be one of Albus Dumbledore’s spies within the Ministry itself,” Percy said coldly. “My father has been arrested, and awaits trial. He is currently being detained in the Ministry’s holding facilities near the Wizengamot chambers.

“Due to the ongoing investigation, and the purge within the Ministry, the date of his trial has not been set. It is hoped that Warlock Weasley will be cooperative in exposing the rest of Dumbledore’s agents. Until such a time, Warlock Weasley shall remain indefinitely in detention, and be subject to interrogation.

“Now, in regards to the muggleborn insurrection, I urge all muggleborn to present themselves to the Ministry at this time for Registration. Things will go much easier for them, and all who are cooperative shall be treated fairly. However, those who are recalcitrant, and who attempt to avoid registration shall be shown no such leniency...”

Percy narrowed his eyes and his voice hardened as he spoke with even greater vehemence.

“Furthermore, given the violence and lack of regard for civilised behaviour on the part of Dumbledore’s supporters and the insurrectionists, the ban on the employment of Unforgivable
Curses has been lifted for Ministry Officials.

“We will use whatever means are necessary to restore Order, and to secure the rights of those with Ancient Blood to move about freely without being subject to violent repression by those of dubious status...” Percy glanced at Dolores “...Minister, do you have anything else to add?”

“Thank you Undersecretary Weasley, I should just like to put some concerns to rest...” Dolores replied, then she turned to speak directly to the viewers in her sweetest, silkiest tones.

“Undoubtedly, the lifting of the ban on the use of Unforgivables is not without some controversy... even among those of the Ancient Houses. However, the majority of the Wizengamot has spoken in concord with the Ministry...

“And we must stress to those among the Ancient Houses who continue to harbour reservations, that this is to the Greater Good in order to preserve our ancient wizarding heritage from dilution and sabotage. I look forward to the cooperation of all... Please remember - the Ministry is here to serve you! Thank you, and good night!”

Harry gaped at the screen as moans and squeals of horror escaped from the others. Hermione gripped Harry’s arm tightly, hissing angrily.

“Bloody Hell!” Dora murmured.

“I can’t believe she actually got the ban lifted!” Parvati fumed.

“The Unforgivables - those are the Death Curse and the Torture Curse, aren’t they!?” Jennifer gasped.

“And the Imperius - the mind-control curse...” said Daphne.

Fleur and Luna sat in stunned silence, horrified expressions on their faces.

“If Percy’s alright with the Unforgivables - anything could happen to Mr Weasley,” Harry said quietly, his face ashen. Hermione glanced at Harry anxiously, sensing his cold fury growing.

“Harry... it’s probably a trap. The Minister - she knows you too well - she’s baiting us...”

“Yeah! I know...!” Harry peered into his wife’s eyes and she nodded.

“Good! Just as long as we’re all clear,” said Hermione. “So what are we going to do to rescue Mr Weasley then?”

“Ahem... Might I offer a suggestion?” said a familiar and vaguely supercilious voice belonging to someone unseen.

Harry, Hermione and the others turned in surprise to peer at the landscape painting on the wall behind the sofa.

“Er... Headmaster Black, what are you doing here?” asked Harry in bewilderment.

“Please, Phineas Nigellus is good enough... there is no need for formalities outside of Hogwarts. And this is one of the homes of my portrait after all! I am free to wander the paintings in any building my portraits reside in...”

“Oh, er... right - of course!” Harry made a mental note to remove any paintings from the bedrooms. “Sorry Headma... Phineas Nigellus!”
“In any case,” the portrait of Sirius’s forebear continued, “that brings me to my point. I have a portrait at the Ministry as well, and I can tell you - Arthur Weasley is NOT in the Ministry’s official holding facility on level ten. I have it on good information from another portrait that Arthur Weasley was last seen being escorted into the Department of Mysteries...”

“So the Minister is baiting a trap for us then!” Hermione stated, quivering in agitation.

“Without question...” Phineas Nigellus affirmed, “however...”

“...you can get us in!” Harry interjected, his heart racing as his adrenaline began to pump. “And Dora and I can slip into the DoM in disguise to find Mr Weasley, and then we can get back out through your portrait.”

“Indeed!” the portrait said dryly. “I just happen to know of a painting very near to the DoM’s secret detention facility and the interrogation chambers. Though, if it is just the two of you, you may be at a disadvantage numerically speaking...”

“We’ll go late at night when there are less people, and Harry and Dora won’t be alone,” Hermione stated in a steely voice.

Harry peered at Hermione anxiously. The last thing he wanted was to get her captured or killed as well, but he recognised her tone of voice as one which would brook no argument. Harry supposed there was always the Disillusionment Charm; he hadn’t really had a chance to practice it yet, but he was certain he could learn it before the day was out.

“Oui, Harry shall have our support...” Fleur added as the others began to raise their own voices.

“I’m going too,” said Luna adamantly.

“Wait... STOP!” said Harry in alarm. “Okay, alright... some of you can come too, but I don’t want to risk all of us in one operation. A smaller team will be able to move faster, and draw less attention anyway....”

“And if we don’t make it back out...” Harry gulped, “whoever’s on the outside can call in the Order for backup if absolutely necessary. But I don’t want to have to get them involved if we don’t have to. It sounds like they’ve got enough to deal with as it is, facing whoever the Ministry is using to round-up muggleborns...”

“Probably the Snatchers and Death Eaters under the auspices of the Unspeakable Office...” Dora muttered. “The Aurors are most likely to continue being used mostly for traditional policing and maintaining order - though obviously they’ll also have the power to arrest anyone they suspect of being muggleborn.”

“We need to work out who should take part in the rescue mission then,” said Hermione.

A babble of voices rose again, as nobody wanted to be left out. In the end, it was determined that Parvati would join Harry, Hermione, and Dora, and that Fleur would remain at Number Twelve with Daphne, Luna, and Jennifer.

“But if you’re not back within two hours, we’re coming in after you Harry,” Luna said sternly.

Jennifer and Daphne had equally determined glints in their eyes. Fleur tried her best not to smirk at Harry’s reluctant expression.

“Only if you can get some of the Order to come along as backup too though, alright?” Harry
muttered. “And just to make sure, I think I’ll give Lupin and Sirius a heads-up. It’s better if the professors remain at Hogwarts.”

Moments later the Potters were peering at Sirius and Lupin’s faces in Harry’s mirror. After quickly getting the pleasantries out of the way, Harry and Hermione told them the plan.

“I should be there too,” Sirius said eagerly. “Don’t go in till I get there Harry…”

“No, Harry’s right,” Lupin interrupted, “A smaller team has a better chance of getting in and out quickly, Sirius. We’ll only stage a larger assault on the Ministry if it becomes absolutely necessary. I think it’s best if we have Hagrid, Alastor, Kingsley, and John on standby with us. If we all have to come in after you Harry, with your remaining team members, we will.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Sirius grumbled. “Right then, so what’s your timetable Harry?”

“Well, Dora reckons they’ll be expecting us tonight, in the main detention area for prisoners being held for Wizengamot trials,” Harry replied. “That seems likely to me, so we’ll wait till very late tomorrow night, and get into the Department of Mysteries using the portraits…”

“So you really did get out of Hogwarts that way then?” Lupin gasped, sharing a startled look with Sirius.

“I have to admit Harry, Remus and I were a bit skeptical when Minerva and Filius told us that was how you had all escaped,” Sirius confessed in amazement. “Simply ingenious!”

“It’s an unheard of method for long distance travel,” Lupin added. “Historically speaking, that particular portal spell is not well-known, and it is mainly noted for allowing entrance to Secret Treasure chambers… I don’t think I’ve ever heard of it being used for escaping from or breaking into warded buildings before, either.”

“Er… really?” Harry was a bit surprised to think that he and Hermione might be the first to come up with the idea of using the Pictura Portus spell in that manner.

“Well, there’s a first time for everything!” Sirius gazed at his godson and goddaughter-in-law with a wistful, proud expression.

“I suppose Dumbledore must think of us as a ‘Secret Treasure’ then…” Hermione giggled. “That’s where Harry and I got the idea from to begin with - the painting we access the Unaffiliated Corridor through.”

“Ohoh… That partly explains the Carrows being unable to locate your ‘House’ in Hogwarts then,” Sirius chortled. “According to Minerva, the Carrows and the Unspeakables have been searching the entire castle to no avail since you left. And none of the professors can seem to find it themselves either, even if they wanted to. Dumbledore must have put an unplottable charm on it as well.”

“Oh!” said Harry, “So that’s why nobody ever noticed us entering or exiting our ‘House’ once the wall went up at the end of our corridor. I always wondered why nobody seemed to see us going in and out through the portrait. But why can we and some of our other friends always find it then?”

“The Unplottable Charm must be keyed to allow only us - and whoever we invite in - to see Aphrodite’s portrait,” Hermione mused, frowning pensively.

“Ah, that makes sense. Anyway…” Harry shifted back to the main topic, “to get back to our plan - we’ll get into the Department of Mysteries tomorrow night at 2:30 AM, and we’ve given ourselves a two hour window to find Mr Weasley’s cell and break him out…”
Harry and Hermione spent the next day preparing themselves with Dora and Parvati. Harry diligently practiced the spell he’d been reading up on, and in the end, Harry managed to learn the Disillusionment Charm much faster than he’d thought he would.

Hermione sat on a stool as Harry tapped the top of her bushy head with his wand. She felt a sensation as if an egg had been broken on her head and was trickling down her body. She gasped when she held up her arm which looked just like the brick wall in front of her. In fact, she couldn’t see her arm at all.

“That’s brilliant Harry!” Hermione beamed, which Harry couldn’t see because for all intents and purposes she was invisible. “I thought I would be like a chameleon... but this is incredible.”

Grinning, Harry tapped Parvati on the head with his wand, and she appeared to vanish as well.

“Cor... that’s amazing!” said Dora. “I coulda put the Disillusionment Charm on them myself if I’d had to - but yours is the best I’ve seen. Seriously Harry... you could put Invisibility Cloaks outta business. How’d’you do that?”

“I dunno really,” said Harry, sounding surprised. “And it was much easier to learn than I thought it would be.”

“It might be that Harry simply has an affinity for that sort of magic,” said Hermione’s disembodied voice proudly. “He’s descended from one of the three Peverell Brothers, the one who made Harry’s Invisibility Cloak to begin with.”

“Wait... are the Peverell Brothers the ones from that story then?” asked Parvati’s voice. “...the Three Brothers story from The Tales of Beedle the Bard I mean?”

“That’s right,” piped up Hermione again. “It turns out that was just a fairy tale version. In reality the Peverell brothers invented the three items themselves.”

“So the other artifacts are real too?” gasped Dora. “Wow! I bet that wand would be somethin’...”

“Oh... er, I expect so,” said the invisible Hermione awkwardly as Harry raised his eyebrows.

“It’d be more trouble than it’s worth really,” Harry said after a pause. “Just look at what happened to the brother in the story. It didn’t end well for him.”

“That’s a good point!” the unseen Parvati agreed.

“Yeah... I suppose that’s right,” Dora said wryly. “Whoever ‘ad it would probably end up as paranoid as Mad Eye... always wonderin’ if someone was gonna murder them in their sleep to steal the wand... I think I like the cloak better!”

“Maybe we should go invisible too then Harry?” Dora mused. Harry thought about it for a moment.

“That’s not a bad idea actually,” he answered. “At least while we’re in the pictures. When we’re in the Department of Mysteries, we should probably be visible though, because we’ll have to interact with Mr Weasley. Do you still have the invisibility cloak Moody gave you?”

“Yeah, I’ve still got it,” Dora nodded. “It’s not as amazing as yours - but it’s never failed me yet.”

“Well, I suppose we’re as ready as we’ll ever be then,” Harry grinned. “I’ll just make Hermione and
Parvati visible again until tonight then shall I? Er... hello? Hermione? Parvati...? Are you two still there...?"

Dora clasped her hand to her mouth and invisible giggles could be heard when Harry’s trousers dropped to the floor.

“Oi... what are you doing?” groaned Harry, standing in his boxers and turning beet red, thinking that Fred and George had been a bad influence on Hermione. “If that’s you Hermione, I am so getting you back for this...”

“Oh... you’d better get me back for this Mr Potter,” Hermione’s giggly disembodied voice whispered in his ear.

~o0o~

Phineas Nigellus Black’s portrait hung in the atrium, so it was only after passing through many portraits, paintings and department levels that the invisible team of infiltrators following the once-headmaster of Hogwarts found themselves in a portrait facing a corridor in the Department of Mysteries.

As the Potters and their friends would be exiting and returning the same way, they knew that they couldn’t avoid revealing at least some of themselves to the portrait of Prometheus. Harry and Dora removed their invisibility cloaks, but Hermione and Parvati remained invisible for the sake of convenience.

“Well, my journey ends here,” said Phineas Nigellus after introducing Harry Potter and his invisible wife to Prometheus. “I shall await your return and alert your compatriots should any complications arise.”

“Great! Thanks Phineas. I’m sure we’ll be back soon without any trouble,” said Harry with a confidence that he wasn’t quite sure he felt. But they’d made it this far without rousing any alarm in the Ministry, so he was hopeful that their luck would hold out.

Once again under the cover of their invisibility cloaks, Harry and Dora cautiously led the way through the stone corridors, followed closely by Parvati and Hermione. They tried a number of doors, but none of them housed the detention wing. Instead, the chambers appeared to contain many fascinating artifacts, but none were more interesting than the chamber behind a mysterious locked door.

Dora tried the handle, then muttered “alohomora” under her breath. Still no response.

“This has to be it,” sighed Harry, wondering how they’d manage to get in.

In frustration he tried the handle himself. To everyone’s surprise the door swung open. But the chamber it revealed didn’t contain any cells or Arthur Weasley. In the centre of the cavernous room a vibrant glowing Orb which seemed to pulse as if it were alive hovered in mid-air near an enormous vat of liquid.

Something about the Orb seemed too enticing to simply pass by without closer examination. Hermione felt it too - a siren call of silent song - an invitation to approach. Dora glanced around anxiously and Parvati held her breath when Harry slowly walked into the room as if in a trance, his hand apparently clutching Hermione’s invisible hand.

“We should get a move on,” Dora whispered nervously, but Harry and Hermione didn’t seem to hear.
The Orb’s luminescence pulsed even brighter, throbbing silvery violet, golden red, and blueish white - drawing Harry and Hermione even nearer. They both gasped when they felt it - a shimmering sensation of seraphic ecstasy which sent rippling tinges of static electricity and magic across their skin - its music filling their souls with a sublime joy beyond imagining.

The intensity and tone of the experience was unlike anything they’d felt outside of themselves before - yet eerily familiar. It was the same sensation they felt when practicing their Patronus Charms together in the Room of Requirement. Neither of the Potters wanted to leave the room.

Parvati and Dora both entered the room, alarm setting in, wondering if it were some sort of trap.

“Harry,” Parvati whispered worriedly. “Hermione, come on... please!”

But the Potters still seemed too enraptured to hear. Harry felt someone grasping his arm and suddenly snapped out of it. Hermione squeaked, startled out of her reverie.

“We’ve got to go,” said Dora quietly. “We don’t have time to waste.”

“Sorry...” said Hermione’s disembodied wobbly voice as Dora led her and Harry out of the room. “I... I’m not sure what came over us.”

Harry was still too overcome to speak; Parvati noticed that his face was wet with tears.

“What happened in there? What’s wrong?” she asked, sounding a bit panicked.

“N...nothing’s wrong,” said Harry, finally finding his voice. “Why do you ask?”

“You’re crying,” said Parvati, “and Hermione sounds like she is too.”

“Really?” Harry looked puzzled and touched his face. His eyebrows popped up in surprise when he discovered that his cheeks were wet. “I dunno... I had no idea... Hermione?”

“I don’t know either,” said Hermione, feeling her own face.

Dora’s brows knitted thoughtfully. There was something about the scent of the liquid in the vat which seemed familiar. Suddenly it came to her.

“I can’t be certain,” she said, “but I think that must be a lab where they’re experimenting with love potions. That was a vat of Amortentia.”

“But the Orb,” said Harry. “That wasn’t a potion - it was real!”

“Harry’s right,” Hermione agreed. “That was the real thing... not fake like a potion. It was an of embodiment of love so powerful that it had strong emotional effects on Harry and me. Somehow the wizard scientists must have found a way to trap the energy in some sort of magical force-field.”


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One of the three Unspeakables guarding Arthur Weasley’s cell grumbled, as another shuffled a deck of cards.

“This is a ruddy waste of a good night’s sleep,” he moaned. “It’s impossible to break into the DoM.”
“And besides... nobody even knows about this detention block,” muttered another. “If Potter ever actually bothers to show up, he’ll head for the holding facility near the Wizengamot chambers with the other ‘Arthur Weasley’...”

“Haha... no doubt!” laughed the first Unspeakable. “I’d love to see Potter’s face when the polyjuice wears offa Brookstone.”

“That’s if Potter actually shows - he didn’t last night,” snorted the second. “And if he were actually able to get through more than a dozen of the Ministry’s finest, and if he actually escaped with Brookstone... What a Bloody Joke! A fifteen year old boy and his pet mudblood breaking into the Ministry?”

“You might want to be a bit more cautious,” said the Unspeakable who was still shuffling the cards. “He may just be a kid, but we still can’t figure out how he got out of Hogwarts without anyone seeing...”

“Inside help obviously!” retorted the first Unspeakable. “If I didn’t know you both so well, I’d be worried that one of you is Dumbledore’s mole...”

“Well there you go then!” the card shuffler replied. “How do we even know it’ll be Potter? Maybe Dumbledore or some of his lot will show up... it doesn’t pay to get cocky!”

The first two looked a bit uncomfortable at that.

“Well, even if Dumbledore did show up and got Weasley out, so what?” the second Unspeakable said after a pause. “It doesn’t make much difference in the long run. Everything’s a go now, and the Chief has the Wizengamot locked up in her back pocket.

“...There’s really nothin’ he could do about it beyond starting a real war against the Ministry - a full on civil war at that. He’d look like the actual villainous rebel that the Chief is makin’ him out to be - and he knows it.”

“Yeah...” agreed the first. “And anyway, if the techs did their job right, the whole point is moot - we’d find ‘im in no time. Like I said, watchin’ the real Weasley is a waste of time.”

“Is that so?” said a cold high pitched voice which made all of the Unspeakables jump out of their skins. “Perhaps you’d prefer to have a lot more time on your hands - say, to visit the Ministry’s Unemployment Services Division?”

“N...no Ma’am... Sorry Chief!”

“Really... we didn’t mean anything by it Minister! We... er... weren’t expecting either of you at the Ministry tonight...”

“That much is obvious!” the Minister snapped.

“I tried to warn them,” muttered the card shuffler.

“That’s very true! This one at least seems to have his head in the right place,” said the Senior Undersecretary in his most condescending tone.

“Too bad it won’t be for long,” the Minister giggled uncharacteristically.

“I beg your pardon Ma’am?” The card-shuffling unspeakable was utterly bewildered.
All of a sudden he had a bad feeling that something was terribly wrong. Stunning spells emerged from thin air behind the three Unspeakables, and all three of them collapsed to the floor in a heap. The Minister, short and squat as she was, loomed over the prone Unspeakables and pointed her wand at each in turn.

“Obliviate,” the Minister murmured three times. Then she and an unseen force hauled the unconscious Unspeakables back to their seats around the little table.

“I’ve found the keys,” said a disembodied voice, and a jangling key-ring festooned with keys floated out of the card-shuffling Unspeakable’s robes. “That’ll make things even easier.”

“Excellent Hermione!” said the Senior Undersecretary, who was rifling through papers, files, and pamphlets on a nearby desk. “Let’s get Mr Weasley out of here now.”

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Arthur Weasley moaned as he shifted, and his iron shackles clanked. Every nerve ending in his body was on fire, his stomach hurt from lack of food, and his mouth was cracked and dry. Arthur’s jailers had fed him, but a few slices of bread had done very little to curb the hunger pangs. And the most water he’d had was when some Unspeakables had tested out a muggle torture technique on him the day before yesterday.

His foggy brain couldn’t quite remember what they had called it. For some reason he wanted to say “surfboarding,” but that didn’t seem quite right. A deep groaning sound caught Arthur’s attention, and he looked up to see the heavy iron door of his cell swing slowly open. He narrowed his eyes when he saw who it was and glared venomously at Percy.

Wait... something was wrong. Percy’s face seemed to melt and change. Arthur began to wonder if he’d finally cracked and gone loopy. That couldn’t possibly be...

“No! Impossible...” he said in a creaky voice. “It can’t be you!”

“Mr Weasley - it is me, Harry Potter! We’re getting you out of here. Just hang on a moment...” The figure with Harry Potter’s face pointed a wand at Arthur’s shackles, and they burst open, releasing his wrists and ankles.

Arthur peered at the toad-like form next to the person claiming to be Harry Potter. He gasped when her face turned into wax and reshaped itself.

“T...Tonks, is that really you?” he gasped.

“Wotcher Arthur... it’s really me!” Tonks replied, grinning broadly. “And we’re really bustin’ you loose. Just stay quiet for a bit. And don’t mind this for now...” Tonks bound Arthur’s wrist to her own. “…that’s just so I don’t lose you on the way out, alright. Now stay quiet and watch yourself - Harry’s turnin’ you invisible, and I’m gonna put my invisibility cloak back on in a few minutes when we get to the exit...”

Arthur couldn’t believe what was happening. Tonks helped him stagger to his feet as her face changed back into the Minister’s; Harry’s features changed back into Percy’s. The next thing Arthur knew, his entire body became transparent, then vanished completely.

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As the fake Minister and the invisible Parvati helped the equally invisible Arthur Weasley stumble through the corridor in the Department of Mysteries, the unseeable Hermione murmured in the fake
Percy’s ear.

“Harry, that’s the room with the Time-Turners which we saw on the way to Mr Weasley’s cell, I think we should do something about it. What if...?”

“...What if the Minister thinks of using them to change what’s happening right now when she finds out that Mr Weasley’s gone? Good point Hermione,” Harry-Percy muttered in response. “I’ll set a few delayed spells in the room to go off in five minutes.”

It only took a moment for Harry-Percy to set the delayed charges: a Bombarda Maxima, a Reductor Curse, and a Confringo... Perhaps it was a bit of overkill, but Harry wanted to be certain that the job was done completely. Then they continued on, keeping an eye out for more Unspeakables as they followed behind Dora-Umbridge.

Harry walked hand in hand with his invisible Hermione, past the door which had mysteriously opened as they had strolled by ten minutes ago going the other direction. Harry-Percy glanced once more into the room at the fountain of Amortentia and shook his head with a snort. The door shut of its own accord once Harry and Hermione had passed it.

The Potters both knew implicitly that the Ministry would never understand the pulsating glowing Orb in the centre of the room which had sung out to Harry and Hermione as they had passed it previously. The Ministry’s comprehension of Love was almost as lacking as Voldemort’s. Having a vat of Amortentia at their disposal was never going to help them unlock the secrets of the Orb of Love.

“This shouldn’t be a secret, Hermione - none of this research should be. It should all be accessible to the public,” Harry whispered to his invisible wife.

“One day Harry, when we’ve dealt with the Minister...” said Hermione. “We’ll try and set all of this right.”

Finally Harry-Percy reached the portrait of Prometheus where Phineas Nigellus was waiting for them all. Harry helped the invisible Hermione clamber back into the painting. Once he was certain that Parvati, Dora, and Arthur Weasley were all inside the painting too, Harry leapt up into the frame to join them.

“Thanks for everything Prometheus...” Harry said as he slipped on his invisibility cloak.

“You are welcome Harry Potter... I am most grateful to have met you - and your charming invisible wife,” Prometheus said with a wink. “Do not worry about the abomination who calls herself the Minister... Your secrets are safe with me!”

“Yes... yes! The Potters are delightful - everyone loves them...” snorted Phineas Nigellus “...let’s get a move on...”

As Harry passed beyond the edge of the frame he heard the rumble of several explosions and knew that the Room of Time was destroyed.

Phineas Nigellus led his invisible charges through the other paintings and portraits in the Ministry - none of them the wiser - past the bored Aurors and Unspeakables guarding the corridor which contained the cell of the polyjuiced Unspeakable named Brookstone - and finally reached his own portrait. Then he walked out of the frame and disappeared from the Ministry.

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Having returned to Number Twelve, Harry undid the Disillusionment Spells before climbing out of the painting, so that everyone could find their footing easily. Dora and Parvati each had Mr Weasley under an arm.

“Zey are back,” Fleur let out a huge sigh of relief when she spotted the Potters appear in the painting.

“Oh thank goodness you’re all safe...” Daphne squealed as Harry and Hermione emerged from the portrait of Phineas Nigellus.

“Here, let me help,” said Fleur breathlessly, taking the arm of the groaning Arthur Weasley from Parvati, who looked like she was about to collapse. “Mr Weasley should be in bed...”

Dora and Fleur settled Arthur into the bed in the room nearest to Number Twelve’s library. Moments later Daphne and Luna arrived with fresh water, towels, washcloths, and medical supplies.

“Just sips Mr Weasley...” Daphne said worriedly as Arthur tried to gulp from the glass of water she was holding for him. “Too much all at once could make you throw up!”

“Does anyone know a good healing spell?” Luna asked as she dabbed Arthur’s sore, bleeding wrists with a wet cloth.

Dora fumbled for her wand, puffed as she was from hauling Mr Weasley back to Number Twelve with Parvati, but Fleur already had her own wand in hand. Fleur muttered the incantation and the bloody marks left by the iron shackles faded from Arthur’s wrists. Luna began to dab at Mr Weasley’s feverish sweaty brow instead as Daphne put the empty glass of water down and tipped a pain potion and a calming draught into his mouth.

“Will he be alright?” Jennifer asked anxiously as she peered around Harry, Hermione, and Parvati in the doorway.

“He should be now...” gasped Harry with a nod, still panting as his pumping adrenaline began to subside.

“...but it might be a few days,” continued Hermione, her glistening eyes full of concern. “He’s clearly been neglected and tortured...”

“Probably the Crucius Curse, and who knows what else...?” Harry muttered angrily.

“Eeek!” Parvati squealed and jumped, bristling when Dobby startled everyone, suddenly appearing with a loud crack.

“Dobby takes over now,” squeaked the eager House-Elf, who appeared to be holding a tureen of broth and a ladle. He set it down on the bedside table and took the damp wash-cloth from Luna to dab Mr Weasley’s forehead himself.

“Are you certain?” Fleur asked dubiously.

“Dobby knows what to do, Mistress Fleur - Dobby is looking after many sick people before. House-Elves is knowing how to do some healing... Master and Mistresses must get their rest now.”

“It’s alright Fleur,” said Harry, grinning for the first time since his return. “Mr Weasley is in good hands.”

“Master Harry and Mistresses must go now - must eat and rest after long day. Dobby leaves midnight snack in the kitchen...” Dobby said, giving everyone a stern look.
Feeling much more cheerful, everyone began to realise that they were indeed famished, as nobody had been able to eat much all day, and gradually they all filed down the stairs to find the “midnight snack,” discovering that Dobby had indeed prepared for a triumphant return. On the table in the kitchen they found trays loaded with crackers, cheeses, sausage rolls, and crisps, and a variety of olives and dips next to bottles of butterbeers.

The Potters and their friends picked up the heavily laden trays and retired to the parlour. But before regaling the others with the details, Harry made a very important mirror-call.

“You’ve got Arthur? Excellent!” Sirius beamed after Harry had informed him of their successful mission. “How did it go? You have to tell me everything...”

“Later Sirius,” Lupin admonished Sirius with a grin. “Let Harry rest for now - he can fill us in on the details tomorrow...”

Finally slumping in an armchair, Harry took a deep swig from a bottle of Butterbeer while Hermione, Dora, and Parvati regaled the others with the full story. Luna held her sides, in stitches from laughing so hard as she rolled around on the floor.

“That’s f...funny - ‘more time... to v...visit... Ministry’s Unemployment Services Division’ -- Hahahahahaha...!”

“Mind you, the Unspeakable probably will be looking for a new job when the real Minister discovers that Mr Weasley’s gone in a few hours,” Parvati chortled.

“Anyway,” Dora continued, roaring with laughter herself, “My favourite bit was when Harry said, ‘This one at least seems to have his head in the right place’... ‘e sounded just like that pompous prat, Percy Weasley...”

“I almost lost it when the one Unspeakable said that they weren’t expecting you two - and Dora retorted ‘That much is obvious’....” Hermione giggled.

Daphne and Jennifer both had tears of laughter in their eyes and Fleur was giggling too. It was nearly 4:30 in the morning, but sleep appeared to be an impossibility for the near future. After the giggles died down, the muggle television was turned on and beams of sunlight were pouring through the window before the lot of them fell asleep on the sofas and the armchairs in the parlour.

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“Gone? What do you mean Arthur Weasley is gone?” fumed Minister Umbridge. “I just came from the Detention Centre - and Brookstone is still there.”

“N...no Minister... I m...mean the r...real Arthur Weasley is gone!” stammered the Unspeakable “I...I was s...sitting outside his cell all night with the other g...guards. We o...opened his c...cell t..to do a morning check... and he was just... gone. And...and th...the T...T...Time Room. It’s utterly destroyed!”

The Unspeakable led the Minister to the Room of Time and she stared at the smouldering, twisted wreckage. The time-turners, the hour-glasses, the bell jar, the clocks - all demolished. Nothing was left but the mangled, blackened innards of Brass clockwork, scattered sand, shards of glass, and charred splinters of wood.

“But that’s impossible!” the Minister snarled. “There is no indication that the Ministry was breached last night. There is absolutely no sign of entrance at all.”
Dolores Umbridge rubbed her forehead, feeling a migraine coming on. The Time Room was a dead loss, but maybe the Weasley situation could still be salvaged.

“What about the Experimental Tracking Spell? Is it working?”

“That was the first thing we checked. B...but no! If Arthur Weasley travels, we might be able to get a hit. But if he’s inside of a warded home with Unplottable and Fidelius Charms - we still haven’t managed to crack those yet.”

“Right then!” Dolores snapped, “Tell the next watch to keep their eye on the tracking monitor. Weasley will probably have to travel at some point. We’ll track him then! Hopefully he’ll lead us to Dumbledore or the Potters when he does move.”

Still seething with rage, the Minister thought it best to take the rest of the day off and dose her migraine heavily with pain potions and calming draughts. Dolores couldn’t afford to let her anger get the better of her, but her last Potter induced hangover had truly been dreadful and she had no desire for a repeat.
Hermione sighed happily, her dream of dallying with Harry amidst a field of vibrant wildflowers on a bright sunny day seemed deliciously real. She tingled with elation as Harry’s ministrations brought her to a peak. Just as Hermione thought it couldn’t get any better, the dream faded and her eyes fluttered open, catching the scattered rays of golden sunlight streaming through the frosted over window panes.

She squealed with delight to find her waking reality so much like the dream, Harry’s head between her thighs and his tongue wriggling inside her. Hermione’s toes curled; she ran her fingers through his messy black hair as she trembled blissfully a second time, her sheath contracting and releasing in rapid succession around the wet warm appendage as she burst and released a flood of nectar.

Hermione’s thighs clamped tightly, trapping Harry’s head between them as he continued to lave her vulva mercilessly without stopping. Gasping, Hermione shuddered ecstatically, her head spinning and sparks of magic flying as she climaxed again and again.

Finally, Hermione giddily slumped back against her pillow, dazed and panting, her breasts heaving. Harry’s grinning head emerged from between her legs; he wiped his face and crawled up the bed beside her to give her a gentle kiss. Hermione beamed at him.

“That... that was amazing,” she gasped breathlessly.

“It’s your Christmas Present...” Harry chortled. “It’s only the second day of Christmas after all and I had to give you something.”

“Mmm... It was lovely Harry! Thank you! Do you want your present now? Or do you want to save your energy for later?”

“Er... later?”

“Well, Ginny’s coming for Boxing Day, remember?”

“Yeah... But I thought... for Luna...” Harry’s eyes widened when it hit him. “OH! Er... You mean we’re going to do the Coven thing today? ... What about Parvati?”

“Apparently Ginny and Luna have it all worked out,” Hermione giggled. “Parvati’s going to join them for a threesome.”

Harry gaped at Hermione. She giggled again; the expression on Harry’s face was too precious, caught between bewilderment, anxiety, a hint of unintentional arousal, and guilt for even thinking about it.

“Er... erm...” Harry didn’t know what to say.

Hermione pulled Harry closer and snogged him silly. When she finally released his lips from her own, Harry looked dazed and giddy. He gave her a lopsided grin.

“Blimey! Well I suppose we’ll give this a go then...”

By the time Harry and Hermione had showered, dressed, and arrived in the kitchen for breakfast, everyone else was already sitting around the table with Ginny and giggling, apparently discussing their plans for the day.
Ginny grinned at the Potters when she saw them enter the kitchen. When Harry couldn’t quite meet her eyes - or Luna’s or Parvati’s either - she snorted mirthfully and struggled to maintain her composure.

“Hi Harry, Hermione... Happy Christmas!”

“Happy Christmas Ginny! Er... You sure you won’t be missed at Hogwarts?” Harry asked.

Ginny shook her head. “I’ll be fine. It’s Christmas Holidays. I told the girls in my dorm that I might not be back till tomorrow morning - they think I’m just going to a party and sleeping over at another House tonight... I didn’t tell them exactly which one. And nobody else will even notice that I’m gone.”

“That’s brilliant Ginny!” Hermione beamed. “So, how was it getting here then? Did everything go alright? Phineas Nigellus didn’t give you too much trouble I hope?”

Ginny giggled and shook her head again. “No! Headmaster Black is really funny. He acts all superior and like he hates kids, but I think it’s all for show...”

Harry grinned and finally looked Ginny in the eye. “Yeah... I sort of got that impression too actually. He’s a bit of a laugh.”

Harry sat next to Hermione and breakfast got properly underway; he couldn’t help feeling a mixture of nervousness and excitement, wondering if he would be too embarrassed by the prospect of being within shouting distance of other couples with just a bit of foliage for cover to perform. All of a sudden he remembered a Rita Skeeter article and he groaned, palming his face.

“What’s wrong Harry?” asked Parvati.

Harry reddened. “Er... I was just thinking about that stupid ‘Secret Harem’ article Skeeter wrote...”

At that, everyone burst into gales of laughter. Luna laughed so hard that she nearly fell out of her seat. Dora choked on the piece of toast she was munching. Fleur patted her on the back and after a couple of coughs Dora gulped down some orange juice to clear her throat.

“Yeah... Not so far off the mark after all, eh?” chortled Dora. “But really, it’s not the same at all Harry. It’s not like you’ll be having sex with the lot of us.”

That set off another round of uproarious hilarity and this time Luna really did fall out of her chair. His face burning like a furnace turned on full, Harry buried it in both hands and slumped on the table letting out another long groan. Unable to control her own giggles, Hermione rubbed his back consolingly.

As everyone settled back down and the laughter abated, Harry wasn’t the only one to be afflicted by anxious contemplation of the upcoming event. Daphne glanced at Jennifer, wondering if she was really up to participating in the Coven ritual. Though she and Jennifer had grown more and more intimate, on each occasion Daphne had been the recipient of Jennifer’s amorous affections and it seemed to Daphne that Jennifer was avoiding Daphne’s tentative attempts to reciprocate.

Jennifer caught Daphne’s look and turned pink, correctly surmising Daphne’s quandary.

“I’ll be alright,” Jennifer murmured. “I’m ready for this. I’m sure of it.”

Parvati kept glancing nervously at Luna and Ginny, who both seemed very eager and not at all anxious about participating in a threesome. Parvati had to admit that she had enjoyed “practicing”
with Luna very much, more than she had thought she would. And somehow - as embarrassing as it was - the idea that Ginny was watching them through the mirror had made it even more exciting.

But this was different. This time it would be all three of them together; and though the idea of it was arousing, Parvati wondered if she would be able to follow through when it came right down to it.

Fleur and Dora peered at the others perceptively as breakfast was finished in a much quieter manner than it had begun.

The rest of Boxing Day morning and early afternoon was spent giving Ginny a tour of Jennifer’s estate and lounging around chatting and watching the muggle television. Harry grinned and shook his head when Ginny teased him a little bit about being Luke Skywalker after Luna insisted on playing the videotape of *Star Wars* for her.

Finally the agreed upon time arrived; it had been decided to take a late lunch (or early Tea) and eat it by the pond before beginning the ritual while it was still light outside.

The sky was clear as they all shuffled through the snowy gardens to the pond. Even though she had seen it earlier that morning, Ginny still couldn’t get over the fact that it seemed like a balmy Spring afternoon once they had passed across the snow line into the meadow grasses. Her skin tingled as she entered the glade with the others and like everyone else had the day before, she looked to Hermione for answers.

“I’m really not sure Ginny,” Hermione admitted when Ginny asked. “Even a hot-spring wouldn’t be able to explain the willows keeping their leaves and the wildflowers blooming at this time of year. It probably has something to do with an ancient enchantment we think might have been placed on the pond, but without more information, I can’t really be certain.

“Anyway, Harry and I will take the North End of the pond, and I think it makes most sense for you and Luna and Parvati to take the South End. I don’t think it really matters who takes East or West though...”

“You alright with West, Daphne?” asked Jennifer.

Daphne looked to both sides of the pond, seeing very little difference; there appeared to be plenty of bushes, grasses and wildflowers for cover.

“Er... yeah, I suppose,” she answered with a nervous giggle.

“Zat makes our decision much easier,” Fleur tittered, grinning at Dora.

“I’ll say,” Dora replied with a smirk, “Right then, I suppose we might as well dig into this picnic basket first. So where do we wanna eat?”

In the end Harry chose the North side of the pond when it appeared that nobody could make up their minds. Luna and Dora spread out a large red tartan blanket between a mossy statue of a Faun playing pipes and a statue of a Nymph by the water’s edge, and opened the picnic basket.

Inside was an array of cheeses and crackers, nuts, tangerines, mini-apple-pies, and mince pies. Harry was also pleased to see that Fleur and Dora had thought to pack several bottles of Merlot and Zinfandel, as he was still feeling a bit anxious about the whole thing.

When everyone was finished and had departed to their own corners of the pond, Harry felt a bit more relaxed, but not overly full, and only pleasantly tipsy, much as he had following the Yule Ball.
As Harry lay on the blanket and watched the wintry sun draw nearer to the tree-line and puffy white clouds drawing nearer, a sense of tranquility settled over him. It was hard for Harry to believe that less than forty eight hours ago he had felt like he’d never be at peace again. With a sigh of contentment Harry pulled his wooly jumper over his head and tugged off his jeans, preparing himself for the now much less daunting task of engaging in a Coven Ritual.

After pulling her own jumper over her head, Hermione was a bit surprised, but not at all unpleased, when she turned around to find a pretty girl with windswept black hair and iridescent green eyes lying beside her.

“How come you changed into Harriet?” she asked, “Not that I mind of course.”

“Er... I just... er... I reckoned this was supposed to be a Coven Ritual,” said Harriet with a shy grin.

“Well, I think it’s really what’s inside you that counts, Harriet,” said Hermione kindly. “Just be whoever you want to be. I’ll be happy either way.”

Harriet grinned and pulled Hermione closer, taking it upon herself to relieve Hermione of her remaining pieces of clothing.

One of Harriet’s hands was already kneading Hermione’s firm breasts, her lips already wetly encircling one of Hermione’s tender pink nipples, and her fingers already traversing the silky skin of Hermione’s inner thighs when she could have sworn she heard squeals and giggles coming from the far end of the pond.

But all distractions fell away when Harriet felt Hermione’s lips nuzzling her neck and Hermione’s fingers seeking out her own heated entrance...

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Hidden from view of the others by the leafy foliage, tall grasses and wildflowers, Ginny, Luna, and Parvati got underway. Luna wasted no time and was as naked as the day she had been born within seconds of arrival.

Parvati shrieked and giggled when Ginny and Luna began pulling all her clothes off. She blushed furiously when every inch of her was exposed to their eager eyes. While she and Luna had been “practicing,” they had remained more or less covered up with their hands reaching under t-shirts and into unzipped jeans.

This was the first time that Parvati had ever been completely nude in the presence of others, and her embarrassment only seemed to fuel the heady tingles of arousal sweeping through her. Luna pulled Parvati closer for a wet kiss and Parvati could feel Ginny’s hands parting her thighs for a closer look.

Parvati wriggled joyfully when she felt Ginny’s fingers brush against the trimmed black patch on her mound. She began to feel a bit dizzy when Luna’s hands mauled her breasts and Luna began hungrily sucking her long dark nipples, and when Ginny’s fingers finally stroked the pouting lips of her burning entrance Parvati let out a little gasp.

The gasp became a squeal of delight when two of the fingers plunged inside her and Ginny began teasing Parvati’s little button with the fingers of her other hand.

Nothing Parvati could remember had ever felt this good; being at the tender mercies of Ginny and Luna simultaneously made her fun with Luna the other day under Ginny’s watchful eye pale in comparison.
Parvati widened her thighs even more to allow Ginny greater access, and soon Ginny’s fingers were plunging to her depths, building up speed, the delicious friction inside her wet heat sending her into new transports of pleasure. A surge of giddiness finally tipped Parvati over the edge and she shuddered, squealing and bursting ecstatically.

For a moment, lost in the fog of ardour, gasping as she fell back onto the blanket, Parvati thought it was over. But Ginny had taken Luna’s place and was now pressed up against her, rubbing her own breasts against Parvati’s, and Parvati felt her thighs being parted once more.

Parvati squeaked and her eyes widened in shock when she felt Luna’s lips pressed against her slit.

“Luna... What...?” she giggled nervously when she felt Luna’s tongue inside her.

“Just go with it,” Ginny chortled, giving Parvati a kiss, “You’ll love it... I swear...”

Parvati did love it. And soon the three girls fell into a wanton scrum, squealing and giggling as they brought each other to climax again and again.

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Jennifer beamed at Daphne and kissed her, stroking her beautiful blonde hair, still gasping as the euphoria ebbed, Daphne’s hand still resting between her bare thighs. The warmth of Daphne’s skin next to her own filled her with joy.

She had been more than a bit nervous at first, afraid that letting Daphne reciprocate might trigger a nasty reaction. But nothing could have been further from the truth. All Jennifer felt was loved. Jennifer bit her lip as her senses returned, eager for more.

Daphne felt a surge of elation when Jennifer leaned into the deepening kiss, glad that the other girl had finally overcome her anxiety. The blanket shifted under Daphne as she rolled onto her back with Jennifer atop her. She reached up to cup Jennifer’s breasts and gently squeeze them as Jennifer cradled Daphne’s bottom cheeks with her hands and slid one of her own legs between Daphne’s, grinding her wetness against Daphne’s thigh.

Soon, the grasses beneath the pair of witches and the foliage around them rustled again as the passion stirred them once more...

~o0o~

In between one of their own bouts of passion, Fleur got up on her hands and knees and peeked through the grasses when they heard squeals and giggles echo across the pond, seeing nothing but trembling bushes and reeds as the gathering clouds above caught the last pink rays of the setting sun. Dora chortled as she came up from behind and leaned against her girlfriend, her ample globes squashed against Fleur’s back.

“You were right Chérie,” Fleur tittered. “Just a leetle wine to loosen everyone up. Per’aps we get back to eet...?”

“Mmhmm... Sounds good,” Dora murmured in her ear, reaching around to fondle Fleur’s breasts “But stay right there. I like this position...”

Fleur’s eyes widened and a tremor of delight shot through her when she felt the tip of her metamorphmagus lover’s stiff magically endowed member pressing between the pink petals of her entrance.
Giddy with exhilaration after bringing each other to completion several times, Hermione had convinced Harriet that it was time to be a boy again. Now on her hands and knees, Hermione giggled, enticing Harry to take her from behind by wiggling her petit bottom at him.

Harry needed very little persuading; grinning, he leaned over Hermione’s backside and grasped her hips, sliding his length inside her.

As their passions resumed, Harry and Hermione both felt it - a rushing sensation - an almost volcanic surge of euphoria - one final burst of explosive ardour as they merged. Harry flooded Hermione’s vessel with his essence, both of them gasping, crying out as they were carried away by the currents of bliss swirling around the entire pond.

The cheerful sounds of ecstatic communion reverberated and as the purple shadows of dusk fell over the glade, multicoloured bolts of lightning crackled and arced across the rippling pond from one corner to another. The willows and evergreens swayed, limbs dancing in the turbulent gusts of wind sweeping through the trees.

Then it was over; silence and stillness reigned in the clearing with the pond as twilight passed into night.

Luna was the first to wake, finding herself in a tangle of limbs, inextricably entwined with Ginny and Parvati. Blinking, it took her a few moments to realise what she was seeing.

“We turned into fairies,” Luna squealed gleefully. “Ginny... Parvati... Wake up...”

Parvati and Ginny both stirred.

“Luna,” Ginny grumbled as she rubbed her eyes, “What’s going on?”

“Open your eyes silly! Look! We turned into fairies...”

“Oh my God!” squeaked Ginny, “I’m glowing! Why am I glowing?”

Harry wasn’t sure if he was awake or asleep. It appeared to be night, and he felt as if he were floating on gossamer, drifting through a sea of luminous stars, nestled in Hermione’s warm embrace. An ethereal swell of breathy tinkling music filled his soul with a sublime, peaceful joy, and tingles of magic rippled across his skin.

It was only when Hermione stirred and gasped that Harry was certain that he was awake. Though the night sky above was dark and clouded over, the glade surrounding the pond was lit with the silvery luminescence of a thousand tiny glowing fairies cheerfully flitting to and fro. The surface of the pond shimmered in their starry light.

The Potters held each other, gaping in wonderment at the beauty all around them, lost in the moment. The reverie was broken when a squeal of happiness caught their ears and Luna burst through the leafy foliage. Harry goggled for a moment before clapping a hand over his eyes and quickly yanking a bit of blanket over himself to cover his privates.

“Blimey Luna! Put on some clothes,” Harry moaned, his face blazing hotly.
“We’re fairies,” Luna shrieked gleefully, jumping up and down. “Look, Harry! ... We’re fairies!”

Caught off-guard, and embarrassed herself, it took Hermione a moment to realise what was happening. She glanced at Luna, herself, and Harry, her eyes widening. The silvery luminous glow in the glade wasn’t just coming from the fairies, but from themselves - their own wet nude figures - as well. That was when Hermione also noticed it was raining.

Hermione tugged on her knickers and t-shirt and threw Harry’s t-shirt and boxers at him, and not a moment too soon. Ginny and Parvati had arrived behind Luna, gasping and out of breath as they had hurriedly dressed before chasing after Luna. Harry groaned and turned around as he quickly pulled on his boxers.

“Hermione,” Ginny squeaked anxiously, “I can’t be glowing! I can’t be... I can’t go back to Hogwarts like this!”

And mere seconds later, Fleur and Dora appeared, both glowing and looking equally perplexed. Harry counted his blessings that they at least had all taken the time to dress, and did his best not to look at Luna who was still bouncing on her toes and waving her arms as if hoping to take flight like the tiny fairies fluttering around them all.

“So... er... why are we glowing Hermione?” asked Harry.

“I... I really have no idea Harry,” Hermione was utterly flummoxed as she held up her glowing arm to the night sky. “Maybe it’s something to do with the ancient enchantment on the pond?” Hermione peered at Fleur, wondering if the part-Veela had any ideas.

Feeling a bit less embarrassed, Harry rubbed his chin pensively and glanced at the statues of the Faun and the Water-Nymph, wondering if they held any answers. Something about the Naiad in particular rang a bell.

“Hermione... er... These statues - there’s something about them. D’you think they might have something t’doo with it?” he asked.

Hermione considered things for a moment, and realised that Harry might be onto something.

“Well...” Hermione raised an eyebrow at her metamorphic husband and Dora and the Greek statues, half-smirked, and looked at their part-Siren friend Fleur again. “...Has anyone heard of the myth of Hermaphroditus?”

There was some more rustling of foliage indicating that Daphne and Jennifer had finally arrived. Daphne looked a bit frightened. For a moment the Coven peered around the illuminated glade and at each other’s glowing figures in bewilderment as the raindrops fell.

“So, what’s going on? Why are we glowing?” Jennifer asked, raising her eyebrows and smirking at Luna who was quivering with excitement.

“I think we turned into fairies,” said Luna eagerly. “Hermione was just going to tell us how...”

“Well... er... I wouldn’t say that exactly, Luna,” Hermione interjected, her face reddening even through the silvery luminescence radiating from her skin. “We really shouldn’t jump to conclusions. I... I was just going to make some inferences and speculations based on the symbolism of some of the Greek myths associated with some of the statues surrounding the pond - they were obviously placed here when the manor was originally built in the 16th century...”

“That’s right,” said Jennifer. “When Daddy bought the place, that’s what the estate agent told him.
The Countess who originally lived here had this whole place built here just because she liked the pond - she’s the one who had the statues put around it.”

“Right,” said Hermione as she geared up for lecture mode, “but the magic here feels much older - predating the Romans even by many hundreds of years. So I think the Countess might have been magical and sensed the enchantment at this site then - or she knew about it somehow…”

“If the Countess was a witch, maybe she was descended from one of the original inhabitants?” Harry proffered.

“That’s certainly a possibility,” agreed Hermione. “There’s really no way to be certain when we’re talking about thousands of years before her time even.”

“So, what were you going to tell us about the myth of Hermaphroditus?” asked Luna.

“Well, one of the versions of the myth of Hermaphroditus - who was the son of Aphrodite and Hermes - involves a Naiad…” Hermione began.

“Oh... you mean the son of Aphrodite, the Greek Sorceress who guards our corridor?” Daphne interrupted, glimmering with surprise.

“Possibly... that’s not very likely actually,” Hermione smiled kindly at Daphne as she tried to explain. “You have to understand, muggles built up a lot of myths and legends around ancient sorcerers, and many were made out to be gods and goddesses, or demons, and that sort of thing.

“And many of the stories associated with ancient witches and wizards are actually based on earlier stories from even older human societies, and prehistoric beliefs about nature spirits from before writing was invented. So it’s all a mixed up jumble really, and it would be very difficult to sort out which stories have a basis in fact, and which were just made up to explain natural phenomenon and human nature.

“In any case, in Ovid’s version of the myth, Hermaphroditus was born a boy and one day he encountered a Naiad - a Water Nymph - named Salmacis at her pond. She was smitten by him and tried to seduce him, and he was... er... a bit reticent,” Hermione flushed in embarrassment at telling a story which featured a lack of consent.

“So she forcibly embraced and kissed him, and begged the gods to let them never be parted. The gods granted her wish, but in a way that she probably didn’t expect. Salmacis and Hermaphroditus were merged into one being, and so Hermaphroditus who had entered the pond as a boy, exited as a ‘creature of both sexes’... both boy and girl.

“The upshot is, that Hermaphroditus prayed to his parents to curse the pond to change any man who enters it into half man, half woman…”

“Well that’s not a very nice story,” squeaked Daphne, who started to look alarmed again.

“You’re right, it’s not,” said Hermione. “I was really just joking a bit because of the irony of our situation... the magic pond, the Greek symbolism, Harry being able to change from a boy into a girl... and Dora being able to change from a girl into a boy if she wanted to, for that matter’

“But you don’t have to worry Daphne... I didn’t curse the pond. I promise!” Harry grinned. “It’s not a bad thing - whatever happened to us is good... I just know it! But it is oddly coincidental…”

“And it’s actually just one of many myths about Hermaphroditus,” Hermione added quickly. “It’s a later version by Ovid of how Hermaphroditus came to have both boy and girl parts. The symbolism
Parvati gasped.

“That’s a bit like some of the stories in some of Mum and Dad’s books from India,” Parvati interjected, blushing furiously through her own silvery luminous glow. “I’m actually glad that most wizards don’t read muggle myths... I don’t think I could have lived it down if everyone at Hogwarts knew that my name comes from a love goddess - Parvati, the consort of Shiva. And in some of the later myths, Parvati and Shiva merge to become Ardhanarishvara: ‘the Lord Who is Half-Woman.’”

Exactly!’’ Hermione agreed, gleaming. “I think what these characters and stories embody is most important. They shouldn’t be taken too literally. It’s the mythic symbolism which has the most bearing on the Magic. Aphrodite, Pan, Eros, Hermaphroditus, etc... their stories are symbols.

“Fertility, Sexuality, Marriage, Love - all Creative, life affirming acts and rituals... That’s what these particular mythological beings in these particular stories most represent. And I expect this site used to be one where groups of Celtic witches - very likely Covens - performed Sex Rituals not unlike what we experienced here this afternoon.

“In a sense... this is literally Hallowed Ground! And I think we may have inadvertently triggered the Ancient Enchantment - reactivated it - by re-enacting some of the Sex Rituals which created it to begin with.

“And I feel exactly like I did in that lab we found in the Department of Mysteries!” exclaimed Harry eagerly, feeling absolutely certain that Hermione was on the right track. “The one with that glowing ‘Orb of Love.’ D’you think there’s a connection Hermione?”

“I think there might be Harry,” Hermione nodded slowly. “That may be why the Fairies are attracted to this area - or perhaps the Fairies were here first and attracted the witches. In any case, Harry, it would seem to fit with what Dumbledore told us after the Third Task. He told us that he hadn’t detected magic like ours in modern Britain and Europe, except in the most ancient magical places for witchcraft, and also in some schools for witches in Asia.”

Fleur had been listening intently the entire time. Her breath quickened as she felt a thrill of understanding, a connection to her Veela heritage in a way she never had before.

“Oui, zat makes much sense,” said Fleur. “It was told to me by my grandmother, that Veela also have an affinity for such places - and that we are related to these little creatures flying around us now - zese Fairies... I do not know enough to know for certain, but at this moment, it feels true.

“When Veela dance and sing, when Veela experience joy, when Veela love - there is something about our spirit which makes us glow, like zis... But as only a small part Veela, I ‘ave never experienced it as strong as this before.

“Per’aps zat means Luna is onto something, not so much that we are all turning into Fairies, but rather, that as witches - as magical humans - our spirits are now of such a high frequency that we are in alignment with ze Fairies... We cannot help but glow as they do, as the Veela do...”

“I knew it!” Luna beamed.

Parvati’s eyes widened again and she quivered with excitement when another thought occurred to her.
“That actually fits some of the other bits that I’ve read of my Mum and Dad’s books if it’s true,” said Parvati. “If someone practices certain types of yoga long enough, they can activate something called the Kundalini Shakti. It’s the primal Female Energy which the Universe is supposedly created from. And when people produce a lot of it, their auras are supposed to be so bright that everyone can see them…”

“Shakti the goddess is also the personification of the Shakti energy from what I remember reading in my Auntie Joanne’s books on Hinduism,” Hermione mused. “In some schools of thought, she’s worshipped as the Supreme Being - the top of the Hindu pantheon... and isn’t Parvati just another name for Shakti?”

Parvati’s silvery glow reddened again as she grimaced and nodded, glistening in the rain.

“Yes... but she’s got loads of other names too,” Parvati squeaked. “It depends on which aspect she’s displaying at any given time.”

“So I guess in a way this more or less proves I really do have a female soul then?” said Harry. “But I still don’t quite get how that all squares with the hermaphrodite stuff, the... er... the androgyny... Even with a female soul and being able to turn into a girl, but primarily being a guy, how is it possible to activate this magic if it’s primarily generated by females? I mean, I turned back into a guy partway through while we were... er... doing it a little while ago.”

Dora had been thinking about it the whole time, wondering exactly what Harry was wondering as she listened, and suddenly everything seemed to fall into place.

“Because we all have male and female aspects to our natures,” Dora said, flourescing brightly as her eyes widened with a flare of gnosis. “Maybe we don’t all ‘ave the outer physical potential to be both, like you and me Harry, but we must all have male and female aspects of our spirits and our souls - even though one might be more dominant than the other.

“In our group, we might all be predominantly female on the inside, including you Harry... but ultimately we girls must’ve ‘ad to activate both aspects of our own energy to trigger the magic too - the male aspect inside of us as well. It must be necessary to ‘ave both parts activated to bring us to this level of magic. That’s what the myths about the bisexual and androgynous deities seem to be sayin’ anyway.

“I suppose when we girls ‘ave sex with each other, at any given time, someone is taking on the ‘male’ role, and the physical act was enough symbolically to activate the male aspects of our spirits. That probably goes both ways... guys ‘ave to be able to activate the female aspect in themselves to make it work - and yours is already active Harry.”

“Okay... yeah,” Harry nodded as he pensively chewed his lip. “Yeah, I think I get that.”

“Of course! That’s it Dora!” Hermione beamed. “Obviously some men have historically achieved such high frequency levels of magic... They must have. But it must be much more difficult because most men aren’t comfortable at all with their feminine aspects. They’re afraid of it and aren’t willing to let that side of themselves grow strong.

“Maybe not so many women are put off exploring both sides of their natures, and maybe that’s why most of the successful Covens have been all witches. Perhaps in the ones with men that worked, they were willing to take on female sexual roles during the rituals,” Hermione concluded.

“Well, considering that loads of guys still seem to think that they’re superior to women, it’s not that much of a surprise really,” said Harry. “Most guys think being ‘girly’ is a bad thing.”
“Yes, but it’s actually not so bad in the wizard world as it still is in much of the muggle world really,” said Hermione. “For all of its problems, and the misogyny that still does exist to a degree, in some respects, gender relations are a bit more equal than they are in the muggle world.”

“It’s not perfect parity by any means,” Hermione continued. “I know that there’s vestiges of patriarchy left in the Wizengamot, what with mostly men being Heads of the Pureblood Houses - and openly gay wizards aren’t treated very well. But look at all the powerful witches throughout history, and gay and bisexual witches seem to be generally accepted.

“Even today there’s lots of witches with power - even though some of them are quite dreadful at the moment. It’s only the most retrograde families that want to reinstate things like forced marriage contracts and human slavery.”

“That’s a good point Hermione,” said Dora. “Though with a witch as ‘orrible as Umbridge running things right now - she seems dead set on bringing some of that sort of thing back ‘erself - at least when it comes to Purebloods lording it over ‘lesser’ witches and muggle women.”

“Yes... that’s very true!” Hermione said sadly. “But once she’s gone, and we’ve cleaned up the Ministry a bit, things will hopefully at least go back to the way things were before recently...”

“Yeah,” Harry interjected, looking hopeful, “...and then we can start trying to improve things in the Wizengamot - push for a more democratic structure so that it’s more representative of modern wizard society and other sentient magical beings.”

Hermione smiled at her dripping husband as the shimmering Coven fell into a contemplative silence, growing soggier as the rain grew heavier. Only the tinkling sound of the delighted fairies flittering around them, and the thrumming of the rain on the blades of grass and the surface of the pond could be heard.

“So how long is this glowing going to last, do you think?” Ginny asked, hoping that it would be gone by morning.

“And what does all this mean for our magic?” asked Harry, hoping that it meant that the rest of the Coven would now be able to produce Patronuses like his and Hermione’s.

“I really don’t know,” Hermione sighed. “We’ll just have to see in the morning, and start doing some more research.”

Hermione was lost in thought all the way back to the manor, barely even noticing the heavy snowfall once they had passed the border of the enchantment.

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Fortunately for Ginny, the silvery luminous glow of their auras had faded by the time the Coven awoke the following morning, and she departed through Phineas Nigellus’s picture after giving Luna a kiss goodbye.

Hermione still didn’t have a good answer when she woke for what the glowing meant for their magic in practical terms. They were in completely uncharted territory. Fleur was the only member of the Coven who had ever experienced the phenomenon at all, but never as strongly before, and only because she was part Veela. There was no knowing for certain what it meant for everyone else.

Hermione dug out the books which she had been reading to Harry before the Coven had gone on their mission and pored through them at the breakfast table after eating a few quick spoonfuls of porridge and a crumpet. Everyone else watched her intently while they ate, hoping for good news.
Hermione frowned and bit her lip, finally looking up from the books.

“Well, my best guess is that what happened at the pond was probably exactly what we needed to do to perform Coven spells at their full potential. If so, then that means the rest of you should be able to do Patronuses like me and Harry now - at least when we’re conjuring them all together in ‘Cult-Mode’...”

“Excellent!” said Harry, grinning from ear to ear. As far as he was concerned, that made putting up with the embarrassment of having sex with Hermione in the near vicinity of the others worthwhile.

“...but I still don’t really know what the glowing has to do with it, other than what Fleur surmised last night,” Hermione sighed. “There’s really nothing in these books about auras... which seems a bit odd. I suppose I’ll just have to wait until I get a chance to see if the library at Hogwarts has anything about them.”

“I don’t know if they’ll be any help, but there are some books about auras in my Mum and Dad’s library,” Jennifer suggested eagerly, her eyebrows raised.

That got everyone moving. In no time flat they were all cleaned up and rummaging through the library, pulling books from the shelves looking for the ones about auras.

“Cor... look at all these books of magic!” Dora exclaimed.

“Yeah... those were mostly my father’s - he was a bit New Agey,” Jennifer explained. “Dad was more into that sort of thing than Mum - she was into it a bit for fun, but she tended to be more skeptical.”

“I don’t understand,” Daphne muttered. “I thought muggles didn’t know anything about magic.”

“Well loads of this is probably rubbish,” said Harry as he flipped through a book which reminded him uncomfortably of the useless books he’d had to purchase for Divination. “Some muggles make up a lot of stuff and believe it’s real. I suppose some of them even think they really are magical...”

“Hmmm...” Hermione’s brows furrowed in thought as she leafed through a book about Tantric Yoga after skimming through several books of Occultism and Neopaganism.

Recognising the tone of Hermione’s “Hmmm,” Harry raised his eyebrows and grinned. “Really Hermione?”

“Well... I’m not so sure what to think anymore Harry. Here... look at these pictures of Chakras in this Tantric Yoga book - what do they remind you of?”

“Hunh... that’s interesting! They look a bit like some of the pictures in the addendum at the end of The Wizarding Edition of the Tai Chi Classics.”

“Yes... they do Harry,” Hermione agreed. “They’re pictures of the major energy centres of the human form - the Chinese system is just more detailed and depicts all of the minor points and the meridians as well.

“If that were all there was to it, I wouldn’t think anything of it, because we already know that all humans have some limited ability to control their own magical energy fields. But what is indicated in the text as possible for anyone to achieve - regardless of genetic predisposition - appears to go beyond what ought to be possible.

“Now, of course that could just be wishful thinking on the part of the muggles who wrote these
books. But the level of detail in the instructions is highly suggestive that a lot of trial and error went into it, which in turn implies that this is more than just someone’s fantasy...”

Hermione pointed to several of the other books on the table. “...And at least one of those books of Muggle Occultism seems to be extremely accurate regarding the way magic works - too accurate to be coincidence or simple guesswork. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if some of the spells in it would actually work for someone with magical abilities.”

“But wouldn’t the Ministry and the International Confederation of Wizards try and keep books about real magic out of muggle hands?” Daphne asked in bewilderment.

“Per’aps zey are not so concerned about books written by muggles, because muggles have no magical ability?” Fleur mused.

A little shiver of excitement ran up Harry’s spine as something clicked in his brain and he shared a look with Hermione, his eyes wide. The rest of the Coven held their breath, sensing that the Potters were on the verge of an illuminating revelation.

“Hermione, if muggles really were totally non-magical then shouldn’t it be impossible for any of them to learn how to do some of the amazing things that some of them manage to do - even after decades of practice? ...like muggle Shaolin Monks...”

“...and muggle Hindu Yogis, and muggle Tibetan Lamas... among others. One would think so Harry.” Hermione bit her lip as her breath began to quicken.

“Before I found out I was a witch, I didn’t really believe in any of those sorts of things. Like Mum and Dad, I thought it was all explainable through standard scientific methods or otherwise fraudulent. I was very confused and upset when unusual things would happen around me until the day I got my Hogwarts letter.

“And I think you’re partially correct Fleur,” Hermione continued. “But for some muggles to write such accurate books about magic, they’d have to have some sort of experience with it.

“To answer your question Daphne, it’s probably almost impossible for wizards to control all of the information about magic because so much of it is tied into Muggle religions, myths, and legends - and most wizard governments probably don’t even bother to try because they know that a lot of it is made-up... and I expect they think that the bits that are real don’t matter because they believe that Muggles have no magical abilities at all...”

“But what if they do?” Harry interjected eagerly. “What if all humans have magical genes Hermione...?”

“Exactly Harry! They might be in everyone - but Recessive in most people - like they were in Jennifer - just waiting to be activated!” Hermione exclaimed, quivering excitedly. “But for the vast majority of humans it never happens because it takes decades of diligent practice to activate them... and very few people are able or willing to actually put in the effort...”

“Hermione, maybe THAT’S why the Pureblood Supremacists in the Ministry are so worried and are claiming that Dumbledore is training Muggles how to be wizards...” Harry postulated. “We all know it’s rubbish of course - that they’re just making it up about Dumbledore - but what if the Unspeakables in the Department of Mysteries really are worried that he actually might work out how to turn muggles into wizards?”

“That... that could be why they’re bein’ so harsh and killing off muggleborns!” Dora gasped.
“Yeah...” Harry agreed. “Maybe it’s not for the same reason they used to hate muggles at all. Maybe now Purebloods - at least the ones in the Department of Mysteries - hate muggles and muggleborn wizards because they’re afraid they won’t be so Superior and Special as more and more wizards are born to muggle families... The Purebloods that are smart know that their days of lording it over everyone are numbered and they’re trying to hang onto power at any cost...”

“Does... does that mean that one day in the future all humans might be born magical then?” asked Daphne.

Eyes as wide as saucers, Hermione slowly nodded. Luna grinned, as if she had suspected it all along.

“It might...” Hermione replied. “If what we’re inferring is true, then there are muggles right now who have turned themselves into wizards of a sort - who have somehow activated their magical genes and learned to perform some rudimentary or limited magical techniques - but who aren’t generally believed to be magical by most other muggles, or by born wizards...”

“So wizards really aren’t any more inherently magical than muggles,” said Harry confidently. “It’s just that we were born with more natural ability to control the magic than other people do because our genes are activated.”

“Y...yes, that’s a bit oversimplified Harry. Obviously there’s a bit more to it, given the long wizarding family lines. But I’m really thinking that’s basically the right of it in a nutshell,” Hermione beamed.

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The next few days leading up to New Year’s Eve passed happily and lazily for the Potters and their friends. Whatever dark thoughts and feelings still lurking in the shadows of their souls since their encounter with the Inferi and the raid on the Ministry’s Concentration Camp had been largely swept away by the Coven Ritual.

To his great surprise, Harry was able to actually enjoy just laying about reading and watching television without feeling agitated or restless. It felt good to just let himself go for once. And of course having Hermione to cuddle didn’t hurt.

But of course once New Year’s Eve day arrived, the anticipation began to build as the evening drew nearer. Even lounging on the sofa with Hermione snuggled under one arm, a mug of hot cocoa in one hand, and Crookshanks sprawled across their laps wasn’t enough to distract Harry from the fact that Dumbledore would soon be calling.

Finally, shortly before six pm, Harry was staring into Dumbledore’s clear blue eyes in the mirror, eagerly awaiting Dumbledore’s tidings. Dumbledore seemed pleased to see Harry’s enthusiasm.

“Well, I hope the timing isn’t too inconvenient,” said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling, “I know that many enjoy a good libation on New Year’s Eve. But I am hoping that you will all be able to join us at Narcissa Black’s estate tomorrow morning at 7 am.”

“Of course we can Professor Dumbledore!” Harry responded excitedly. Hermione and the others nodded as they were all listening with bated breath. “So, are we going to...”

“...Retake Hogwarts?” Dumbledore interjected, his eyes twinkling. “Yes indeed! And I have you and Mrs Potter to thank for inspiring the plan of attack. With the element of surprise, we should hopefully be able to minimise casualties on all sides...”
“We’re going to use the pictures then?”

“Indeed!” replied Dumbledore. “There are a number of other paintings here at Madam Black’s which are copies of those at Hogwarts, so we shall be able to move several teams into the castle all at once. Now, I must be going as I have a pressing engagement. However, you may wish to turn on your Wiz-Vision...”

~o0o~

“Some more Wine, Percy?”

“Oh... er... Yes please, Dolores.” Percy cheerfully held out his goblet as his mentor refilled it.

Percy was feeling much better about things after deciding that he and Penelope really didn’t belong together after all. Dolores was right; there were many other lovely young Pureblood women, and a man of his station - the youngest Senior Undersecretary in history - should have no problem ensnaring one for himself.

Taking a sip from his freshly filled goblet, Percy returned his attention to the Wiz-Vision screen for the final news broadcast of the year.

The splendidly coiffed William O’Hannity was regaling his cohost Endora with his well considered opinion on the news of the day when suddenly the screen went snowy. For a moment it went black altogether. Percy and Dolores regarded the Wiz-Vision with puzzlement as the image returned.

Wine sprayed from their mouths and their eyes bulged in shock; the Minister and her deputy would have recognised those clear blue eyes and that long silvery beard anywhere. They both gaped in horror as the former Headmaster of Hogwarts announced what they were just about to witness.

~o0o~

Having concluded his very important mirror-call to Harry Potter in private, Albus Dumbledore took a seat in the elegant armchair in Monsieur Delacour’s sitting room with Henri Delacour, his wife Appoline, Olympe Maxime, and the three others who had been invited.

Albus regarded the three most important members of the ICW Committee for the Investigation of Statutory Violations with twinkling eyes as they took their own seats. Henri poured everyone glasses of wine from his own private reserve.

“Vell, Dumbledore... I hope you haff much more for us to go on zis time,” snapped Angelika Machschnell, the stern German witch who headed the ICW’s investigatory committee.

“And you must remember Albus, there is very little we can do regarding internal blood-status policies unless they threaten to spill over to the International Stage,” the Greek wizard from the committee added with an oily tone.

“Ah, indeed I do Pericles,” Dumbledore warmly replied. “I may be getting on in my years, but it has not been so long since I was Supreme Mugwump after all...”

“Though, if certain rumours prove to be true, surely there must be something that we at the ICW can do to help Britain!” interjected the Nigerian witch, narrowing her eyes at the other two committee members.

“Oui! Olubunmi speaks wiz compassion and wisdom Monsieur Papadopoulos,” said Madame Maxime haughtily. “If ze British Ministry ees employing the methods of Grindelwald and
Voldemort, eet is imperative zat those with a powerful voice speak up to convince the rest of the Wizengamot to act.

“You see what is happening around ze world - Blood-Extremists everywhere are emboldened! If Britain falls, ozzers take notice and then where are we?...” Olympe continued.

“Thank you Olympe, Olubunmi,” Dumbledore interjected pointedly. “I am certain that Pericles and Angelika will make the most appropriate decision. I do not expect the ICW to join a potential civil war on one side or another. All I ask for the time-being is that the current laws against collusion with muggle heads of state, and against muggle oppression be upheld...”

Henri Delacour cleared his throat and took a swig of his wine, thinking it was probably best to not mention that he and Olympe had already mobilised a number of French forces to assist Dumbledore’s people. It wasn’t illegal for private alliances across international borders, but some in the ICW might frown on it nonetheless. Henri swallowed the mouthful of wine and listened to Albus’s mellifluous voice as the true Headmaster of Hogwarts continued.

“...Though I daresay that in the future, it is my hope that what you are about to witness will cause the ICW to revisit the International Secrecy Statutes. It is my contention that the strictures are far too narrow.

“As it stands, the Statutes allow for some interaction between wizards and muggles at only the Highest Level of State, with only a single point of contact between governments - Ministers and Presidents of Magic with muggle Presidents and Prime Ministers. Thus leaving the unwitting muggle public at large at the mercy of those in power with no recourse when the most virulent and mendacious members of the ruling classes of both societies have assumed control.

“In my view, this is a recipe for political disaster for the muggle world, to say nothing of our own. In any case, please bear with me - the broadcast is about to begin...”

“Hmmmpfh... I suppose you might have something there Albus,” muttered Pericles, eyeing the WizVision in distaste.

“Oh, indeed!” Dumbledore chuckled. “I did also bring all the relevant evidence with me to turn over to the committee - the following broadcast is largely for the British wizarding public, but it is a good overview of my case against the Minister...”

Tuned to the British Wiz-Vision feed as it was, Henri Delacour’s screen was currently displaying the WVN evening news. The image and sound broke up with a burst of distortion and faded to black, before returning with the pre-recorded video the Order had made for the pirated broadcast.

Taking a sip from his own wine-glass, Albus Dumbledore noted the reactions of the ICW committee members with great interest. Olubunmi’s tears and stifled sobs were expected - Albus had always appreciated her compassion and humanity. But the horrified expression on Angelika’s face when she saw the footage of the corpses in the Death Chamber and the prisoners - including the child - gave him a grim sense of satisfaction. Pericles was harder to read, a twitching muscle on his temple the only evidence of emotion.

All three of the committee members were rapt with attention when the Dumbledore on the WizVision screen presented the evidence from the files liberated during both the rescue of Arthur Weasley, and the raid on the Ministry Death Camp.

The pre-recorded Dumbledore described the contents: lists of enemies, supporters and recruits, details of operations, plans for the “detention facilities,” lists of the detained and the killed, among many
other details. Dumbledore pointed to the file which confirmed that the entire story of Dick Turpentine and wand-stealing muggleborn rebels was an utter fabrication concocted by the Minister and the Unspeakable Office.

He explained the Inferi, and Bellatrix Lestrange’s role in their creation under Ministry auspices, showing the recovered implements of torture and necromancy on-screen, and replaying the footage which revealed the tridecagram on the floor of the Death Chamber next to the stacks of corpses.

Dumbledore punctuated the information with the footage depicting Thorfinn Rowle’s presence at the compound as evidence confirming that the Minister had recruited those of Voldemort’s Death Eaters who had been interned in Azkaban for their previous crimes.

Finally, the Dumbledore on the Wiz Vision was shown interviewing several of the rescued prisoners, muggleborn wizards and muggles, including the MI5 analyst and her daughter, confirming the collusion between Minister Umbridge and the muggle Prime Minister.

When it was over, one could have heard a pin drop in Henri Delacour’s sitting room, and Albus Dumbledore was nearly certain that he finally had the ICW Committee in his corner. Dame Machschnell was a hard-nosed character and a stickler for rules, but Dumbledore’s hope for her sense of honour and human decency appeared to have been rewarded.

“Vell Albus, zis is quite shocking,” said the Head of the Committee. “Vhen ze evidence you haff brought confirms your allegations, I can assure you zat our committee shall begin an immediate investigation...”

“Angelika will have my complete support of course,” Olubunmi interjected, her nostrils flaring angrily as she dabbed at her tears.

“If the rest of your evidence substantiates these... images... Albus, I suppose I can offer my own recommendation in support of an investigation,” Pericles added silkily.

Angelika Machschnell rolled her eyes at the Greek committee member; she was the head of the committee after all, and all she needed was Olubunmi’s second to carry the motion to investigate.

“I cannot promise zat the vote of ze entire ICW vill go your way of course Albus, but vot you haff presented is very damning and quite convincing!” said Angelika firmly. “My committee can certainly Censure your Minister Umbridge, and introduce a motion to ze Wizengamot to Sanction her administration, and to issue an International Warrant for her arrest, should she dare to step on foreign soil...”

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Before he had completed the mirror-call with Harry, Dumbledore had cautioned him that some of the footage filmed during the raid on the Ministry’s Death Camp would be shown during the broadcast over the hacked Wiz-Vision feed, though edited to keep their identities concealed.

Forewarned, the Coven had braced themselves for the ugly images that they knew were coming.

It had been hard to relive the sickening scenes again, but they had managed it, feeling an odd mix of relief and sadness that the rest of the wizard world would finally see what the Ministry was really up to. And with the anticipation of what the New Year would bring, sleep seemed a distant possibility that night, but one by one, slumber gradually took them all.

The second to last person to fall asleep was Harry, still anxiously contemplating the plan to retake
Hogwarts, hoping that it wouldn’t turn into a bloodbath - hoping that what they found there wouldn’t drive him to lose control of himself. When Hermione felt her husband’s tension melt in her embrace she finally relaxed enough to let oblivion take her.

~o0o~

“Too bloody early - it’s New Year’s! Leave me alone...” Ron grumbled as someone tapped his cheek. The tapper ignored Ron’s complaints and gently patted his cheek again.

“Come on Ron; wake up! You’ve been asleep for long enough... or are you just going to sleep your whole life away then?”

The voice sounded familiar, but it was one which Ron hadn’t heard in quite some time. It must be a dream... or a nightmare! Blearily Ron opened his eyes as his senses jangled. His surroundings were unfamiliar and pink - pink bedding, pink curtains, pink carpet, pink wallpaper - but the countenance which peered at him was a face he knew all too well and Ron’s trepidation turned into alarm.

“Bloody Hell!” Ron gasped, feeling naked when he realised that he was all alone and that he didn’t have his wand. “Percy! Where am I? What’s going on?”

“It’s alright Ron - you’re safe!” said Percy in a soothing tone. “Nobody’s going to hurt you...”

“Like hell! I know what you did to Dad,” snarled Ron, beginning to panic. “What happened to you Perce...?”

“Believe me Ron, I hated that I had to do that! But our father has been in cahoots with Dumbledore for donkey’s years. He’s a traitor Ron...”

“Rubbish!” shouted Ron. “You’re completely mental...”

“Ron... Please, calm down! Hear me out!” Percy pleaded, and Ron quieted.

“I promise - I’m not going to hurt you,” continued Percy. “I know you’re Potter’s best friend, but I’m also aware that you don’t really know who he truly is... or who Dumbledore really is...”

“What are you on about Percy? I’m not...” Ron trailed off, his heart pounding. It suddenly struck him that it might not be in his best interests to tell Percy that he hadn’t been Harry’s best mate since the First Task of the Triwizard Tournament. “You... you don’t seriously expect me to believe all that barmy stuff about Harry and Dumbledore being violent criminals do you...?”

“Yes... yes I do Ron! You know what they’re capable of - what happened to the Malfoys...”

“The Malfoys? You must be joking! They had it coming... and... and Ginny told me what really happened to Draco Malfoy! I’m surprised you haven’t tried to arrest her too!” said Ron angrily. “Since when did you turn into a Slytherin, Perce?”

Despite everything that he knew about Percy, Ron could hardly believe what he was hearing.

Percy had always been a bit of pompous git - a bossy know-it-all who thought he was better than everyone else - and Ron had always known that his brother was exceedingly ambitious. But Ron had never imagined that Percy would ever go so far, and seeing his older brother peering at him with concern, it was still hard for Ron to accept that he had actually come to believe all that Pureblood rubbish.

“Ron... please!” Percy rolled his eyes, trying to control his temper. He needed Ron. It wouldn't do to
antagonise him, but it was high time that Ron grew up. “It’s long past time to put aside House prejudices...” Percy continued, “for the sake of the wizard world. If we want to put an end to all of this strife - if you want to save your friends - we need to work together...”

“Whaddya mean, ‘work together’...?” Ron asked suspiciously.

“We need to stop the violence before it gets worse Ron - before it tears the wizard world apart. A lot of people still look up to Harry Potter. And as long as Potter follows Dumbledore down the path of madness and chaos, people will continue to blindly follow behind him...”

“You can help bring the violence to an end Ron,” Percy continued earnestly. “As his friend, you might be able to get through to Potter like no others can. If you help us end this Ron, you’ll be a hero! Go on the Wiz-Vision - tell Potter to turn himself in - and I promise, I’ll do everything I can to see that Potter is treated fairly...”

“Never! You’re barking if you think...”

“How many more must die Ron? What will it take to convince you? Please... think about it!”

Percy peered at Ron, considering other approaches. Following Dumbledore’s pirated broadcast, the Minister and her Senior Undersecretary knew that they would have to move fast to counter his spin on the revelation of the death and destruction at the Ministry’s detention facility, before people had a chance to give Dumbledore’s warped perspective and lies any credence.

It was imperative for the wizard world to see that Dumbledore and his protege would fabricate any story to justify their attacks on the Ministry, and that what the Ministry was doing was necessary for the preservation of wizarding society as a whole. If they could see that even Potter’s best friends had turned against him...

“Ron, haven’t you ever wondered why we were so poor? Why Dad never got ahead at the Ministry? Didn’t you ever stop to think about why other wizard families always looked down on us and mocked our name? ...”

Ron scowled at Percy.
Chapter 68: Meet the Parents

Harry drew in a breath of crisp fresh winter air as he and Hermione traipsed through the snowy grounds of Jennifer’s estate. At nearly one hundred and fifteen acres of hill, much of it wooded, there was plenty of estate for a nice explore. The rest of the Coven were engaged in various activities after having spent a good part of the morning training with Ginny to accustom her to performing spells as a Coven.

Passing through a thick copse of evergreens, Harry and Hermione found a bit of bluff nearly untouched by snow just under the canopy of the trees on the other side. Even given the pearly grey skies, the view from the bluff was spectacular. The sea was visible in the distance one direction, and the snow covered ruins of Corfe Castle in the other. And much closer, the Potters could see the Church steeple and a bit of the village.

Well bundled up against the cold, Harry and Hermione glanced at each other and smiled, then sat cross legged on a patch of ground covered in pine needles. Hermione leaned her head on Harry’s shoulder and sighed contentedly as he wrapped an arm around her. They sat like that for a good while, drinking in the beauty of the wintry landscape.

Harry let the peace wash over him, soothing even the parts of his soul where the shadows of recent events still lurked. He pressed his lips to the knitted cap which covered Hermione’s bushy hair and kissed it. Hermione snuggled even closer if possible and sighed happily again. Moments later, their lips met for a proper kiss.

When the kiss was finished, Harry’s eyes caught the church steeple again. The steeple stirred a deep yearning within, and for a moment he wasn’t sure why. Then he recalled the little cemetery behind the church and it struck him.

He cleared his throat, feeling a bit like he had when he had asked McGonagall to let Hermione go to Hogsmeade in third year, despite the fact that Hermione’s parents hadn’t signed her form. Harry began tentatively, wondering if she would think it was too risky.

“Hermione?”

“Yes Harry?”

“Er... I was wondering... I... I really want to go to Godric’s Hollow - to visit my parents’ grave with you... maybe use the Resurrection Stone.”

Hermione peered into Harry’s green eyes and bit her lip.

“I don’t know Harry,” she said after a moment passed. “Of course I want to go with you, but I’m not sure that it would be safe for us. I would be surprised if the Minister wasn’t staking out your parents’ house in Godric’s Hollow just in case you show up... And even if we both went disguised, there’s a good chance that we’d be detained anyway, just to see if we’re muggleborn.”

Harry sighed. “Yeah! You’re probably right Hermione. I guess I was sort of thinking the same thing... I just really want to go now. I’ve been feeling more ready for it since visiting Jennifer’s parents’ graves with her. And... and with, er... everything we’ve had to deal with recently, it’d be nice to actually see for myself that people really do go on after death.”

“I’m sorry Harry.” Hermione smiled at him sympathetically. “Eventually we’ll get to Godric’s Hollow. I’m sure of it! But if you want to, you could use the Resurrection Stone anytime you like.”
“I thought about that actually. But - I’m not really sure why - it just seems right somehow to use it in Godric’s Hollow.”

“Well, I suppose that does make sense on some level - it was your home after all, where you were born and lived with your parents. And there’s a lot of history in Godric’s Hollow, Harry, as well as your own...”

“Yeah!” Harry nodded. “It’s been ages since I’ve read it, but I remember from A History of Magic: Godric Gryffindor, and the guy who created the Golden Snitch lived there... and Dumbledore told us that his family used to live there too.”

“And then there’s Bathilda Bagshot, who actually wrote A History of Magic,” said Hermione, grinning. For all that Harry complained about his memory and intellect not being as good as her own, Hermione mused again that Harry was far more intelligent than he gave himself credit for.

Hermione thought back to the end of First Year, when Harry had pieced together all the bits that others had told him and worked out that he and Voldemort were connected, and that eventually Harry would have to kill Voldemort or be killed himself.

That had been a brilliant and logical piece of deduction, based on his own recollections, and confirmed by Dumbledore’s revelation of the Prophecy. Of course Dumbledore had also pointed out that Prophecies were “a dubious business,” and most never fulfilled - most likely due to the increasing number of variables - the ever branching probabilities and roads not traveled - as the future unfolded.

And it had turned out that Harry was more or less right, despite not knowing at the time that Voldemort’s obsession with him was due to a Prophecy. It only made sense logically that Voldemort would come after Harry time and time again if Voldemort had believed in the Prophecy, regardless of the truth of it.

When it came right down to it, Hermione reckoned that Harry’s deductive reasoning skills had always been one of his biggest assets, besides his strong ability to visualise complex patterns, and his diligent study habits.

Harry raised his eyebrows, regarding his wife’s amorous expression with bemusement. Despite himself, Harry couldn’t help beaming back at Hermione’s radiant features, her golden curls spilling out from under her knitted mauve cap and tumbling over her shoulders.

“Why are you smiling at me like that?” he asked.

“Oh... er...” Hermione was slightly taken aback, not prepared for Harry’s question, not having quite realised that she was feeling a bit breathless and tingling with arousal - which was no doubt apparent to Harry. “I was just... er... thinking about how brilliant and smart you are,” she said, biting her lip and blushing furiously.

Still grinning at Hermione, Harry turned a bit pink. He couldn’t help feeling a swell of elation at Hermione’s unsolicited praises. Suddenly, without warning, Harry leaned in again and took Hermione’s lips with his own, kissing her steamily.

Hermione’s spark of desire burst into flame and she fell back upon the bed of pine needles, pulling Harry atop her.

Harry’s lips were so busily engaged, his own libido unchained, that it took him a moment to realise that Hermione was tugging off her jeans and knickers... which she was doing with some difficulty as
Harry’s legs between her parted thighs were blocking her way. Glancing down, Harry caught an eyeful of Hermione’s exposed pubes and bare hips, feeling himself grow harder.

“Er... you sure about this Hermione. Wouldn’t you like to go inside? It’s starting to snow again.”

“This is perfect, Harry!” Hermione said curtly as she panted. “Now help me!”

Harry grinned again and grasped Hermione’s jeans and knickers which were rucked up near the top of her thighs. Moments later, the bottom half of Hermione was completely nude (excepting her thick woolen socks) and Harry was between her spread legs, trailing kisses up the silky skin of her inner thighs until his lips reached her flushed, dampening slit.

Hermione let out a little moan of pleasure when Harry’s tongue slipped between the inner petals of her humid vulva, seeking out the little button hidden within. She felt a soaring sensation as if she were on the back of Harry’s broom. Moments later, squealing, Hermione’s back arched, her thighs clasping Harry’s tousled head, trembling blissfully.

Harry’s tongue continued its mission and Hermione peaked several more times, reaching new heights of ecstasy with each climax. Hermione quaked. Letting out another squeal of delight, she lost herself to a churning storm of ardour as sparks of magic flew.

Hermione was too giddy to care that the clouds had darkened and the wind had come up, sending a flurry of snow into the hollow under the canopy of the evergreens. Harry was now repeatedly driving his lance into her clasping warm sheath, his own jeans halfway down his thighs.

In a brief moment of lucidity, Hermione managed to undo the front of her parka and tug her jumper and t-shirt above her belly button. Harry grinned, understanding Hermione’s plea. As Harry continued to rock her, his hands slid across the satiny skin of Hermione’s abdomen, slipping under the hems of her t-shirt and sweater.

Rolling around on the bed of pine needles, Hermione found herself atop Harry riding his shaft. The open parka flapped around Hermione’s sides as she rode Harry ever more vigorously, his hands under her jumper and shirt kneading her breasts, his fingers gently pinching and tugging her rock hard nipples.

The fervor eventually took Harry and Hermione both. Hermione gasped, bursting ecstatically once more as Harry groaned, releasing his essence into Hermione’s depths. The magic exploded, crackling and arcing, lighting up the little alcove under the trees.

Hermione slumped on Harry in a blissful haze, and the pair faded into oblivion.

When Hermione came to, she felt a blast of cold air and snowflakes melting on her heated bare bottom and between her legs as a gust of wind drove the heavy snowfall into the otherwise sheltered clearing under the evergreens. Entwined with Harry, Hermione could still feel him inside her as she stirred.

Hermione shivered from the bitter cold, surprised that she wasn’t half-frozen until she remembered that she was still tattooed with the runes which prevented hypothermia and freezing to death. She slid off Harry’s front and clambered to her feet, sighing to see the layer of snow on her jeans and knickers which lay on the pine needles and underbrush close to the edge of the tree canopy.

Harry stirred and sat up, grinning at his half-naked wife, unable to help feeling another swell of arousal at the sight of Hermione standing there bottomless next to her snowy jeans and underwear. Hermione blushed at his intense gaze, feeling a little thrill herself.
“Too bad Hermione,” Harry chortled. “You’ll just have to hang them up on a branch for a bit and wait. I’ll keep you warm until they dry.”

Hermione smirked and rolled her eyes, half-tempted. There was something strangely exhilarating about the otherwise embarrassing idea of being nude outside in inclement weather with “no other choice” but to wait for clothes to dry.

“Don’t be silly Harry!” she said as she picked up her knickers and shook off the snow. “I’ll just perform a drying charm.”

Hermione giggled when Harry gave her an exaggerated look of disappointment.

“Alright... Fine!” said Hermione, rolling her eyes again, secretly giving in to her own desires. “But only if you get naked too. I’m not going to freeze my arse off by myself.”

“Done!” exclaimed Harry, grinning again as he yanked off his jeans and boxers. And just to show how much he was willing to share in Hermione’s “predicament” he chucked them out into the snow as well...

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Minister Umbridge took a sip of tea, considering her options carefully. There had to be a response to Dumbledore’s pirate broadcast of course. The most suitable narrative was that of Dumbledore’s past, previously published in the pages of the Daily Prophet, perhaps presented in a documentary format on the Wiz-Vision. That should help muddy the waters in the minds of the public.

Satisfied with her plan, the Minister took another sip of tea and peered at her list again. The next item on her agenda was what to do about the Dementors. The Ministry had been most fortunate that there had been no scheduled Feeding for the Dementors the night of Dumbledore’s attack upon the Ministry’s Welsh Detention Centre, as Bellatrix had been working at one of the other facilities. Had the Dementors been at that location, Dumbledore would have no doubt destroyed them with his Secret Weapon.

At the moment, the Dementors had returned to the ruins of Azkaban, awaiting the call for another Feeding - sucking out the souls of those that Bellatrix had finished torturing while she prepared herself to kill the prisoners and turn them into Inferi. And twice a week, the Minister had allowed the Dementors to take their leave of Azkaban to roam Britain and Feed from the ambient emotions of the general public.

All things considered, it might be best to disallow the regularly scheduled Soul Feedings at the detention centres and give the Dementors carte blanche to leave Azkaban and rove Britain at will, drawing their sustenance from the emotions of the public as needed. At least then the Dementors wouldn’t all be gathered in one location, presenting themselves as an easy target. They could still be called to the facilities in small groups to Feed on Souls on an impromptu basis whenever Bellatrix was ready with a new batch of broken detainees.

Confident that she had resolved another problem, Minister Umbridge moved on to the next item on her list. The Ministry needed a means of instantaneous communication to coordinate Unspeakables and Aurors engaged in the field. Owls and Memos sent through the Floo System were wholly inadequate for communicating with those in the field conducting operations. It was long past time for the wizarding world to take another step forward, technologically speaking.

Noting the irony, the Minister sighed as she scribbled a memo to send to the Unspeakable Office ordering the procurement of muggle communications devices - specifically, two-way radios and
mobile phones - and the immediate formation of a research project to develop equivalent magically based devices. This was a top priority.

Finally, Minister Umbridge scowled as she looked over the reports of several skirmishes between Ministry officials and wizards resisting the registration process. The damage from Dumbledore’s propaganda was already taking effect; more people were digging in and fighting back instead of simply running away and hiding. Hopefully countering Dumbledore’s propaganda would ameliorate some of that...

~o0o~

She wasn’t sure how long they would be in Brazil, but Madam Amelia Bones was beginning to wish she had brought her anti-sunburn ointment as she followed the head of the ICW Committee for the Investigation of Statutory Violations and another senior member of the committee, and an assortment of large wizards in crisp, black muggle business suits and dark sunglasses.

They were all in turn following the Brazilian Minister of Magic and his assistant through a crowded beachfront street towards a less populated stretch of the sandy seashore which appeared to have been roped off for VIP’s.

Madam Bones felt a momentary measure of relief from the heat when they passed under the canopy of a Cabana with an open bar. A few musical notes caught Amelia’s ear as she dabbed at her sweaty forehead with her hanky. Amelia glanced at the band playing a bossa nova on a platform by an outside patio at the other end of the Cabana.

“There he is,” said the Brazilian Minister of Magic, gesturing at a stretch of sand halfway between the Cabana and the waterline, “Minister Tsuchinoko. Just follow me...”

~o0o~

The Japanese Minister of Magic drank in the rays of the heavenly sunlight as he sunned himself on the golden sands of a beautiful stretch of beach not far from Rio de Janeiro, nursing a cocktail with a tiny umbrella sticking out of the glass, his eyes closed. Several sultry young witches - who might as well have been naked for all that their barely-there-bikinis covered the most intimate parts of their plentiful assets - cooed and giggled as they nuzzled, kissed, and caressed him, their fingers and lips trailing along the lines of his elaborate colourful tattoos.

He was basking in the glow of glorious victory. The Japanese International Quidditch team had resoundingly defeated the Brazilian team in their own home stadium the night before, and now he was enjoying the fruits of their Win. His Brazilian hosts had been very gracious indeed, putting him up in their ritziest resort for VIP’s, and making their sexiest Companion-Witches available to him - completely free of charge.

A shadow loomed over the Japanese Minister, blocking the sun, and the tittering of the witches went silent as their soft touch fell away from his skin. The Minister opened his eyes to see what had interrupted his pleasure. He frowned in puzzlement when he spied the Brazilian Minister of Magic peering down at him with a thin smile on his lips.

“Ramón... is this important? Is there a problem?”

“That remains to be seen, Asahara,” the Brazilian Minister replied. “I am merely here to facilitate a meeting. I hope you can forgive me...”

The Japanese Minister clambered to his feet, groaning inwardly, a knot of trepidation forming in his
gut when he saw the delegation from the ICW striding across the sand towards him. His two bodyguards scowled, but he kept his own features neutral, unwilling to show weakness.

“I must apologise, my friend,” the Brazilian Minister continued, raising his eyebrows. “But the duties of my station come first - I cannot flout International Law. I suggest that you cooperate fully.”

“But of course...” Tsuchinoko Asahara muttered. He bowed stiffly towards the stern German Witch approaching with another member of her committee, a number of large grim-looking, impeccably groomed wizards wearing dark sunglasses and black muggle suits, and a dour square-jawed witch with a monocle.

“Dame Machschnell, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Minister Tsuchinoko!” Angelika Machschnell returned, politely bowing to the Japanese Minister. “Madam Olubunmi Ogoba the Nigerian delegate to ze ICW - I believe you are both already acquainted. And zis is Madam Bones - formerly Head of ze British Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

“Ve are here on a fact-finding mission, and I am hoping that you can tell me vot these vere doing at ze bottom of the Black Lake... They vere discovered after an attempt on Harry Potter’s life during the Tri-Vizard tournament, and recently passed along to our committee...”

The Head of the ICW Committee for the Investigation of Statutory Violations narrowed her eyes shrewdly as one of the black-suited International Aurors accompanying her opened a briefcase. Sure enough, despite Minister Tsuchinoko’s determination to maintain his composure, a slight twitch in the corner of his right eye gave away his recognition of the items, two sais and a throwing star etched with an intricate design.

Another International Auror opened a second briefcase, with somewhat morbid contents: a well preserved severed hand which had formerly been attached to a kappa.

Despite his increasing angst, Minister Tsuchinoko took some satisfaction in the knowledge that there was nothing which tied him directly to the kappa assassination team which he had recommended to Minister Umbridge.

~o0o~

Dora yawned as the filtered grey light of a wintry dawn heralded the arrival of another January morning. The snow was coming down heavily again, piling up on the terrace just on the other side of the French doors. She smiled to herself, sighing in contentment, feeling cozy as she snuggled next to Fleur. But after a while, she reckoned it was time to get up.

As Dora shifted, she felt a soft warm hand give one of her breasts a little squeeze, and Fleur’s silvery lashes fluttered open. Fleur leaned over and gave Dora a wet kiss.

“Bonjour Dora,” whispered Fleur, an eager gleam in her eye. “I also am awake - per’aps you would like some company in ze shower?”

“Er... yeah,” Dora grinned, “that sounds smashing Fleur. Just gimme a minute first.”

A few minutes later, as the steam rose, Dora and Fleur soaped and fondled each other under the hot spray of water. Gasps and moans of delight could be heard over the thrum of the falling water as fingers slipped into wet crevices and hands kneaded ample curves. The pair of young witches both cried out ecstatically, bringing one another to completion.
As they toweled each other off after the shower, there was a knock on the bathroom door.

“Is Dora in there?” asked a muffled voice which sounded very much like Hermione’s.

“It’s alright, you can come in,” said Dora without thinking.

“Would you care to join us?” Fleur tittered when she saw Hermione’s bushy head peeking around the door.

“Oh... er... What?” Hermione sputtered, eyes boggling, reddening with embarrassment as she gaped at the two nude, dripping witches with towels in their hands.

“Sorry Hermione,” said Dora, quickly wrapping her towel around herself. “I just lost my mind for a minute...”

“And I was just teasing,” purred Fleur, who looked like she hadn’t been teasing at all.

“It... it’s quite alright,” Hermione said faintly, trying to ignore the flutter in her middle. “I just came because Sirius is on the mirror for Dora...”

“Oh, alright then,” said Dora, looking slightly puzzled. “Ta Hermione... Tell Sirius I’ll be there in half a tick.”

“Got it,” Hermione replied. “I’ll... er... just be going then.”

Hermione quickly shut the bathroom door and made her way back to the parlour, her face still aflame. Harry looked up with a bemused expression when he spied Hermione’s crimson features.

“What’s up Hermione?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Hermione muttered before leaning in and whispering in Harry’s ear. “I’d really like to play with Harriet tonight.”

Harry grinned. “No problem Hermione. So, is Dora on her way?”

“She’ll be here in just a moment...”

~o0o~

“Blimey!” Dora chortled after Hermione left the steamy bathroom. “‘Would you care to join us?’ ... Really Fleur?”

“And if ‘Ermione had accepted my offer, you would be so disappointed?” Fleur raised her eyebrows and peered at Dora knowingly. Dora flushed and squirmed a bit, her giggles abating.

“Well, she’s married for one thing... bit young... more or less family,” Dora mumbled, not quite meeting Fleur’s eye. “And you and me...”

“...would ‘ave lots of fun, non?” Fleur tittered. “Per’aps if ‘Arriet likes, she may join in too?”

Dora tried desperately to put all such thoughts out of her head as she quickly threw on a pair of jeans and an artfully torn Blondie t-shirt. But when she entered the parlour, there was Hermione, sitting on a sofa next to Harry.

Harry glanced back and forth between Hermione and Dora, who had inexplicably both blushed and quickly avoided each others’ eyes when they spotted each other.
“The mirror’s on the coffee table Dora,” said Harry, standing up and taking Hermione by the arm. “We’ll just leave you to it then.”

Hermione and Dora both gave Harry a grateful look, and both blushed again when they caught each other’s eyes once more. Dora waited until they had both departed the room and took a deep breath to clear her head before picking up the mirror...

~o0o~

“Okay Hermione... Spill! What was that all about?”

“I... er... I walked in on Fleur and Dora together - by accident - they’d just got out of the shower...” Hermione trailed off, leaving it there and hoping that Harry wouldn’t press for more.

Harry smirked a bit, knowing that there must be a bit more to the story. Hermione wouldn’t even look him in the eye; her face was still as red as a fire-engine, and it seemed significant that she wanted him to be Harriet tonight...

~o0o~

Dora lifted the mirror from the shiny spotless coffee table and Sirius’s grinning face came into view.

“Mornin’ Sirius! What’s up?”

“Sorry about this Dora!” The grin was replaced with an apologetic smile. “I’m actually just acting as secretary. There’s someone else here who’d really like a chat with you...”

Dora flushed and groaned inwardly when her parents both appeared in the mirror. She had been hoping to put this off until she had worked out a way to tell her parents that Harry had promised to pay her way until she got her cartoons or music off the ground once this was all over.

“Nymphadora , you look positively radiant,” her mother gushed effusively, taking Dora by surprise. Her father’s face was right next to mum’s, but there was something a bit goofy about his grin when he said, “Hi Sweetie.”

“Oh... er... Hi Mum, Dad!” said Dora, puzzlement crossing her features. “So... What’s goin’ on?”

“Darling, it would be simply delightful if you could visit us tonight,” Dora’s mother beamed. “You can bring your girlfriend. It would be lovely to meet her finally.”

“...Oh... and maybe the Potters would like to join us too,” Dora’s mother added nonchalantly, as if the thought had just occurred to her.

Okay, now Dora knew something was going on! Calling Dora by the hated moniker “Nymphadora” was typical Mum, but Mum almost never ‘gushed effusively’ or ‘beamed’ at anyone unless something was up, and it was as clear as a bell that Mum and Dad were both eager to meet the Potters. Dora bit her lip and her eyes narrowed slightly in suspicion.

“Er... I’ll ‘ave to check with Harry and Hermione. But I s’pose if they’re game...”

“Oh, wonderful dear!” said her mother enthusiastically. “We shall be dining precisely at seven - just the six of us. So you don’t have to dress too formally...”

Which really meant, “Please dress up and don’t wear your usual rags,” to Dora’s ears; she turned pink when she remembered what she was wearing.
“...Anyway dear, I can’t wait to see you and Fleur and your friends this evening,” her mother continued. “Bye for now! Please don’t be late.”

“Bye Love,” said Dora’s father, who looked relieved that he hadn’t had to say anything. “See you tonight.”

~00o~

Harry and Hermione both let out sighs of relief when they managed to land on their feet upon their arrival on Black Manor’s front lawn via Portkey with Fleur and Dora. They were all dressed up spiffily (Hermione had helped Harry transfigure some of his clothes with the assistance of Parvati’s and Daphne’s fashion sense), and Harry for some reason felt like he had when he’d almost met Hermione’s father in Diagon Alley.

Harry couldn’t quite get over the impression that he would be under scrutiny, sized up for approval by the parents. But for the life of him, Harry couldn’t work out why. He thought Hermione looked a bit perplexed as well.

Feeling a knot of dread in the pit of her stomach, Dora peered awkwardly at Fleur and the Potters’ anxious faces as they all waded through the snow towards the front door of Narcissa Black’s manor from the portkey arrival site.

“I’m not really sure what’s goin’ on. Sorry guys...” Dora started to say.

“It’s alright Dora,” Harry interjected, making a feeble attempt at putting on a brave face. “I’m really looking forward to meeting your parents,” he fibbed. Perhaps under other circumstances it might have been true, but Dora’s growing anxiety rang alarm bells in Harry’s brain.

“This will be lovely, really!” said Hermione, doing her best to look like she meant it. Like Harry, Hermione couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to this visit than a casual dinner with a friend and her parents. The whole situation had a distinct “meet-the-parents” vibe.

“Oui, mon amour. All shall be well,” Fleur said to Dora, wondering who she was trying to convince more - herself, or Dora. For Fleur, there was no question about it, this was her moment to either impress her girlfriend's parents or fall flat on her face.

They were greeted at the door warmly by Narcissa Black and invited in. Narcissa led them to the parlour in which Andromeda and Ted Tonks awaited the arrival of their daughter. Out of the corner of her eye, Dora spotted Clara and her sister Gemma in one of the other parlours. Clara seemed to be consoling her sister, who looked like she’d been crying.

Thoughts of the Dawson sisters quickly evaporated as Dora approached the entryway and spied her beaming parents on the other side in a small cozy looking parlour with a roaring fire in the hearth. She swallowed nervously as she entered the room.

“Hi Mum, Dad... This is Fleur...” Dora began a round of introductions.

“How lovely to finally meet you, Fleur!” said Mrs Tonks, pulling her into a big hug.

“You as well, Madame Tonks,” Fleur gasped, trying to catch a breath in the tight embrace of Dora's mother.

Harry wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers before shaking Mr Tonks’ hand, his heart thumping in his ears. Harry felt somewhat relieved that Mr Tonks seemed happy to meet him. But this time it was the frankly appraising looks he was getting from Mrs Tonks which unnerved Harry the most.
There was definitely something weird going on.

Hermione shared a bewildered look with Harry, having picked up on the puzzling sense of hopefulness from Dora’s mother when Mrs Tonks had swept her into a hug as well.

“Please, make yourselves comfortable,” said Mrs Tonks cheerily. “Dinner should be served momentarily, but in the meantime, perhaps some wine?”

“Er...Oui, zat sounds vairy nice,” said Fleur, who looked even more anxious than the Potters. Fleur couldn’t be happier to take a few gulps of the French Chardonnay, hoping it would settle her nerves.

Everyone settled in around the little dining table near the window and began chatting amiably about the most innocuous of things while awaiting the arrival of dinner as some light classical music played in the background.

When it arrived, Madam Black’s house-elf served up a fantastic meal, easily worthy of Dobby or the elves at Hogwarts. On his second glass of wine, Harry began to relax, his thoughts drifting as the voices around him faded.

He found himself ruminating on the plight of house-elves again. Wizards of means just took them for granted, when house-elves deserved so much more considering how much they provided for those they served. They at the very least deserved to be able to choose who to work for, and to not be forced magically to obey. It was a place to start anyway.

It was still hard for Harry to reconcile the utter complacency most house-elves felt about their enslavement. Harry had looked up Stockholm Syndrome after Hermione had mentioned it not so long ago, and he reckoned that she was right.

He thought about how unhappy and frightened Winky had seemed at the World Cup, belying her protestations of delight at serving her master. Harry supposed there really wasn’t anything wrong with her working for Crouch - she really seemed to love him. But she deserved to be treated fairly and kindly, like any sentient being.

It wasn’t right that not only was she forced to obey orders which terrified her, she wasn’t even allowed to acknowledge the validity of her own feelings about it. Harry was more determined than ever that one day he and Hermione would somehow work out how to get house-elves more rights without upsetting them...

“...Harry?”

“Hunh?” Harry suddenly snapped out of it when he realised that Mr Tonks was addressing him with an odd gleam in his eyes. Harry glanced at the empty second glass of wine in his hand and decided that he’d had enough.

“Er... Sorry Mr Tonks! What were you saying?”

“Too many distractions, eh?” Mr Tonks said to Harry with a roguish wink.

Dora stopped half-listening to her mother’s gossip, her cheeks turning pink when she heard her father’s off-hand comment. Her chest tightened. Oh no! Here it comes, she thought.

Harry was simply confused. Distractions? Somehow Harry didn’t think Mr Tonks meant absentmindedly pondering future plans for liberating house-elves. And what was with the winking? There was only one thing which made sense. But surely Mr Tonks wasn’t implying...
“So my Dora tells me you actually used your metamorphmagus skills to navigate the Second Task, not Gillyweed,” Mr Tonks continued, looking really impressed. “That takes some real focus, that does. Your Intent must be off the charts!”

“Er... Maybe, I suppose!” Harry replied tentatively with a nervous grin, wondering where this was all leading. “I mean... Sure, it took a bit of focus, but I wouldn’t say it was ‘off-the-charts.’”

“...And so humble.” Mrs Tonks beamed at Hermione. “My dear, your husband is simply delightful!”

Dora’s eyes widened, her breath quickening as panic began scratching wildly at the door to her brain like a terrified puppy frightened of an approaching storm.

Hermione was at a loss. She suddenly felt like she was at a cocktail party in an old black and white film.

“Er... Yes! Harry’s the best!” Hermione squeaked with a slightly strained smile, cringing at the sound of her voice and the lameness of her response.

“And an up and coming quidditch champion perhaps, from what I hear,” chimed in Mr Tonks.

“...And quite a potioneer from what Severus tells us,” added Mrs Tonks. She turned and gave Hermione a look that was both meaningful, and almost uncomfortably warm. “Indeed he tells us you are both some of the most exceptional students he has ever had the pleasure of working with...”

Hermione and Harry both dropped their forks at the same time and gaped, unable to imagine Snape ever using the terms “exceptional students” and “pleasure” in the same sentence. There was no doubt about it now. Mrs Tonks was clearly buttering them up for something.

Dora hid her blazing face in her hands, knowing that the dam was about to burst.

Fleur watched with great interest, the corners of her mouth twitching with mirth, free to enjoy the show now that her own interrogation was over.

Apparently oblivious to all of the expressions and gesticulations of her guests, Mrs Tonks cheerfully barreled on.

“...I can imagine that you’ll both make wonderful parents one day!” Mrs Tonks sighed wistfully. “With your talents, I have no doubt that you’ll both have your pick of careers, providing stability and comfort for your children...”

Dora audibly groaned through the hands still covering her face.

The Potters were now simply stunned into silence. Children was the last thing on their minds; both of them were thrilled at the efficacy of the wizard world’s Contraception Charms and Potions.

“I miss children,” said Mrs Tonks. “Metamorphmagus children can certainly be a handful, but more fun than you can possibly imagine. You might both find that out some day. I hear that the talent actually runs through some families from one generation to the next.

“Anyway, You should have seen our little Nymphadora, such a cherubic little angel and wicked devil all rolled into one. We have some pictures somewhere, in one of our suitcases...”

“Muuuuum!” groaned Dora.

“...I had hoped that one day another little one would join our family.” Mrs Tonks let out another
wistful sigh. “Of course that’s just me being selfish though.” She gave her daughter an affectionate motherly look. “I only want my Nymphadora to be happy...”

Dora felt like slamming her head into the table and knocking herself out so she wouldn’t have to listen any more.

“...And I know how happy Fleur makes her...” Mrs Tonks shot Fleur a winning smile.

Dora winced ahead of the bombshell she knew her mother was about to drop.

“...And it’s obvious how happy you two make her as well...”

There it was!

“Mum!” Dora said sharply, dropping her hands from her face to glare at her mother.

The Potters could only continue to listen in horrified fascination, their eyes popping. Fleur covered her mouth, struggling to hold back the laughter.

“...And please don’t worry yourselves that Ted and I won’t understand your relationship with our daughter and Fleur. We are both quite accepting of alternative lifestyles...”

“MUM!” Dora shouted. “That’s enough...”

“...and I can’t tell you both just how happy I am to have a new hope that I may yet have a grandchild,” Mrs Tonks concluded, beaming more cheerfully than ever.

“Wait... You mean... me... I...” Harry sputtered, finally finding his voice as his head spun, unable to fully comprehend that this was really happening. But Harry’s attempt to clarify whether he was dreaming or not was interrupted.

“OH MY GOD!” Dora fumed. “SHUT UP! Harry and Hermione are JUST FRIENDS! I can’t believe you Mum! Where’s this all coming from? Dad, please tell me you’re not in on this...”

“Why, if it weren’t for your father dear, it might have escaped me completely.” Mrs Tonks gave her daughter a sympathetic smile. “Those photos of the Potters and Fleur from the end of the second task - and there you are in some of the photos, right behind them grinning like a little monkey... your closeness with the Potters... your trip to London all together with Fleur... It all makes sense now, and I couldn’t be happier for you!”

“Please stop, Mum!” Dora moaned, glancing at Harry apologetically, then sharing a desperate look with Hermione, and Fleur who was still valiantly fighting a fit of giggles. Mrs Tonks’ comments were hitting uncomfortably close to home after the awkwardness between the three young witches that morning; Hermione’s features appeared to be in a race to catch up to Dora’s in redness.

Harry caught the looks and the rosy cheeks. Wondering what the hell had actually happened during the Shower Incident that morning, Harry slumped in his seat and groaned, resigned to whatever fate the Universe had in store for him.

“Now dears, there’s really no need for all of you to make such a fuss or hide it from us,” Mrs Tonks said kindly, her eyes sparkling with happiness. “The love you all share is as plain as day now that I see you all together...”

“Oh God! You’re not going to give up are you?” Dora rolled her eyes and threw her arms up in exasperation. “Okay... fine! Believe whatever you want to believe! I’ve ‘ad enough of this...” Dora
pushed back her chair and stood up. “I think I’m ready t’go home now. ‘Ow about you guys?”

“Er... yeah!” Harry couldn’t scramble to his feet fast enough. “Er... thanks for dinner!” he said to Dora’s parents.

“It was lovely to meet you both!” Hermione squeaked, wincing again at the sound of her own voice.

“Madame, Monsieur Tonks!” Fleur stood up gracefully and curtsied, a beatific smile on her face. “Thank you so much for your ‘ospitality.”

“Yeah! Thanks for dinner Mum, Dad!” said Dora in a weary, defeated tone of voice. “Love you both!”

Ted and Andromeda Tonks both sighed happily as their daughter departed from the parlour with her companions. Andromeda took out a hanky and dabbed the tears of joy glistening on her cheeks.

“Oh Ted! I think it might really happen. We might really get a grandchild one day!”

“Eh? What’d I tell you then? You believe me now, don’tcha?” Ted waggled his eyebrows at his wife and grinned. “Now that you’ve seen ‘em...”

“You were right Ted,” Andromeda sniffled. “It’s so obvious when you see them all together. I just... I still can’t get over how much Nymphadora seems so at home with all of them - even Harry Potter.

“I never thought I’d ever see our daughter look at a young man like she looks at her girlfriends. It’s his eyes - you saw them didn’t you Ted? Harry Potter’s eyes? ... They’re just too pretty for words...”

Ted raised his eyebrows and smirked a bit at his wife.

~o0o~

“Bloody Hell! I can’t believe it!” Harry muttered as the four of them trudged back through the snow to the portkey departure point, his face blazing like a furnace. “I can’t bloody believe it!” he repeated.

Harry peered beseechingly at Dora. “Your mum actually wants me to get you pregnant? ... I’m only fifteen!”

Dora hid her face in her hands, moaning, “I’m so sorry Harry! I swear... I ‘ad no idea that was gonna happen!”

Fleur was laughing uncontrollably now that she was outside and no longer had to restrain herself; she was laughing so hard that she had to stop and clutch at a stitch in her side.

Hermione felt all of a jumble - finding herself torn between laughter, embarrassment, and anxiety. She gave Harry a sympathetic smile and curled an arm around his waist...

~o0o~

Amelia Bones adjusted her monocle while Dumbledore poured them both a cup of tea in his office. She had spent two days in Brazil and was eager to get things under way. After taking a few sips of tea, Amelia began.

“It was quite apparent that the Japanese Minister of Magic knew much more than he let on. Unfortunately, the ICW does not have enough to charge him with any crimes, nor to compel him to reveal any more information about Dolores’s connection to the Kappa Kill Team.”
“That is a shame indeed,” Dumbledore sighed and nodded. “But not entirely unexpected.”

“Quite!” Madam Bones replied drily. “However, he did not deny the connection outright, but rather, indicated that Dolores may have approached wizards associated with the Yakuza for referral to the assassins... which is nonsense of course!”

“Of course!” agreed Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. Amelia was thoroughly in her element when engaged in uncovering a mystery.

“I have no doubt that Minister Tsuchinoko himself provided Dolores with the contacts necessary for hiring the Kill Team,” Amelia continued. “Regardless, he at least gave us enough to track down the assassins sent to kill Mr Potter. Once the International Auror Office has them in hand, the assassins should be able to provide direct evidence that Dolores - or someone closely associated with her - hired them.

“The evidence collected by the Potters and their friends is being sifted through by the Committee. The most damning of all, will of course be the direct testimony being provided by those imprisoned at the compound... I will be taking a trip to Japan for the next few days to follow up the leads on the Kappa, but Kingsley and I will be heading to Brussels again next week, this time with Ms Mason to provide evidence of collusion with the muggle Prime Minister. If all goes to plan, the Committee will be able to bring a Motion to the floor of the ICW to issue an International Arrest Warrant for Dolores within the next four to six weeks.”

Satisfaction crossed Dumbledore’s countenance as he listened to Amelia’s report.

“Excellent!” he said with another nod. “In the meantime, we can continue to focus our own efforts on countering the Minister’s forces here at home...”
Locked in a passionate embrace, Harry and Hermione rolled around on the damp bed of pine needles, getting wetter and wetter as more icy drips and rivulets of rain seeped through the canopy of the trees above. Hermione giggled when she felt Harry’s fingers slip inside her coat and under her t-shirt, trailing across the bare skin of her tummy.

“That tickles Harry. Does this mean you’re ready then?”

Harry reluctantly dragged his lips away from Hermione’s neck and grinned at her.

“Er... Yeah! I guess I am.”

The Potters clambered to their feet and brushed the wet pine needles from their clothes. Harry made to open an umbrella as they stepped out into the torrent, but Hermione snatched it from his hand.

“Oi... What the...?” said Harry, bemused.

Hermione giggled again as she darted out of Harry’s reach. “If you want it, you’ll have to catch me, Harry.”

Shaking his head and laughing, Harry pelted after Hermione as she ran. Hermione led him on a merry chase through the downpour, and by the time they reached the red brick barn, panting and out of breath, they were both drenched.

“Now we have to get out of our wet things,” said Harry, shivering and grinning as Hermione closed the door behind them.

“That was the plan, yes,” Hermione answered matter-of-factly, shaking excess water from her saturated mane of hair.

“Wasn’t exactly necessary though, was it?” Harry chuckled, his eyebrows raised as he tugged off his t-shirt. “I’m bloody freezing, now.”

Already down to her wet bra and knickers, Hermione rolled her eyes and picked up her wand.

“Necessary, no! Romantic, yes!” she said as she cast a Warming Charm over the barn. “Now hurry up and get out of those clothes.”

Harry chortled again and tugged off his sopping jeans, then popped open a bottle of wine and poured two glasses. Having already replaced several bricks in the wall with the slab of stone from the Room of Requirement before the walk, the Potters wrapped a blanket around themselves and huddled together, sipping the red wine as they listened to the rain beating steadily upon the roof.

Soon enough the chill was gone, and Harry picked up where he had left off under the evergreens, sweeping Hermione’s wet locks out of the way as he nuzzled her neck and his hand slid across her abdomen.

The ardour intensified as the kisses became steamier and caresses traveled; wet undergarments were heatedly yanked off and flung to the side. Harry’s hand reached between Hermione’s parting thighs, his lips encircling the tender pink peaks of her rolling hills.

Hermione bit her lip, already quivering and squeaking blissfully, Harry’s fingers inside her, his
thumb twirling her little button. Dousing Harry’s hand with dewiness, Hermione giddily reached for his turgid staff, beckoning him to enter her and seek his own release.

But Harry seemed to have other ideas.

“Harry?” she squealed, slightly startled and confused when his appendage snaked up her torso, between her breasts.

Harry grinned in response. When she felt the crown of his hardness pressing between the humid petals of her heated entrance, as the head of his serpent hovered above her lips, waving tentatively, Hermione suddenly caught on and giggled.

“Er... Well? Do you want to give it a go then?” asked Harry, raising his eyebrows questioningly. “It’s up to you... I can still be Hugh Grant if you’d rather?”

Hermione giggled again, smacking Harry’s shoulder. “I’d rather have my Harry or Harriet any day of the week. But if you’re really sure you don’t mind, Shokushu Harry does sound like fun... I just thought you might feel really weird about it!”

“I don’t mind at all!” Harry said softly, giving Hermione a gentle look with those pretty green eyes that she had fallen in love with. “I never feel weird when I’m with you...”

Hermione felt the tug on her heartstrings and pulled Harry closer for another deep, burning kiss.

Harry’s lance plunged into her sheath. Hermione let out a moan as he began to rock her, and opened her lips wider to take his second appendage in her mouth; she tasted his essence, sucking almost hungrily as it slid over her tongue.

The feeling was almost indescribable; there was something heavenly about having Harry filling her in both places simultaneously. The tidal surges of ecstasy swept Hermione away more than once, and she was gleefully amazed that Harry was still managing to hold on.

Harry was more than surprised himself; the soaring sensations from his two members inside Hermione rushing through him from head to toes were nearly overwhelming. He could feel himself drawing nearer and nearer to the edge of the abyss, but he tried to hold off as long as he could, delighting in both her pleasure and his own.

But as Hermione peaked again for the umpteenth time, the passionate fervor fed back in on itself, and Harry finally lost himself. Awash in a heavenly fog of bliss, he erupted, releasing himself, flooding Hermione’s depths as she thirstily drank from his fountain.

For an eternal moment the pair were as one, undulating, caught in a perfect storm of uncontrollable multiple cascading climaxes.

The Magic arced like bolts of lightning; the Barn lit up, bathed in the pulsating silvery luminescence emanating from the writhing couple. Filaments - all colours of the rainbow - branched from the major crackling arcs bursting from them, and began crawling across the walls, ceiling, and floor of the barn.

The stone from the Room of Requirement glowed intensely. There was one last blinding flash of light... the Barn quaked vigorously... and it was over. The Potters fell into Oblivion...

~o0o~

When Harriet came to, still entwined in Hermione’s embrace - perhaps an hour later - she gave her wife a puzzled look, who was also just starting to stir.
Hermione blinked and shook her own head clear, seeing Harriet’s bewildered expression.

“Harriet, are you alright?” she asked, looking concerned.

“Er... Blimey!” Harriet squeaked anxiously. “I’m not sure, Hermione! I mean... I feel great - that was amazing - but I don’t remember changing into my girl form. I’ve never morphed without doing it on purpose before. D’you think...? That doesn’t mean something’s wrong, does it?”

Hermione bit her lip and frowned pensively. While having a good think, Hermione found her wand and conjured up a towel to wipe her face and hair before answering Harriet’s question.

“Hmm... Well, it’s not really the first time, is it?” she finally said. “You regrew your hair once without even knowing how. .... Obviously transforming into a girl is much more complicated, but you’re used to it by now, as you do it all the time. So if I had to guess, I’d say that you unconsciously forced the change after you’d spent yourself. You’ve just been a rather... er, extreme expression of maleness... and I think you just really needed to be a girl again after all of that!”

Harriet peered at Hermione - who was still toweling herself off - in sudden understanding. She clapped her hand to her mouth, a guilty expression on her face.

“Yeah,” Harriet muttered, “I see what you mean.”

Hermione smiled sympathetically, trying hard not to giggle.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of Harriet. It was lots of fun - brilliant even! I’d really enjoy doing that again with you some time... but only if it doesn’t make you feel uncomfortable.”

Harriet gave Hermione an abashed looking grin.

“Er... Yeah! Okay! I had loads of fun too... I wouldn’t mind doing it again once in a while. Maybe not too often though - I’m bloody knackered after that...” Harriet trailed off as Hermione leaned in to kiss her.

“Mmm...” said Hermione, an impish expression on her face as she stroked her hand along Harriet’s inner thigh, “That would be disappointing if you were too tired for a bit more now. I was sort of hoping I could spend some time with you as Harriet too.”

“Well, I suppose... If you insist,” said Harriet teasingly, “As long as I don’t have to work so hard this time.”

“Not at all. Just leave it to me,” Hermione giggled, waving her wand at her coat by the barn door.

Harriet wasn’t as surprised as she might have been when she saw the toy fly out of a pocket and across the room, knowing that Hermione usually prepared for every possible situation.

“I made some magical adjustments,” said Hermione, “I should be able to really feel what it’s like to be a boy this time. I hope you don’t mind?”

“Go for it,” Harriet eagerly replied. “Of course I don’t mind.”

A fresh tingle of arousal coursed through Harriet as Hermione readied the strap-on for action and kneeled between her thighs.

The tingle became a cresting swell of elation and Harriet’s toes curled when she felt Hermione prepare her humid pink crescent with kisses, licks and nibbles - Hermione’s tongue alternating
between flicking Harriet’s fleshy pearl and burrowing inside her wetness. Harriet was gasping and squeaking, already in the throes of her second climax when Hermione finally presented the tip of the strap-on’s shaft to her spasming entrance.

Harriet writhed under Hermione as the bushy haired witch repeatedly drove the synthetic phallus into her core and moulded her bouncing little globes, moaning into Hermione’s mouth as their lips met, dancing wetly.

The delicious friction of feverous passion was too much and Harriet let out a keening cry of euphoria as she peaked, merging with Hermione for the second time, vaguely cognizant of the pulsing jets inside her, releasing a torrent of nectar into her channel.

The barn trembled again, crackling arcs of Magic leaping from wall to wall once more.

It was another while before the pair of glowing witches roused again. Harriet grinned, giving her wife a tender smooch.

“That was brilliant, Hermione!” said Harriet. “I always wondered what that felt like...”

“So did I,” Hermione retorted, smirking. “I think I might enjoy being the boy a bit more often.”

“As long as you don’t get me pregnant... OW!” Harriet chortled when Hermione gave her a swat.

“You know that can’t happen. It wasn’t real, er... semen,” said Hermione, giving Harriet a mock glare. “And I know you never bothered with the internal reproductive bits. Though if I ever do work out how to make it real when we’re older, you’d best be prepared to learn how to transform those parts too if you want more than one kid...”

“Er...” Harriet gulped, hoping Hermione was joking. “Speaking of transformations... The barn...” Harriet deflected. “We should give it a test run and have our picnic...”

Hermione’s eyes widened as she and Harriet glanced around the chamber - for that was what the interior of the barn looked like now, a grand castle chamber...

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“Wow! You did it... it actually worked!” gasped Parvati as she and the rest of the Coven peered at the inside of the barn later that afternoon.

“Was there ever any doubt?” Ginny giggled, giving the luminescent Potters a smirk which made them both blush.

“Not really,” said Luna, looking slightly wistful, as if she had hoped the services of the entire Coven would be called for.

“It’s amazing!” exclaimed Jennifer. “It looks like just like a room at Hogwarts - like a castle made out of stone I mean... instead of bricks...”

“Let’s test it out,” said Daphne eagerly.

“Well, it definitely works. Hermione turned it into a London art gallery and we looked at the pictures while we had lunch. But I’m so worn out, I can’t even think about training,” groaned Harriet. “And I’m the one who wanted it the most.”

“Well, never mind that, Harriet,” chimed in Hermione. “We’re just supposed to be relaxing on
weekends anyway - Pomfrey’s orders.”

“Yeah,” said Jennifer, “Just think of something fun, Harriet.”

“Er... well given the dreadful weather outside, we should try and think of a sunny place,” said Harriet. “But why don’t you guys choose!?”

“Oooh, I know just ze place,” Fleur cooed excitedly.

The Coven filed back outside into the icy downpour and waited as Fleur paced back and forth by the door of the barn several times. Fleur turned the handle of the door when she was finished and everyone held their breaths as it swung open. Delightedly, the Coven found themselves on a bright sandy beach, the blue-green waters of the sea sparkling in the sunlight and lapping at the shore.

“Oh! The Côte d’Azur!” squeaked Hermione joyfully. “That was a lovely idea Fleur...”

“Oui!” Fleur nodded and beamed radiantly. “Zis is beach near a village not so far from Saint-Tropez - ees not so popular with non-magical tourists as mos’ must hike or take boat. But for wizards, is easy... and for us, even easier, non?”

“Bloody brilliant Fleur!” Dora grinned. “What say we all dash back to the house for bikinis and sunglasses...”

The Coven spent the rest of Saturday afternoon lounging in the stunningly realistic simulation of the French Riviera under summer skies while the late January rainstorm continued to rage outside.

Sunday passed just as pleasantly, everyone relaxing and engaging in hobbies. Harriet took the opportunity away from Hogwarts to remain in girl form, and had another go at painting under Jennifer’s expert tutelage while Hermione and Fleur retired to the library for a bit of light reading. Daphne joined Harry and Jennifer, interested in trying her hand at painting as well - though by the end of the session, there was more oil paint covering Daphne than there was on her canvas.

Dora, Parvati, and Luna spent part of the morning in the music room as Ginny looked on. Luna tapped away on the drum machine while Dora played the keyboard and Parvati warmed up her voice. Dora caught Ginny’s eye after half an hour of making a racket.

“Oi, Ginny, you look a bit bored. Come ‘ere...” Dora gestured at the synthesizer.

“Er... What?” Ginny squeaked nervously. “I don’t know how to play piano.”

“You don’t really ‘ave to know how, to have a bit of fun at first,” said Dora. “That’s the beauty of a synth... I can show you enough t’get you started. We can try making a song.”

“Er...”

“Go on, Ginny,” begged Luna, brightening at the idea of Ginny joining in properly. “It’ll be fun! ... Please?”

“Yeah... Come on Ginny,” said Parvati imploringly. “Give it a go.”

“Oh alright,” Ginny grumbled, clambering to her feet. “So what do I do then?”

Dora fiddled for a moment with a few buttons. “There, that oughta do it... Should be a nice synthy-bass tone. Yeah! ... Alright then, hit that key...”

Ginny tentatively tapped the white plastic key and a loud rumble boomed from the amplifier. She
jumped back, squeaking. Parvati and Luna giggled.

“That’s fine,” said Dora encouragingly. “Go on, hit it again. All you need t’do is tap out a rhythm...”

Ginny bit her lip and began bouncing her finger on the key.

“Yeah... That’s it - just like that, Ginny. Now, see these keys...?” Dora pointed at two more keys and Ginny nodded. “Alright... You can tap out a beat for a bit on the first one, then go to that one and do the same thing for a bit, and then the same on the other. All you gotta do is keep time. ... If you can count, you can do this, no problem...”

Ginny went back and forth between the keys while Dora counted out for a bit until she thought she’d got the hang of it. She glanced at Dora questioningly.

“Brilliant!” Dora grinned and picked up her guitar. “Just keep doing that. Luna, start hittin’ that drum machine again - you and Ginny just watch each other and tap out the rhythms. I’ll join in, with a chord progression, and Parvati, you just make up a melody and whatever lyrics you want...”

After about ten minutes it all came together and actually sounded like a song. Ginny beamed, amazed that she was actually making music with the others. Several hours later, Harriet and Hermione poked their heads in the door of the music studio.


“Ta Harriet,” said Dora. “What’s up you two?”

“If you’re all hungry, Dobby’s got lunch ready,” said Hermione...

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After lunch, the rest of the day proceeded apace, and too soon it was over. When Hermione crawled into bed that night and snuggled under Harriet’s arm, Harriet caught a whiff of Hermione’s toothpaste and let out a contented sigh as she stroked her tawny curls. Harriet felt so relaxed the following morning that she almost forgot to change back into boy form until she saw herself in the mirror after a quick shower.

For a moment, Harriet considered returning to Hogwarts as a girl, and just changing back into Harry whenever she felt in the mood. But a knot of anxiety formed in her stomach at the thought. Dean, Neville, and Viktor were still the only ones besides the Coven who knew that Harry could turn into a girl - not counting Dumbledore.

Viktor and Neville had never actually seen Harry as Harriet though, and as far as Dean knew, Harry had simply been disguising himself as a girl during the search for a Ministry facility just to keep the Ministry off his trail.

Harriet wasn’t sure that she was ready yet for anyone else to know that she actually liked being a girl sometimes. That sort of thing was definitely looked down on in the non-magical world - Uncle Vernon wasn’t the only one who thought people who sometimes presented themselves as the opposite gender were freaks - and Harriet was quite certain that most wizards would think she was a weirdo too.

There was no question that she had been growing more and more resigned to being famous as the Boy-Who-Lived, but Harriet still felt that she would much rather not be the centre of attention and potential scorn at Hogwarts yet again. Besides, it was still very important to keep being a metamorphmagus a secret, Harriet reminded herself. Sighing, Harriet watched as her features...
changed and she was Harry once more, then he put on his bathrobe and returned to his and
Hermione’s room.

Hermione was already dressed when she heard Harry entering the bedroom. She glanced up and
caught the look in his eye.

“You alright, Harry? Is something wrong?”

“Er…” At first Harry wasn’t really sure what to say, but then the words came. “I just felt like being a
girl for a bit longer, but I’m really not comfortable at the idea of anyone else knowing. … And it
really ought to stay a secret for now anyway,” he concluded with a sigh.

Hermione’s brow furrowed sympathetically. “I’m sorry Harry. You shouldn’t have to feel that
way…”

“It’s alright really,” said Harry as he dressed. “I’ll manage. At least I can be who I like when I’m
with you and the others, and I can actually change physical form whenever I want to. … It’s got to be
loads worse for people who feel trapped in the wrong body all the time and can’t transfigure
themselves as easily as a metamorphmagus, and get treated badly if they do dress up or get surgeries
to change themselves.”

“You’re probably right,” Hermione nodded. “Still, nobody should be afraid to be themselves in
public, not even you, Harry.” A sudden thought occurred to Hermione and she bit her lip guiltily.
“You know I was just joking on Saturday, right?”

“Huh? About what?” asked Harry’s muffled voice as he pulled his school-blazer over his head.

“When I said that if I ever worked out how to magically produce my own semen that you should be
prepared to morph yourself a womb if you wanted more than one child with me. I was just kidding...
I swear! I don’t want you to feel trapped in the wrong body for nine months Harry!”

Blazer now properly in place, Harry peered at Hermione’s worried, earnest features and ran his
fingers through his mussed up hair.

“Of course I know you were joking, Hermione,” he said reassuringly. “But honestly, for you I’d do
it! You’re going to have a brilliant career - I just know it - and I don’t want you to think I expect you
to be stuck at home all the time having loads of kids…”

Harry was cut off when he suddenly found his arms full of Hermione, who had flung herself on him
and was showering him with kisses. Harry grinned, staggering slightly under the onslaught of
Hermione’s vigorous affections.

“You’re so sweet Harry,” said Hermione. “Anyway, we don’t have to even think about children
until we’re properly old enough…”

“…not until our thirties, right?”

“That sounds about right,” Hermione giggled, giving Harry a proper kiss on the lips. “Now hurry up
and get your robes on, breakfast at Hogwarts will be starting any minute…”

Moments later, Harry and Hermione greeted the rest of the Coven in the Parlour, and one by one
they stepped through Aphrodite’s portrait at Jennifer’s manor, and emerged from the other copy on
the other side of the wall at Hogwarts…

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Several weeks had passed since the hearings in the International Confederation of Wizards’ head offices had begun. It was mid February, and the snow in Brussels showed little sign of abating just yet; heavy flurries swirled outside the window of the chamber in which the hearings were being conducted.

“This meeting of the Committee for ze Investigation of Statutory Violations is hereby called to order - presiding officer, Dame Angelika Machschnell.” The stern looking German witch’s voice rang out in the chamber as she banged her gavel on the wooden trivet. She peered at the other six members of the seven member Committee.

“We are here today to consider bringing charges against ze British Minister of Magic, Dolores Jane Umbridge. The charges before us stand as follows: First - that Minister Umbridge has knowingly colluded with a non-magical Official. Second charge - that Minister Umbridge has engaged in ze subjugation of non-magical persons, specifically those unfavoured by the aforementioned non-magical Official.

“Third charge - that Minister Umbridge has engaged in ze systematic oppression of wizards born into non-magical families. Fourth - that in carrying out ze subjugation of non-magicals, and the oppression of wizards from non-magical families, the Minister ordered the commission of multiple Crimes Against Humanity.

“And lastly, but certainly not least, Minister Umbridge is also charged with ordering ze attempted assassination of Harry James Potter. Further charges may be issued, pending arrest and full investigation, but zese charges alone are enough to detain Minister Umbridge, and hold her over to face an International Tribunal.

“It is my recommendation zat this committee shall bring to the floor of the General Assembly of the International Confederation of Wizards a motion to issue an International Arrest Warrant for Minister Umbridge, and that sanctions be brought to bear against ze British Ministry until such a time as Minister Umbridge is taken into custody. How say you all?”

The Nigerian delegate, Madam Ogoba, was quick to respond.

“I second the motion!” she stated firmly, with a look that dared the others to disagree.

Perhaps... a measure of caution is warranted before we render a decision,” said the Greek committee member in an oily tone. “We should not move with undue haste. I still have questions regarding the veracity of Ms Mason’s and her daughter’s testimony, and the evidence presented by Dumbledore’s people.”

“Perhaps then, you also questio ze integrity of the committee’s own investigators, Herr Papadopoulos?” snapped the German head of the committee. “Ze testimony of all non-magicals - including that of Ms Mason and her daughter - vos confirmed by pensieve examination of their memories...”

“Memories may be altered or manipulated,” interjected Pericles Papadopoulos

“However, such alteration alvays leaves traces.” Dame Machschnell glowered at the Greek delegate. “Our Legilimens haff verified that ze memories of all those who provided testimony are unaltered - a true representation of events.

“Likewise, our investigators haff confirmed all ze evidence collected thus far: the documents, the artifacts - including the wands of torturers and murderers - and ze tools of necromancy, the footage filmed during ze raid on the concentration camp...
“Perhaps you wish to call zem to testify again? ...including Ms Mason’s young daughter? The girl is available to speak if you wish to subject her to the torment of recounting her travails in person...”

Pericles narrowed his eyes and shook his head.

“That will not be necessary,” he said quietly.

The head of the committee barreled on, her jaw set, eyes glittering dangerously.

“Then there is the testimony of a Kappa assassin - who ve haff in our custody should you wish to speak to him...?”

Pericles shook his head again, and Dame Machschnell continued.

“Ze confirmation of a single piece of evidence vould be enough to bring even one charge against the Minister... and we haff many such pieces of evidence. And over these past weeks, you were here in these very chambers as ve examined all this evidence, were you not?” the head of the committee concluded pointedly.

“Yes, indeed I was,” the Greek delegate answered slickly. “I merely wished to be certain of all the facts before irrevocably and irreparably damaging the sterling reputation of such a highly respected head of government as Minister Umbridge.”

“How very noble of you Pericles,” Madam Ogoba offered coldly, her nostrils flaring. “We wouldn’t want to harm the reputation of someone who encourages the rape and murder of children now, would we?”

Several members of the committee coughed and shuffled uncomfortably in their seats at Olubunmi Ogoba’s pointed remarks. Dame Machschnell raised an eyebrow; her steely look made it clear that the time for debate was long past.

One by one, the committee members raised their hands to affirm the decision to bring charges against Minister Umbridge. Finally, slowly, when the count reached him, Pericles Papadopoulos raised his own hand as he smiled thinly at Madam Ogoba.

“A unanimous decision! Excellent!” exclaimed Dame Machschnell. “I shall call for a full session of the ICW, and ve shall present our findings on ze floor for a vote on Monday.”

~o0o~

Harry scowled at a particularly intractable Arithmancy problem on the worksheet. He was loath to ask Hermione for help just yet, as he really wanted to give it his best effort first. He sighed and peered out of the window of the classroom, watching the snow as it came down again.

Winter seemed to still be in full gear at Hogwarts, even though Southern England had recovered from January’s severe cold snap. The last few weekends at Jennifer’s had been quite wet, but yesterday the clouds had parted for a few hours of sunshine and temperatures that hinted at Spring, even though it was still a month off.

Briefly, Harry wondered what Sirius and Remus were up to. The last time he and Hermione had seen them, they would only say that they were quite busy, though there had been very little indication that the Minister had made any more major moves.

Harry finally returned his attention to the parchment on the desk, but his befogged brain was still refusing to yield any answers. He heard the door open and a gentle voice carry across the classroom.
“Alright you lot, I think you’re due for a break.”

Harry peered at Hestia, grateful for the interruption.

“Harry dear,” said Hestia, addressing him with warm familiarity. “Professor Dumbledore would like a word with you in his office - all of you that is. I think it might be some good news...”

Harry perked up. “Really? What’s going on then? Does this have something t’do with the Minister?”

“I think the headmaster is in a better position to answer your questions dear. Hurry along now...”

Hestia turned to Jennifer who was working on a History assignment. She gave her a hug and whispered in her ear. A flicker of puzzlement crossed Jennifer’s features, but she nodded before joining the others.

“What was that about?” asked Harry as they made their way to Dumbledore’s office.

“I... I’m not sure,” Jennifer replied, biting her lip pensively. “Hestia just said that there was someone we were going to meet, and that we might be able to help them.”

“That’s odd. I wonder who it could be...” said Hermione. “Oh well,” she continued after a moment of thought, “I suppose we’ll find out soon enough.”

When the Coven crowded into the headmaster’s office, Dumbledore was waiting with twinkle in his eyes, though nobody else but Fawkes seemed to be there with him. Harry supposed that whoever else they were meeting was waiting in another room. As usual, Dumbledore offered everyone comfy chairs and cups of tea. Once everyone was seated the headmaster began.

“Thank you all for coming today,” Dumbledore beamed. “I have some welcome news that concerns us all, though that is not the only reason why I have asked you all to join me...”

“Hestia told me that someone wants to meet us,” Jennifer interjected.

“Indeed,” Dumbledore agreed, “And momentarilry you shall. But to begin with, the news which brings us together is that the General Assembly of the International Confederation of Wizards met early this morning in Brussels. They issued a ruling based largely on the evidence gathered by you during the raid on the Ministry compound in Wales, and also during the rescue of Arthur Weasley, not to mention the testimony presented by those rescued - including that of Puddleby’s mayor.

“The Committee for the Investigation of Statutory Violations has spent several weeks sorting through the evidence, and suffice it to say that they found it all credible. Thus, when they made their recommendation to the General Assembly of the ICW today, a resolution was passed to issue an International Arrest Warrant for Minister Umbridge.”

Jaws dropped, and gasps of amazement issued from the Coven. The air itself seemed to crackle with excitement. The portraits on the wall burst into applause and Harry’s eyes widened.

“That’s excellent sir! Does that mean that they’re sending help?”

“Alas, that is beyond the purview of the ICW,” the headmaster answered. “The matter is still regarded as an internal conflict, and foreign forces would only be dispatched if this conflict threatened to spill across international boundaries.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Harry sighed, “It might be too interfering otherwise.”
Hermione nodded in agreement.

“Indeed! However,” Dumbledore continued, “it does mean that our cause is legitimised, and that Minister Umbridge is more or less trapped in Britain. It will be very difficult for her to find safe haven, should she choose to flee when we close in on her.”

“About that sir,” said Harry, “how’s it going finding the rest of the internment centres?”

Dumbledore let out a sigh. “Ah... Well, as you know, after your raid on the Welsh Compound, the others were much more carefully hidden by the Ministry. We are still looking, of course, but our forces are still stretched somewhat thin - despite an upsurge in recruitment - especially as we now have a sizable contingent protecting Puddleby from suffering further retaliatory measures. Though I do believe that our efforts have kept the Ministry’s attempts to round up more muggleborn to a bare minimum.”

“What about countering the Minister’s plans?” asked Hermione. “Do we have any idea yet what she’s planning next.”

“Not at the moment,” Dumbledore responded with another sigh. “However, I am considering several of the most likely scenarios - one of which is that she may make an attempt to lay siege to Hogsmeade, to draw myself and Harry out - and I am formulating a number of plans to counter each and every one of them.

“When I have some further information regarding her movements, I shall be certain to inform you. And then we shall choose the best option - one which shall hopefully lead to the end of this war. Now, if there are any more questions, please feel free to ask.”

When nobody seemed to have anything else to ask, Dumbledore nodded.

“Well then, perhaps it is time to meet our guests.” He waved his wand and a tall mahogany bookcase slid to the side, revealing a hidden door. Harry wondered if it led to Dumbledore’s quarters. The door swung open, and four people stepped into the room.

Harry flushed in recognition. The shy little girl reddened as well and hid behind her mother. A hot cauldron of emotions stirred inside Harry as he recalled the state in which he’d last seen the girl. A surge of savage fury flooded his veins, remembering what the guards at the Welsh compound had done to her.

Then he caught the eye of Clara Dawson’s sister Gemma before she quickly looked away, whom he was quite certain had been subjected to similar treatment by Minister Umbridge’s Death Eaters.

For a brief moment, Harry felt like blowing something up, or burning another building to the ground. Hermione quickly took Harry’s hand and gave it a comforting squeeze; he closed his eyes and breathed deeply, feeling himself calm again.

Dora chewed her lower lip, sharing a look of commiseration with Clara Dawson.

Jennifer swallowed, suddenly realising why Hestia had given her the heads up. She glanced at Harry and saw the same distress written all over his face. She knew that if Harry was too upset to say anything, that it might be up to her.

“Introductions hardly seem necessary,” said Dumbledore softly. “But I would like to say that the testimony of Ms Andrea Mason and her daughter Samantha, and of Gemma Dawson, was crucial in swaying the Committee to press for the arrest of Minister Umbridge...”
“And we wanted to thank you all for that opportunity, and... and I really didn’t get a chance to thank you properly when you rescued us,” Andrea suddenly interjected. “Words really aren’t enough - but thank you...” Tears began to trickle as she attempted a smile.

“Thank you especially for saving my daughter, Samantha - she means the world to me. I... I could have died happy knowing that she was safe, but... you saved us both - gave us both a chance to be a family again... Thank you so much!”

“And thank you for my sister,” said Clara Dawson, putting her arm comfortingly around Gemma, who looked like she was about to cry. “I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

Gemma nodded gratefully, opening and closing her mouth, clearly too anxious to speak.

“Th...thank you! ...from me too!” squeaked a scared little voice from behind Andrea Mason. Samantha peeked her head around her mother, then hid again.

Harry suddenly found himself with tears streaming down his cheeks. The little girl looked even younger to his eyes than he or Hermione had at her age, the year they had started Hogwarts.

“Er... Hi!” Harry barely managed to croak. “You’re welcome... all of you...” He glanced at Jennifer, catching the rest of the Coven’s glistening eyes as he did so, and then peered questioningly at Hermione and Dora.

Dora nodded, knowing exactly what Harry’s question was. She had been asking herself the same question for some time.

Hermione could feel it too. She knew what Harry wanted to say - what he wanted to ask if he had a voice.

“Hello!” said Hermione as she smiled, her own eyes teary. “I’m glad we were there - that we were able to save you, Samantha... to save all of you...” Hermione peered earnestly at Samantha’s mother and at Gemma Dawson. “We... we’d like to help you some more if you’ll let us... if Professor Dumbledore will let us...”

“I... I don’t understand,” Andrea Mason looked puzzled. “You’ve already done so much for us. How can you help us more than you already have?”

All eyes turned to Dumbledore. The headmaster peered back at his students over the top of his half-moon spectacles, feeling the same ache in his heart as they all gazed at him beseechingly.

Dumbledore sighed inwardly, raising his bushy eyebrows as he rubbed at his furrowed brow. He had to concede that their unspoken request wasn’t entirely unexpected. He had considered the idea himself, but had decided to leave well enough alone unless a member of the Coven brought it up. It was a dangerous prospect in these troubled times.

But now the burden of the decision had been thrust right back in his lap. Dumbledore’s clear blue eyes finally came to rest on Jennifer, and he knew that in the end, there was only one correct choice for this circumstance, and that he had to be the one to make the offer.

“Ms Mason, Samantha... Ms Dawson,” he began, “What my students are offering is nothing short of a miracle - a miraculous healing. What might normally be accomplished only after many months - if not years - of counseling and recovery for victims of trauma, can be accomplished in the space of minutes... thanks to a special talent of two of those who sit before you.

“My students - Harry and Hermione Potter - are the only ones to have seen a certain spell through to
its fullest potential - a spell which drives away Darkness, Death, and Despair - a spell which restores the Spirit. They are truly the Masters of this Life affirming spell as are no others in the wizard world.

“With this spell - in their hands - Samantha’s and Gemma’s nightmares can be put to rest and their terrors dispelled... if they would allow my students to perform this Charm upon them.

“There is only one possible side-effect of which you must be aware. If either Samantha or Miss Dawson harbour a certain recessive gene - and there is a possibility that they might - then this spell could activate this gene. If this should occur, Samantha and Gemma... they would gain the ability to control Magic - in short, the possibility exists that they may become witches.”

“You’re joking!” gasped Andrea Mason.

“Are you kidding?” asked Gemma Dawson quietly, speaking for the first time, frowning, looking slightly suspicious.

The headmaster shook his head. “Not at all. If you or Samantha do indeed gain magical abilities, you and she would need training of course. Samantha is of the right age to begin such training here at Hogwarts. And though you are certainly past the age of majority, Hogwarts is currently operating an Independent Studies programme, so you would be able to remain an learn while being spared the indignity of sitting in on classes with the younger students...

“And under the circumstances, given the situation with the current Ministry, I could see fit to allow your sister Clara, and Samantha’s mother, Ms Mason, to reside here as well for the time-being. The choice is yours and Ms Mason’s of course.”

“Erm... I... I don’t know. This... this is quite unbelievable...” Andrea Mason trailed off, a shocked expression on her face, and glanced at her daughter uncertainly, whose eyes had turned into saucers - wide and pleading.

“Mummy? Please...?” squeaked Samantha.

Gemma glanced at her sister uncertainly...

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Garrick Ollivander tapped his steepled fingers against each other while he waited in Dumbledore’s office with a large trunk full of wands. He peered curiously at the woman in the armchair next to his, and at the headmaster. Dumbledore had sent for him nearly twenty minutes ago with a cryptic request. Ollivander was extremely grateful for the Order’s protection in one of their safehouses, so of course he had come at once.

A number of Dumbledore’s delicate silver and gold instruments appeared to be whirring and spinning with great intensity as Fawkes eyed them warily. Not more than ten minutes later the door burst open and a giddy little girl ran in squealing loudly, a radiant smile on her face.

“Mummy!” she shouted gleefully. “I can do Magic... I’m a witch now!”

The little girl was followed by two young women walking at a more sedate pace, both whispering. One of the young women rolled her eyes.

“Go on, Gemma! Don’t be silly!” said the slightly older looking young woman. “Of course I don’t mind you being a witch. Now let’s go get you a wand...”
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