Harry Potter and the Witch Queen

by TimeLoopedPowerGamer

Summary

Harry Potter never actually beat Voldemort, but rather fought him to a standstill while Europe burned around them. Finding himself an unwilling part of a dark ritual to send him back in time twenty years, he is surprised to see how Dumbledore reacts to proof of obvious child abuse (Harry’s), how eleven-year-old super genius and Witch Queen in training Hermione reacts to actually having a socially competent friend (Harry), and how much easier it is to shrug off the insults of munchkins when you’re a grizzled war veteran.

But there is one huge problem: being sent back blew out his magic entirely. Just waving his wand knocked him out the first time he tried it. Can Hermione help him though his classes even with his magic almost unusable? Will Harry be able to find the secrets to actually killing the Dark Lord and saving his friends from a horrible future without blowing his cover, or even getting mistaken for the Dark Lord himself? Will Neville Longbottom get better grades than him?

Notes
On Content:
Canon-Harry lives in a dark world. This one is darker, with evil turned up to 11 and actual adult situations: everyone is more magical and dangerous, witches and wizards are preternaturally attractive and seductive, people are meaner, magical creatures are horrifying and have back stories, Harry has worse mental issues, teenagers are hornier, villains actually torture and kill people before the last book, etc. Rated M for Maliciousness.

Special Note for AO3:
This is not a porn fic. Adults have sex "on camera" but it isn't explicitly described (think art, not straight porn). Teens and tweens talk about sex but don't actually have any. The archive tags (which I don't like and am thinking of removing) are to make sure people don't see something they don't want to see, so I'm using them conservatively.

There is no violent child rape in this story, despite what the tags might suggest. This is a romance in a magical world, with flashbacks to adults having sex occasionally. Sometimes, magic makes consent fuzzy - it isn't violent rape but it might be disturbing to some people so I err on the side of caution. People in this story under the age of 18 talk about sex and have sexual experiences, and there are explicitly described acts of violence. You've been warned.

History:
This story was originally posted on FanFiction.net on my account under the same name, Harry Potter and the Witch Queen. I'm adding it without edits to AO3 to see how I like this site. Latest updates are on the original site but I will be adding all chapters to AO3 and will simultaneously update both with new chapters once I'm caught up. Thanks for reading.
Chapter 1

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Chapter One

Harry Potter woke suddenly, coughing up his own blood, his scar burning like an iron brand on his forehead. This wasn't unusual for him; he'd lost count of how many times this specifically had happened, usually while sleeping on the floor of a burned out building or in the cold mud in a ditch in some field. What was unusual was finding himself chained to a large stone block, his wrists and ankles bound to the floor, the chains stretching him naked across the top of the rough granite surface. Yeah, that was it. He almost never woke up naked.

“Good evening, Harry,” three soft female voices whispered in his ear at the same time, in slightly different pitches but in tune, a chord in his head. Harry recognized her “voice” immediately: Ginevra Granger was here. With her merely in the same room, he was in mortal danger. Maybe worse. Tied down like this, he was as good as done for already.

Ignoring his bonds, he immediately concentrated for a moment, doing all his Ds for the zillionth time. The jarring sensation made him wince and feel sick to his stomach; of course he was under an Anti-Disapparition Jinx, but he had to check. He heard a flute, a little girl, and an old crone softly chuckle directly in his face.

“Ah, Ginny. All right?” he replied, grimacing and hoping to at least string things out until he could make some kind of plan. Not that anyone was coming to rescue him this time. The Thorn Witch of the Fae Court responded.

“Harry, Harry, I'm always good now. You know why,” the West Wind in human voice growled seductively from two feet behind him, which was technically solid rock but whatever, the Voice of the Mouthpiece of the Faeries didn't need to follow physical laws, just burrow directly into the auditory processing centers of his brain.

“Despite everything, it is good to see you again my dear friend Harry. I only wish it wasn't like this,” a dozen shocked cats hissed through his feet emotionally, sounding like they genuinely did regret it.

“That makes two of us, Ginny. Is she...?” he hesitated to ask.

“She is fine, thank you,” snipped his nightmares in human form from somewhere over and behind his head – this time not a Fae trick of sound but a normal human voice, just one he dreaded hearing even more than Ginevra's strange Voice. A fine layer of perspiration started to gather on Harry's forehead, his palms felt cold and clammy as he flexed his fingers nervously. His worst foe had him, captured and bound.

No, not Voldemort or even Ginny. Old Tommy Boy had savaged the mundane world like a mad dog but couldn't really touch Harry and though Ginny had sold her everything and her all to the Fae Courts for dread powers beyond mortal keen, she was still a mortal-sized threat in person. This was
worse. Way worse.

It was She-of-the-Darkness, Witch Queen of the Isles, Dark Enchantress of the Seven Paths (speak not her name). Well, most smart people didn't speak it, not since she reverse-engineered and mastered the Taboo Curse that Voldemort had used during his first war, casting it on all of England and western Europe, keyed for her name. Say it and her minions showed up to ask you why you dared invoke it. You might survive that.

Say it three times real fast and she showed up. She didn't seem to like doing that, but the results of such attempts, as reported by long-range scrying spells or the rare surviving eye-witnesses, were at least educational to the remaining magical community. High-energy magical events were rare enough to make every one a learning experience for those left alive.

It had taken her three weeks originally, and she was reported to have been “disappointed” in how long it took her to work out such a “simple” nation-wide spell effect. Harry had never bent to that rule with Voldemort but she was a different story. But since there was no longer reason to care now with her here already – well why not.

“Hermione Granger, old friend. How long has it been? A year?” he said as firmly and casually as he could, hoping his voice wasn't sounding as nervous as he actually was. He tried his chains carefully, hoping against hope that Voldemort would show up soon or something else unlikely but more fortuitous would happen, anything really. He tried craning his head to look around and precisely locate his captors.

The rest of the large room in front of him was dark and unevenly lit, with candles placed directly around the stone altar he was on, but nothing was clearly visible outside that area. There seemed to be something hanging in the corner on the left side of the room, but he couldn't see anything else, no doors, no windows. Damn. The Thorn Witch and she had him firmly trapped.

“Almost two now, Harry. Be more precise,” Hermione said, stepping into view on his right side. She had on the same black formal robes she always seemed to wear now. Her metal-soled boots tapped firmly on the stone floor and echoed off the bare walls of the chamber. The silver circlet, sign of her hard-won Fae knowledge and undisputed magical rule of all of the British Isles, sat on her brow and flashed in the candlelight where it held down the wild brown hair that hung almost to her waist. Her hips were wrapped around with a silver chain belt that dangled down in front just past her knees. And her eyes. Her eyes were as they had been since the bargain, black pits that seemed to devour light, no longer the cool brown he knew as a child.

Unlike Voldemort, her Dark powers left her rosy-cheeked and fresh looking, seeming even a little tanned though she never saw the sun unless perhaps it was shining into a secret library somewhere in Europe. She had her hands clasped loosely in front of her robes and a soft smile on her relaxed face. The pits of darkest night bored into his eyes, but she didn't even try his Occlumency barriers, which were as weak as always and wouldn't have held for long against her anyway.

That worried him. She wasn't after any secrets he had. Not trying to control his mind or buy his soul. She merely looked down at him while standing beside the stone altar, just at his right hand. It came to him slowly that she was simply going to kill him, no other explanation fit.

The Thorn Witch joined them at that point, red hair flashing, walking completely silently to Hermione's side and wrapping her arms around the young Dark witch's waist. She was wearing her usual (nothing but a glamour) but appeared to mortal eyes to have on a short green plaid skirt and a white button-down shirt with a sloppily arranged crimson tie bearing a Gryffindor lion, loosely knotted at the top. No shoes for some reason, maybe she didn't really care – her mortal form no
longer needed them, after all, it being capable of bouncing bullets now. But she also had a large, traditional-looking pointed witch’s hat on her head for some damn reason.

Snuggling closer, Ginny finally turned to Harry and grinned a toothy grin. She hadn’t actually opened her mouth to speak like a human yet but it was her face that made him look away; as pretty as it still was, Harry could never deal with those eyes – all yellow and slit like a cat’s and too much like Voldemort’s. It still shook him to see his former friend that way.

“Dearest, shall we move this along?” Hermione said, glancing at Ginny.

“Yes, mistress. I’ll get it started now,” Ginny said to his left ear, broadcasting her Fae Voice to both Harry and Hermione as a polite gesture to the captive young man. Ginny then bowed to her wife Hermione with arms still wrapped around the Dark witch (not an easy feat but still graceful), cat-eyes downcast and submissive.

It was some kind of act, he knew; even now, Ginny was as much like Bellatrix as she was like a pudding, but the similarity of their positions in serving as right-hand to a Dark and powerful person was obviously something Ginny was playing on. She was still grinning as she bowed and ignored Hermione glares at her odd teasing. Ginny then quickly disengaged and skipped over to the base of the altar while glancing at the left-hand corner of the room. Something still lurked in the dark there and it bothered Harry. Hermione rolled her eyes at Ginny (or at least shook her head and smirked – one can’t roll Stygian pits of darkest night very effectively) and returned her focus to Harry.

“This next part will hurt more than the rest, Harry,” she said. “I hope you understand why I’ve chosen this path once we’re done. Let me know if you have any specific questions. Otherwise, we’ll just move things along and complete this project as quickly as possible.”

The more she talked, the more worried Harry got. He tried the chain again, not caring if they clanked or if he was obvious about it, trying a few silent summoning charms with his slightly more hidden left hand under the cover of his struggling.

“Accio wand!” he thought silently, screwing up his face, attempting the wandless, wordless casting. He knew he could do it, normally, but nothing this time – surprise surprise. “Accio blade! Accio gun!” he continued, with no results. “Accio key!” he tried, on the off chance someone had been really, criminally stupid securing his chains. Either nothing named was outside anti-summoning charms or the altar or chains were somehow blocking his magic.

Hermione watched him struggle, still smiling quietly and not at all distracted from what he was really trying to do. She could of course tell he was trying to cast but apparently just didn’t care.

Ginny was grabbing some candles from the base of the altar, lighting them wandlessly and floating them around her head. Noticing his gaze, Hermione commented, talking to Harry in her best lecture voice, “Yes, physical candles not summoned lights. There will be some heavy magical backlash here and we don’t want them being dispelled in the middle of everything.”

Now wearing a wreath of lights around her head, Ginny pointed at the darkest corner and all of the candles followed her wandless directions, taking up positions on the ground illuminating the area. Harry’s heart seemed to stop.

“Luna Potter, wakey wakey,” Ginny chortled like a cold mountain stream from the ceiling, again broadcasting. She poked Luna with a finger, casting a wandless, wordless revival spell at the bound woman.

Harry’s wife Luna was hanging upside down from an inverted cross, feet tied to the main post and
hands tied to both sides of the bottom crossbar. Her robes were tied along with her limbs, making it look a little neater and saving some of her dignity. Luna's long blond hair was also tied up and pinned to the back of her robe to keep it out of the large basin directly under her head. This was, for Harry, the worst thing he'd ever had to witness, worse even than seeing Voldemort resurrected in front of him, especially considering Hermione's specialty of Fae blood magic.

He lunged forward, rattling his chains and trying to break free with sheer brute force. He was screaming something unintelligible, something even he couldn't understand, but he didn't care.

“Yes, Harry,” Hermione replied to what he assume was an unspoken question, “she was hiding in Norway but I found her eventually. The Fidelius Charm doesn't fully work against elves, house or otherwise. Not sure if you knew that.”

“What the hell are you doing?” Harry growled, still straining at the chains.

“It is really quite a simple ritual. Almost all the parts were already set up by Voldemort. A soul link, a connection across time and space, a magical core directly associated to the soul link at both ends. And,” she finished, still horribly calm, “the blood of a True Seer, taken at her self-prophesied death. True time travel. At least for one target soul.”

“No!” he screamed. “You can't do this!”

“I really can. Everything is ready and it is the only way to get them back, you know. All of them.”

Hermione gently placed her hand on Harry's, which was still straining against the bindings.

“True, it might only send you into an alternate time-line or a parallel world working on slower relative time that syncs up to ours twenty years ago or some such temporal nonsense, but the chance that it will be our time-line, that it will correct our mistakes...it is too good a chance not to at least try.”

“And in any case, Harry,” she stated, leaning toward him, “it will still give you another chance, even if we are left with nothing but corpses and questions, even if for me and my beloved nothing changes. You'll have a chance to be free and happy again. Of this I am sure. And Luna will die today you know – she is the real thing and has foretold it. This is your only chance to save her, however convoluted a situation you end up in. More like a second chance for both of you, really, than...what was it Dumbledore called it? The next great adventure?”

The insanely powerful witch (emphasis on insane) patted his hand one more time before calmly drawing a knife from her sleeve. Slumping to the cold stone again, Harry stared at her in disbelief.

“No, wait, Hermione, we went over that years ago – it doesn't work, time travel is impossible. We searched everywhere, even the Darkest archives at Durmstrang said it was impossible. You sacrificed a dozen people during that one attempt with the super-sized time turners, and it still didn't work!”

“Minor setbacks,” she said, dismissing his argument casually.

“Look, they're gone. You have to focus on what's in front of us: Voldemort and his Death Eaters. You can't bring back Ne-” Harry bit his tongue and avoided the only truly unspeakable name, “you can't bring our classmates back. The Weasleys, your parents, Dumbledore: they're gone. God, I’d do anything to get them back but killing the two of us won't help!”

The Darkest witch since Morgan (possible Darker) sadly shook her head at him. “No, I've done the calculations and worked out all the underlying techniques. I even sent the soul of a rat back with a
drop of blood from a lesser seer, still alive of course. I know the system worked, but I couldn't come up with a paradox-free test. I'm sure it doesn't form closed causal systems, though, so you, lying there right now, were definitely not sent back in time and are not looping right now. No need to get into the Arithmancy, but it is impossible for the magic to work that way in this universe. It was strange, making all those tiny twin-wands and scarring the souls of rats into other rats.” She paused, briefly pondering her demented experiments.

“Wonder if that's how Voldemort feels all the time about you? Just a rat from a failed experiment? Anyway,” the madwoman said, somehow regaining focus, “it will take all of your core's power and a great deal of mine and Ginny's, but it will work. You'll end up in your body back when you were eleven years old, the first time you ever touched your Phoenix wand, the one paired with Voldemort's.” Dark robes swirling, Hermione turned and walked toward where Luna hung. “You'll be able to stop everything, save everyone. I know you will, even if you don't approve of my methods you'll still do it Harry.”

He was shaking his head, unable to think clearly about the extent of the wrongness of what was happening. “Please don't do this, this is wrong, it won't work,” he babbled, trying to figure out how to convince her not to kill his wife for this insane scheme.

Ginny was standing in front of where Luna hung, waiting for Hermione to continue the ritual. His wife seemed to be coming around finally. “Oh, hello Ginny, Hermione. How are you? Funny meeting you here,” Luna said, somehow still looking distant and dreamy even upside down and about to be sacrificed.

“You see, Harry,” his good-old mad, bushy-haired friend said, “she already knows what's going to happen. She foretold it a month ago. I found her after she gave her Prophecy in front of a group of confused Norwegian miners in a bar in a lonely town high in the mountains. My name was mentioned and I was able to track down one of the mundanes and read his mind. Quite a bombshell of a tale but death-tellings usually are. I think one of the men was actually driven insane just from hearing it. Well done, Luna.”

“Thank you, 'mione, you know exactly how much that means to me,” she replied calmly, looking intently at Hermione's left forelock for some reason.

“The best part,” the darkest witch continued, “is she predicted my success too, not just her death. Didn't say which flavor of time travel for the result, but that is why Divination isn't a science, just a strange mutation of magical ability and a bit of skilled interpretation. When done well, that is, not like that disastrous bitch at Hogwarts.”

Hermione took the last few steps up to Luna. Her brown hair shook as she glanced over her shoulder at him, gripping the silver knife with more purpose. Ginny looked on with a grin, watching her wife and Dark mistress wield the sacrificial blade attentively but with no apparent emotional reaction, just her happiness to be there with Hermione that she always had now and would for all eternity. She patted Luna's upside-down leg with one hand then drew both her and Harry's wands from thin air, holding them casually at her side.

“Almost done now babe,” Ginny echoed, the sound of a soothing night breeze broadcasting inside Harry's skull, the message for Luna this time but still shared with the room.

“Might want to close your eyes for this part, dearest Harry,” Hermione said quietly, looking into his eyes with the midnight holes in her face, “Don't worry, there will be no pain for her. Luna's all numbed-up, like for a medical procedure. Mundane drugs don't interfere with the magic. The least I can do for a couple of my last and oldest friends. This will take only a few minutes.”
As the Dark witch turned, Luna finally seemed to start paying attention. Staring into Hermione's face where her eyes once were, locking her gaze to the madwoman's, Luna seemed relaxed but more focused than Harry had ever seen her. Neither woman looked away as the knife came up.

“See you in a bit, Harry,” his love, the greatest Seer of a Century, promised in a soft whisper, still not looking away from the black pits that were now her friend's eyes.

An infinite darkness cleared in a thousandth of a heartbeat, returning Harry to pain and light.

The wand burned his hand, a red-hot fire that scorched his flesh to the bone. He screamed a strange high-pitched screech and dropped it, collapsing to the ground and curling his entire body around what surely must be the smoking remains of his hand. He heard something drop to the floor and rushing footsteps, then someone bent over him.

“Goodness! Young man, are you quite all right?” said a curious old voice above him.

Slowly unclenching his everything, Harry opened his eyes and saw Ollivander staring down at him. Looking around, he realized he was in the man's wand shop, lying on the ground, cradling his entirely unhurt right hand. And he was tiny. Like, little boy tiny. His hands were impossibly small. He scrambled and got himself slightly more upright, still favoring his unwounded right hand, turning it over and over, still expecting to see charred bone instead of unmarked pale pink flesh.

His wand was still rolling slowly across the floor toward the counter. Ollivander poked it carefully with his finger before picking it up.

“Well well, you seem fine and so is the wand. Such a reaction, I must say, most unusual,” the old man said to no one specifically.

Harry was helped shakily to his feet by the old shopkeeper, leaning on him more than he'd like to admit. He wondered for one delirious moment where his sexy, battle-hardened body had gone. Back propped against the counter, trying to gather his thoughts, it hit him: she had been right. It had worked. He was back.

“Let me see, let me see. Here is your wand, lad,” Ollivander said, handing it to Harry who, for some reason, grabbed it without thinking.

“Go ahead, try that again. Shouldn't happen like that, no, shouldn't happen at all. Need to make sure, though,” the old man said, almost to himself.

Harry winced and held the wand gingerly between two fingers and gave it only the slightest wave. The lights dimmed and a glow seemed to come from the wand again, followed by a rush of magic and some sparks – maybe a little less than he'd remembered from his first time twenty years ago which was somehow also today, but still it was obviously his wand.

“Hmm, no, yes, I was right the first time. Strange, the wand chooses the Wizard and tha-” the old man started, then Harry threw up all over his shop floor.

Stomach burning, Harry doubled over and continued to heave up his pathetic breakfast of dry toast and water all over the stone floor, his wand still gripped in his hand and kept there through long-honed battle reflexes from wars apparently yet to come.

Ollivander simply looked at him in shock. The door to the shop banged open and a huge man stared down at Harry open-mouthed, the birdcage and snowy white owl in his hand momentarily forgotten.
“Hagrid,” Harry managed to groan out, before falling into the spreading pool of his own vomit, sinking into darkness once again.

One of these days, Harry thought, he'd wake up well rested, only a little sore in just the right way, in his own bed, beside a hot blond (first, best, and really only choice: Luna), who was crazy in the sack last night (Luna was a little crazy anywhere, but especially there).

Today was not that day. Taking a gasping breath, he had an instant sense of déjà vu. This was the way he always woke up in the hospital wing of Hogwarts. It even smelled like the Hogwarts hospital wing.

He had a strange and intense burning sensation in an odd part of his body (his stomach, this time). And the bed...yes, the bed was just that special lumpy kind only Hogwarts seemed to use for their injured students (maybe to prevent slacking-off), check. Sheets like sandpaper, check. Harry opened an eye.

Ugly curtains, check. And Madam Pomfrey, just coming around to have a look at him, check. It was strangely good to be back. And for Pomfrey to be alive again. He almost wept, but he had tears in his eyes already from the pain and an exam to look forward to from his least-favorite doctor in the world (except for all the others).

“Mr. Potter, this is not the way I like to meet new students,” she said, looking sternly at him. He scrambled for his glasses at their usual place on the bedside table.

“Sorry Mada- err ma'am,” he stammered, almost slipping up and naming someone ickle baby Harry couldn't possibly know. Bollocks, this was going to get hard really fast. He started to think about how much he wished Hermione was here, for the millionth time, but nipped that line of thought in the bud as usual. No time, live for the now, now. He wished Hogwarts had had an acting program – his mundane school certainly hadn't, even if he would have been allowed. His mind was strangely drifty right now.

“Never mind that,” she said, “tell me what happened. Hagrid and Ollivander already told me what they saw. Did you have an upset stomach this morning?”

“Well, err ma'am,” he started again, trying desperately for a name so he wouldn't slip up later.

“I am Madam Pomfrey, I run the hospital wing here at Hogwarts,” she interrupted sternly.

“Oh, uh, what? Umm, Madam Pomfrey, why am I already at Hogwarts? I thought I wasn't to leave for another month?” he asked, hoping that would make sense for him to wonder about.

He screamed silently inside his head, unable to remember anything about how he felt or thought when he was eleven.

“Well Mr. Potter, Hagrid was worried about you, thought it might be something magical wrong with you. You were shopping for a wand at the time.”

“Oh. I see. Well,” Harry started, trying to figure out what to say.

He wondered if she was going to find out what happened. Did he want her to? What was the penalty for time traveling without Ministry approval, instant wand snapping? His thoughts raced and burbled out of control.

Well, maybe she somehow won't notice anything magically strange about a boy who's now eleven
years old instead of thirty-one, was just the focus of an impossibly powerful and Dark ritual in the future, and also, unfortunately, afflicted with a chronic and terminal case of being Harry Potter.

Nothing to do about it. He silently but valiantly hoped that she wouldn't actually end up throwing him in St. Mungo's for the rest of his life for excessive magical naughtiness and being a horrible patient.

“Err,” he began, “I was holding this wand and suddenly I didn't feel very good. I dropped it and fell down on the floor. After a bit I started feeling better so I got up again but then I felt even sicker and...uhh...threw up in the shop. I guess I fainted, too.”

He hung his head a bit and said more quietly, trusting his non-existent acting skills to pull him through, “I hope Mr. Ollivander isn't mad about that. Maybe he won't sell me a wand now.”

That...was horrible, Harry thought, his inner-critic aghast at his performance.

“Oh, there there, don't worry,” she said, actually buying it, the sap. “Hagrid picked up your new wand for you, all bought and paid for. I've got it stored in that end table right there.”

She pointed at the low drawer next to his bed. He looked at it hopefully.

“But!” she said sharply, grabbing his attention with a firm wag of her finger and almost making him pee himself in surprise, “You aren't to try waving it around or anything! Wait until classes start next month. It isn't legal for little kids to do magic outside of school, you know.”

She looked even more sternly at him, like it was all his fault and one big prank, him getting blasted through time, vomiting all over an ancient magic shop, and ending up in one of her hospital beds – and something he was likely to try again the moment she turned her back on him.

“Well, it seems like you just had a touch of a stomach bug,” she said kindly, worryingly changing demeanor on him.

“Yes, umm, nothing to worry about. Drink this,” she said, shoving a vile smelling potion into his hands, “and we'll get you right...back home...uh, immediately.”

Poppy seemed a little distant and distracted for some reason. With practiced speed he gulped down the smelly and strangely powerful healing brew (why one of the big, smelly ones – he hadn't been run through with a sword or anything, this time). Harry handed the empty back to Poppy, which she immediately replaced with another, different, equally vile one. Repeating that process three times, she finally gathered everything up and made to leave.

“Ma'am, how long was I asleep?” he said, “I don't want my...relatives to worry.”

She blanched at that, face twitching in an unrecognizable emotion. “Nothing to fear, child,” she said strangely softly, “it was less than an hour and a half. Hagrid is just out in the hall talking to the Headmaster and he'll, he'll take you straight back home now that you've got everything worked out. You just stay there for a few more minutes until Hagrid returns.”

She started away from Harry's bed, then suddenly stopped and turned, smiling at Harry, “Oh, and I think he's got a gift for you, so be on your best behavior now.”

Harry was a little worried. This was all very, very different from the first time. And there was something wrong with Pomfrey. She didn't smile like that at you unless something was really wrong and she was trying to reassure you that you weren't going to be like that forever. Not right for just a stomach bug.
Gathering his things, including his wand, he put his shirt back on quickly. He'd forgotten how skinny and cold he was all the time at this age. Idiot Dursleys were hardly feeding him but at least the extra fabric on his hand-me-downs kept him moderately warm. Didn't feel right being in Hogwarts without a robe, though.

He spent some time just looking around at the large room he had, err, would, err, will, shit whatever; the room he'd experienced far, far too much time in, in whatever temporal direction. Almost a home away from home at Hogwarts, really. Maybe he'd lead with his face less this time around. His middle still burned strangely and it took a lot for him not to wince at it, but he'd have to pretend everything was fine or they'd surely keep him overnight, at least. Hopefully he wasn't going to explode or keel over and die or anything, but he couldn't risk Pomfrey finding something magically strange about him.

He was spacing out so bad that he actually jumped when the recovery room door quietly swung open and Albus Fucking Dumbledore himself strode in. Harry's brain went into Instant Panic Mode.

Did Harry know who Dumbledore was at this point? If not, when? Wait, no, Hagrid had mentioned his name, right? So, could eleven year old Harry have assumed? But he didn't know what he looked like until the moving trading card...but no wait FUCK Dumbledore could read minds, right? Was he? Oh god, Harry was staring right into his twinkling eyes! What was Harry's Occlumency like right now? Shit he hadn't even checked his barriers!

Oh thank god there, right there, they were still in place and unmolested. Maybe tone them down a bit, though, in case he checked. Just make it look like a very good amateur or a natural talent. Suspicious magical incidents and links to a not-so-dead Dark Lord's not-really-death aside, Albus wasn't going to try and mindrape him right here in the hospital, now was he? Was he?

Thoughts naturally cleared as Harry smiled a nervous little smile on the outside and set yellow-alert inside his head (Star Trek reruns with Hermione and Ron instantly came to mind and were shut down just as quickly). The headmaster gave him a casually reassuring smile in return and walked over to Harry's bed with Hagrid in tow.

He'd forgotten just how quietly powerful Dumbledore was, the magic that poured off of him. Even thinking that anything bad could happen with him watching seemed silly. How messed up must he have been the first time around not to see it? The man practically had a magical aura around him. Hell, maybe he did. Harry had been so inexperienced when Albus had died, never had a chance to ask him how real wizards, powerful ones, organized their abilities, how they spent their days. Maybe he'd have that chance now.

But something was wrong. Hagrid was looking unhappy, fiddling with the cuffs on his giant coat nervously. And Albus looked a little off, tense somehow. Then it hit Harry: Albus was seriously, burningly, building-levelingly, reality-breaking mad. Harry's heart missed a beat. No, wait, not at him. Holyshit, Albus wasn't mad at him thank god. Someone or something else, god help them or it. What could it be, Harry wondered. Did he interrupt something important, get someone hurt? Was a member of the Order killed today? He didn't remember any problems at this point that would make him so mad.

Conjuring a chair with a simple but abrupt wave of his wand, the Headmaster sat down next to Harry where he was still perched on the hospital bed (not daring to move until Pomfrey said he could). Hagrid strangely seemed to stall partway to Harry, fidgeting at the foot of his bed and not making eye contact with anyone, not at all the bubbling man he'd met this morning, twenty years ago.
“Hello Harry Potter,” the wise, kindly old man said, “I am Professor Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Headmaster here at Hogwarts. You may call me Professor Dumbledore or just Professor. If you don't care for any of those, there are some who call me...Tim.”

There was a brief moment of quiet in his head, then Harry entirely lost his mind. Did Dumbledore just make a mundane joke? What the hell was that? He'd never said that before! Had he broken the greatest wizard in the world, traveling through time like that?

Harry quietly gibbered in a corner of his brain safely not controlling his face or speech. Not showing any fear or reaction was key, yes. Maybe look a little worried, but not scared. Dumbledore had to be trying to reassure him.

“Uh, nice to meet you, Headmaster. Sorry about all the trouble,” Harry said, almost automatically, his mind a shattered shell.

Albus twinkled at him most strangely, still not testing his mental shields other than oratorically. “No problem at all, Mr. Potter. We were all just a little worried you might have had some reaction to the magic in Mr. Ollivander's shop. Madam Pomfrey has reassured me that didn't happen. Now, did you have any questions before we...escort you back home?”

Harry thought at lightning speed but ended up just shaking his head.

“Well then, I will be joining you and Hagrid on your return trip. I just need to let your...guardians know what happened and see if they have any questions about the upcoming school year.”

To Harry's horror, Dumbledore stood up (the chair disappearing) and gestured for Harry to follow him. Hagrid silently shuffled along behind them. Was he changing things this much already? Illumination escaped him for now, so he had to be satisfied merely escaping from the hospital wing with what seemed like minor damage to the Supreme Mugwump’s temporal health and mental well-being.

Dumbledore lead them to what Harry suddenly realized was the DADA professor's office (currently unoccupied by Quirrell, thank god). Grabbing a bowl of what Harry now knew was Floo powder, he turned to him and said, “Mr. Potter, we need to get you back to your Aunt and Uncle's house as quickly as is reasonably possible. To that end, we will use the Floo Network, a series of connections between authorized fireplaces in the wizarding world which quickly transport users from one point to another with the use of a target location phrase. Please note, Harry, that such connections are not always allowed at Hogwarts and transportation is usually turned off in the castle for safety reasons.”

Harry acted naturally for an eleven year old by staring dumbly at that explanation.

“Now,” Dumbledore continued, “this time, we will be traveling to Diagon Alley, note the pronunciation carefully, and from there Apparating to...your house. Apparating from Hogwarts is not possible and is blocked by very strong wards, again for security reasons. There is a purpose for this route, also related to security and secrecy.”

He stood there, looking into Harry's eyes. Trying to find something, maybe, Harry didn't know what, but not searching behind his mental shields.

Harry wondered why Dumbledore was explaining all this. It was like Dumbledore wanted him to feel safe about the process, or maybe about him for some reason. Not doing anything he didn't explain ahead of time: it was like how a doctor might act around a scared kid. Harry considered this, increasingly confused by the whole situation.
“First step now, Harry. Take some powder and say 'Diagon Alley' clearly, then step into the green flames. I will demonstrate.”

After disappearing in a puff of flames, Hagrid finally spoke up, “Doncha worry 'arry, 'ets really easy. Jus'...jus' say 'et real clear an loud, like the Headmaster did. Yer'll be fine.”

He seemed a little shaky for some reason, his mouth working behind his huge beard. This was something disconcerting from such a large man, but he held out the bowl to Harry and quietly waited, so Harry again just kept moving forward.

Determined not to screw up his first Floo trip this time, Harry concentrated more than he had in years on the simple act. Maybe that would help his cover, maybe everyone was that bad the first time; he just didn't want to screw it up and get eaten by a grue in Knockturn Alley. He went flying out of the (correct) destination fireplace like he'd been shot out of a gun. Five out of five for destination, zero out of five for style.

Harry was caught on the other end by Dumbledore, who quickly got him out of the way before Hagrid followed. Harry barely got a look around the Leaky Cauldron before they left again. This time Hagrid disappeared first, touching what Harry recognized as a Portkey, and then the Headmaster side-alonged with Harry in tow. They appeared in a dark corner just down the block from their destination, which they quickly approached. It was late afternoon now and they were very, very conspicuous, giant and robed wizard. Harry wasn't much better, but mostly because he was wobbling more than usual and wearing clothes obvious too large for him. He still didn't feel well.

Seeing his, no, the Dursleys' house after so long made him feel ill in a different way than his burning stomach. He hated this place so much more now than even when he was eleven. He was just a kid back then, didn't know anything else. Didn't know how wrong his situation had been. If he wasn't careful, he'd burn it down with accidental magic the second he set foot inside. He wasn't feeling very careful at the moment.

As if sensing his thoughts (nope, mental shields still up), Dumbledore gently placed his hand on Harry's shoulder and started him towards the much-cursed house. Glancing over at Dumbledore, he now appeared to be wearing a floral hat, sandals with (ugh) socks, tan pants, and...a Hawaiian-print sport coat? Hagrid was already wearing his coat, so he at least sort of looked like a mundane.

Before they even reached it, the door jerked open suddenly, Vernon glaring out at them. Harry could see a table in the entryway had a very pissed-off looking Hedwig (no wait, he hadn't named her yet, details!), still in her cage, and his trunk was sitting in a corner. Vernon was livid, almost stomping in place with anger.

"Where the bloody hell have you been, boy!" his uncle started in, “Keeping all kinds of odd hours, unnatural people coming and going with all kinds of wildlife! We left the hotel hours ago and just got back, now get in here and help Dudley unpack! We just left your old stuff at the lost and found, so don't bother looking for it.”

“You lot can just get lost now, move along,” he said in the general direction of the wizards in front of him, trying to grab Harry and hustle him inside before there was even more of a scene.

Harry didn't much care if he never saw those second-hand clothes again, but this was way over the top, much worse than last time. At least Dumbledore was with him now. Maybe the beatings wouldn't start until the wizards were long gone and Harry had a chance to work out whether he could get away with gutting the fat, abusive asshole with a fish boning knife.

Just then, the Headmaster spoke up. “Mr. Dursley, there are some...school matters we need to discuss
first. I am afraid I can not leave until we do so, school health and safety requires it.”

The fat idiot suddenly let go of Harry like he was a diseased rat, looking frightened and disgusted at the same time. The Headmaster took the chance to push Harry gently through the door to clear the way, leaving Hagrid behind them on the stoop.

Vernon started spluttering but Dumbledore ignored it, directing Harry to the stairs. “I hope you feel better soon, Harry. I will talk with your Uncle about what happened today, but you should go up to your room now and get some rest,” he said, eyes sparkling kindly at the boy.

Harry’s trunk, apparently delivered earlier by Hagrid, was rapidly levitated up the stairs and stowed in his room, care of Dumbledore’s wand. Harry soon followed and was surprised when the door to the upstairs room was magically shut behind him and some other spell (not a locking one, silencing?) was cast on it.

Not sure what was going on, Harry simply started sorting through his trunk, looking at books he’d long forgotten about, trying to mentally catch his breath and work out what the hell was going on, why Dumbledore was at his house, and what the fuck he was going to do now.

Albus turned to Hagrid, who was still awkwardly standing outside the small Muggle house door, looking down at his hands. The groundskeeper was gripping his hands together so hard his knuckles were turning white.

“Hagrid, thank you for escorting me here today and for your earlier delivery of Mr. Potter's school supplies,” Albus said. “You may return to Hogwarts now if you wish. I'll be speaking with the Dursleys about Harry for a while – wouldn't want them to misunderstand what happened today, so I'll tell them everything they need to know.”

He waited, looking significantly at Hagrid over his glasses. The gigantic man pursed his lips and nodded once, jerkily. “Yes, Headmaster. I understand,” he said sadly, turning to leave.

Looking at the fat, awful man in front of him and the weak chinned woman hiding just around the kitchen door, Albus despaired. Seeming to reach an internal decision at last, he straightened his shoulders. Harry was upstairs, safely away from what must be done, his room silenced. Albus suddenly closed their front door without touching it, the loud bang interrupting the red-faced man's impending rant.

“Mr. Dursley, we need to speak in your sitting room. Now,” he told the wretched man.

“I'll do no such thing you fre-” Vernon started before Albus' hand made a tiny little wave at the odious blob, casting a spell that left him fluttering his lips silently like a fish.

“Mr. Dursley, Vernon: may I call you Vernon?” Albus started, not waiting for an answer, “Vernon, your chairs in the sitting room, now, or I'll create my own right here. Magically,” he emphasized carefully, a wand suddenly appearing in his hand. The lights in the hall dimmed and the twisted wood of the arcane instrument shimmered with barely constrained power.

Following the scampering fat man into his spotless sitting room, Albus took the nicest chair (most likely Vernon's), his wand held casually in his hand and not quite pointing at the whale of a man, and waited for the oaf to stop gulping and find his own seat. A wave removed the silencing spell from Vernon.

“Petunia, you might as well join us,” he said to the door, opening it with a wave. The woman, caught eavesdropping behind the door, walked slowly over to the couch were Vernon was sitting and
seemed to fold in half like a broken doll, collapsing into the seat.

“Here is the situation as it stands,” Albus started before Vernon got his mental balance back. “I know what has happened to young Harry. I have personally seen the evidence, talked to a medical professional about it, and heard her conclusions. This reality is not open to discussion. If these facts were to be published in my people's newspapers, your house would not be standing tomorrow.” The pathetic Muggles were now pale like ghosts.

“I thought that was something you should know,” Albus said, twinkles entirely absent from his eyes. “Also, I now have a way to watch Harry's health and well being twenty-four hours a day, down to the least little hunger pang or the smallest bruise. I will be using it, every hour of every day, for however long he is in your house.”

He took a large, old fashioned pocket watch from his robe, popping it open to display the complicated face and briefly presented it to the Dursleys.

“This shows me Harry's location and state of health,” he said. “If it reads anything but 'Perfect' and 'At the Dursley House' for the next month before school, you will receive a visit from one of my staff. They will interview Harry and ascertain why it reads otherwise, then they will take whatever measures are required to ensure it doesn't happen again.”

Albus then leaned forward and repeated, clear and loud so they wouldn't miss it, “Whatever measures are required.”

“In addition,” Albus said, leaning back again, apparently relaxed, “you will follow all of these health and dietary care instructions from his doctor at Hogwarts to the letter. That includes limitations on chores he is allowed to do and meal plans.”

A piece of parchment magically appeared in his hand, which he placed on the extremely normal looking coffee table in from of him.

“The same warnings apply, and I will be personally investigating if he does not appear to have been cared for correctly on his prompt arrival at Hogwarts as specified here,” he said, as another parchment appeared from nowhere and was added the other on the table. “The Hogwarts train timetable is clearly listed, as are the instructions for how to get onto platform 9 ¾. No excuses will be heard.”

Sitting back and looking at his watch, he declared, “The device currently shows 'Stomach Ache'. That requires some explanation. Today while shopping, Harry came down with a bad stomach ache and passed out briefly. We took him to a doctor at my school who gave him some potions to fix him up, but he was not seriously ill. To treat this, you will give him some soup and, if required, Muggle medicine. If he gets worse, take him to one of your Muggle doctors and get him looked at. I will know if and when this happens. If he isn't better by the end of the week, you will receive a visit from me.”

“I-I don't understand, we've given the brat everything he needs, even when it meant less for our little Dudders! The little turd has been nothing but disrespectful to us – so ungrateful!” Petunia finally spoke up.

“You will remember our agreement,” Albus said in a monotone. Both of the Dursleys jerked, then sat completely still, wide eyed in shock. Continuing as if nothing had happened, Albus said, “If I have to remove Harry from this house, I will be very disappointed and you will have broken your word. That would not go well for your family. Enemies of the Potters still hunt for him, and you, as Muggles, would be immediate targets.”
Sighing, Dumbledore put away the watch and stared sadly at the last, rotten remnants of Harry Potter's family. “Know that I can not protect you from them without the boy being present under this roof,” he said quietly, “but also, I can not protect you from the boy himself. You would do well to remember that.”

Pushing himself slowly to his feet, Albus silently padded over to the doorway to the hall, surprising the rotund Dudley who had been standing there also eavesdropping.

“That goes for you as well,” Albus said, spearing the boy with his now baleful twinkling eyes.

“Even the weakest wizards hold great power at their command. But mark my words,” he said as he turned to the still stunned Dursleys on the couch, “Harry Potter will grow to be a powerful wizard indeed. Some of the strange events you've seen around him are proof of this. Those were incidents of what we call accidental magic, power that sometimes bursts forth from a young witch or wizard. It is poorly directly and ill formed – most of the time. But even this unfocused magic can reduce a full-grown Muggle to a mindless state or a building to a pile of ash on the ground.

“Know that, in our world, there is no punishment dealt out for such inadvertent use of magic by a minor, merely an attempt to clean up afterward; also, the use of magic in self defense is virtually always upheld as justified, even – no, especially, against Muggles. Now imagine, if you will, what a full-grown wizard could do if he hated you and wanted you to suffer as Harry has. Be glad the young man as of yet holds no serious animosity towards you. The moment hate truly touches his heart, all your lives are in danger. For your sake and the sake of this world, I hope that day never comes.”

Raising his fell wand, the old wizard pointed it directly at Dudley, who promptly wet himself where he stood. The woman on the couch let out a muffled cry as a the ancient wizard made a small wave of his wand and removed the boy's pigtail, cleaning up once again after one of his grounds keeper’s minor mistakes. Not sparing another glance at them, Albus Dumbledore left the trembling Muggles behind as he moved into the hall. Gently picking up the birdcage holding Hagrid's present for Harry he quietly mounted the stairs, towards where his watch was saying Harry's room was located.

Harry was sitting quietly by himself reading, perched on the bed he remembered from so long ago. He remembered how his Uncle had panicked when it appeared the letters were being sent to his cupboard (what would the neighbors think) and had given him Dudley's second bedroom, the one full of broken toys and a closet full of the fat boy's old clothes. That hadn't changed, it seemed.

One of the possibilities in that horrible last lecture of Hermione's (punctuated by blood, dripping, dripping) was that Harry would end up somewhere with a radically different past, a parallel world with possibly a different history and rules and even people. Checking a history book first thing was one of her preternaturally calm suggestions as she waited for Harry's wife to slowly bleed to death in front of them. That sort of thing focuses the mind, Harry found, really helps you remember the course material.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Harry closed the book, having just finished skimming “History of Magic” for major changes. He’d still have to read it again in-depth to make sure (he’d basically skimmed the index at this point) and get a copy of “Hogwarts, A History” (Hermione always wanted him to read that, might as well this time), but history wasn't really his best topic so he might only notice if there was now a Dumbledore House at Hogwarts or maybe if Slughorn had been Minister of Magic for the last twenty years or something. His mom and dad were still dead, obviously, so the most important change (one he'd secretly hoped for before the end, her still-warm blood smeared on his naked body) wasn't present.
Opening up *History of Magic* again, he started reading from back (most recent) to front, taking note of even minor events and reading more carefully this time. He was still reading when there was a knock at his door. He almost didn't recognize it, as no one ever knocked when he'd lived with the Dursleys.

"Come in," he said in his new, tiny-little-boy voice. Wow, that really was going take some getting used to.

In walked Dumbledore, greatest wizard of this and quite a few other ages, who still looked sort of pissed. He was carrying a birdcage, which he seemed to make a conscious effort to put down carefully on a nearby table. Hedwig (it really was the same owl, he noticed) seemed a little put-out, but wasn't making much of a fuss yet. Thinking about his old friend (his first friend, really) started opening up old wounds that Harry didn't have the time to think about, so he brutally shut down those feelings and prepared for the worst from his old teacher.

Harry had seldom seen the old man so wound-up. The Headmaster sat on a chair that popped into existence the moment he started to sit down. The ancient wizard didn't seem to notice. He seemed a lot more tired than Harry remembered, at least before that last year when he'd been dying from that curse. It really worried Harry to see him like this.

"Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said, "I've spoken to your Uncle and Aunt. Some things will be changing for you. Madam Pomfrey, the, ah, doctor you saw earlier, believes you need to follow some specific care guidelines to regain your health and strength, guidelines which your guardians have been given with exact instructions on how to follow. This is a copy of those guidelines, along with instructions on how to get to Hogwarts next month. Some of this information was included in your letter, a copy of which is also here. Your guardians will take care of both your doctor's orders and your travel to the train station next month. Do you have any questions, Harry?"

He handed Harry a small stack of parchment. Harry took it with hands that seemed numb. This was. Totally. New. Harry wondered, yet again, what the hell had happened. His too-small hands were beginning to shake. For a hundred galleons, Harry couldn't have come up with a response to this. He stared at the papers in his hands and slowly shook his head no.

Visibly pulling himself together and (as Harry knew from long Dumbledore-exposure in the future) forcing a gentle smile onto his face, the old man gestured to the birdcage which Harry was just now consciously registering again. "This lovely owl is a Birthday present from Hagrid and is one of the pets you are allowed at Hogwarts. Take good care of her; the instructions for such are in the packet taped to the cage."

Thinking Dumbledore would think him rude as well as stupid and mute, a horrible first impression this time around, Harry scrambled for something to say. Looking down at the books on his bed and then up to one of his first friends, one of those he'd lost so long ago, he realized a pattern, something to bring control back to this already-messed up situation.

"S-she's lovely, sir," Harry managed to babble, searching for the right words. "I-I was reading some of this history book here and I, I think I'll call her Hedwig. I liked the sound of that name, I think. C-could you thank Hagrid for me, please? I'll likely not get a chance to see him for another month."

There, he thought, that sounded more like an intelligent eleven year old, or at least maybe Goyle.

The old wizard seemed to relax a bit, a genuine if small smile seeming to return to his face. "I certainly will, Mr. Potter," he said. "And if you like, you can ask Hedwig to send him a letter, thanking him personally. There should be a quill and parchment in your school supplies and, as long as you don't over do it, you shouldn't run out of parchment writing a few letters. Just follow the
instructions in that packet and Hedwig will take it straight to him. We are looking forward to seeing you next month at Hogwarts. Happy Birthday, Mr. Potter.”

Giving an almost inaudible sigh, Dumbledore stood up again (chair disappearing) and headed for the door. Just as he was about to open it and leave, he turned back and said, “Mr. Potter, if for whatever reason you wish to write to me, any reason at all, send me a message by owl addressed to Headmaster Dumbledore at Hogwarts. I would like to think that all of my students can come to me with any problems they might have, anything that worries them, any time the world seems too large to handle alone.”

Sighing again, he opened the door and walked out. “Goodnight, Mr. Potter. Be well,” he said, closing the door, his wand already starting the complicated series of gestures to ward the door to Harry's room, this set specifically against Muggle violence and intrusion.

Albus Dumbledore couldn't sit and think in his office; it was too dangerous, too many breakable objects. He was too angry. Instead, he stood on top of the Hogwarts tower where Astronomy was taught, the delicate scopes put away and nothing fragile nearby, just the open sky and some rocky architecture. The clear and starry dome filled his senses, the wind bracing but not cold. It had been decades since he'd had an accidental magic incident but today might be the one to break that streak of self control, hence his self-imposed exile from breakable and ancient artifacts.

Three times, he thought as he seethed internally, three times before had he been that out of control, that enraged. In his long, long life Albus had lost many friends, most of his family, all of his childhood. He would eternally damn himself before allowing Harry Potter to suffer the same way he had. Goodness knows Harry was already fated to suffer enough. Stones nearby groaned from the magical disturbance as Albus paced back and forth.

And these, these people Harry lived with were what Minerva had called “the worst kind of Muggles.” Albus hadn't believed it at the time – Minerva had a...history with wizarding children and Muggle parents, it being a regular conflict that fell to the Deputy Headmistress to solve. It was a constant conflict, sometimes bringing joy but more often heartbreak. Muggle parents who were not accepting of magic or seemed likely to threaten their magical children were often charmed to forget anything about magic and to ignore any accidental magic in their presence, being left with the belief that their dear children were attending a prestigious boarding school (which Hogwarts was) where they would be groomed for the best colleges in the country (which they weren't, exactly).

Sometimes, they would simply be Obliviated and have the children taken from them, to be placed with other, magical families. That hadn't happened since Albus had become Headmaster, but it had been a close thing a few times, requiring exacting charms work to minimize the mental trauma to the Muggles. Either solution was sad and morally questionable, but Albus still preferred his. Children should be with their families.

Stopping his pacing and briefly placing his hands on the cool stones, he didn't notice that he left visibly glowing spots on the rocks in the shape of his palms, the granite glowing from the magical discharge. He resumed pacing. In any case, he hadn't believed one of the brightest witches he knew and Harry had paid the price, paid it for ten long, long years.

After a panicked Hagrid had Flooed into Hogwarts carrying an unconscious Harry Potter, everyone present had rushed around like chickens with their heads cut off. Madam Pomfrey had quickly found that the boy had simply fainted, most likely from the excitement or, judging by his visible ribs, possibly hunger and exhaustion. The reasons for that and deeper probing had brought horrors to light. After a more detailed physical exam, she gave the boy a light sleeping potion to let him get some more rest. His stomach issues were worrying and might also be related to the day's excitement
or just an upset stomach, as children often had. What was more worrying to her were the older injuries.

Madam Pomfrey had described, in detail, the wounds the boy had suffered: multiple incidents of a broken nose, now healed, broken bones, recent contusions, even an old skull fracture and scars from beatings with belts and harder objects. In other words, signs of long, severe, and ongoing abuse. Most wizard children were very, very resistant to injury. Hells, the worst school Quidditch accidents would be fatal to a normal child and were shrugged off in hours by a magical child with the assistance of healing potions. To have sustained this much lasting damage was unimaginable for a normal magical child and could very well have killed or permanently maimed a Muggle child.

The wind whipped unnaturally around Albus as he stomped back and forth across the stones, his footsteps sounding like thunder. He didn't notice.

Madam Pomfrey had wanted the boy moved immediately from the abusive home and into St. Mungo's, but under detailed questioning had told him that at this point, another month (one free of beatings) wouldn't do any more damage if certain care instructions were followed. So Albus had told her to expect Harry the day after school opened for another exam and health review and had promised to resolve the issues in the boy's home immediately and permanently. That had seemed to mollify Madam Pomfrey, or maybe it was the grim look on his face.

Privately, Albus worried whether this abuse had affected Harry's body, his mind, or even his magical core itself but there was no way to get him to either a mind healer or in for a more detailed exam until school started. Looking that closely at someone's magical core was slightly invasive and usually done overnight under the care of a skilled healer and most mind healers worked out of major medical centers. Neither were safe for Harry right now, so Albus had come down on the Dursleys harder than he ever thought possible for him. It was Albus' own history that angered him so, made him less than dispassionate about this specific case, but that was no excuse. Death Eaters weren't as frightening as he had been in that house, in front of those people. But Harry wouldn't suffer them any more, even if Albus had to hex those idiots into a gray smear on the floor.

He had to consciously relax his hands where his nails were digging into his palms. He stopped and stared up at the twinkling sky, trying to calm his thoughts.

After what had happened to his sister when she was six, nothing could make Albus as mad as an abused child. His father had gone to Azkaban for what he'd done, the horrific magical injuries inflicted on those boys who'd attacked her. But Ariana had never been the same since, her magic broken along with her spirit and her mind. She had been a shade of her former self until the day of that horrible accident. Damn Gellert to hell.

After his father was sent away forever for his moment of vengeance, Albus had sworn he'd be smarter than his dad and set out to learn everything about magic, specifically protecting others with it. He had eventually become a master of strategy, plots, and wards, and focused on proactive defensive and political measures to keep students at Hogwarts from harm.

Even though the dark rages still came to him, to strike out like his dad had against those who intentionally hurt others, Albus resisted. So, as much as he wanted to jinx the Dursleys into unrecognizable heaps on the floor, he'd take the patient route and try to see the good in them. Make himself see them as worthy of even continuing to live. He'd have to trust they'd do the right thing, given a second chance. But as a Russian friend of his (long dead now) had said during the long, hard fight against Grindelwald: “Trust, but verify.”

He'd made a pocket watch and modeled it after the one the Weasley's had in their house, the old enchantments of which tracked their family members locations and their safety. Arthur had worked
long hours a few summers ago to figure out how the family heirloom worked, sharing the details with Albus on how it protected them when they were out of the warm embrace of their house. Now Albus would turn that knowledge around to protect Harry from his...defective family inside their grimly well-ordered Muggle house.

It had required reusing some of the magical links in the Weasley's device, linking them to the watch and adding Harry Potter to the clock face; from now on, all the Weasley's would know where Harry Potter was and (to the limited extent that device listed it) how he was doing. The Headmaster had keyed his pocket watch to that link and to Harry, using the tracking charms already on the old clock but also weaving in an even stronger welfare charm, piggybacking it on the ancient magical heirloom to detail any health issues including exhaustion, hunger, and thirst. If those idiots abused Harry or even made him skip a meal, Dumbledore would know and investigate.

It was a good plan and he had taken the time Harry was undergoing final medical examination and treatment to prepare it, working as fast as he ever had and even pulling Mr. Weasley out of the Ministry to help. Finally standing in that horrible house had almost made him abandon the plan, had made him want to whisk Harry away from there, let him stay at Hogwarts for the rest of his childhood. But the boy would be instantly dragged into the politics of the wizarding world, targeted by dozens of plots, possibly even killed.

With the wards linked to the Dursley's house (via Petunia), nothing Voldemort ever planned could touch Harry. Fate linked them both to that night Harry's mother Lily died protecting him and her last, greatest spell protected him still: no plot, no magic, nothing Voldemort tried would work. Spells would miss, Death Eaters would be intercepted by Aurors, giant monsters would be defeated with improbable defenses and counterattacks or avoided with unlikely coincidences. Anything Voldemort tried to do to hurt Harry would fail, but Harry would have to stay with these horrible people to make it effective. So Albus would arm himself to prevent them from hurting Harry ever again.

Where he'd failed with Tom, letting the lad roam free and hoping he'd see the joy that was magic while blinding himself to the Dark and growing menace of the abused young orphan, Albus swore to succeed with Harry. He shook his head in amazement; he'd been ready to go and do the same damn thing again, letting Harry just wander into the Magical world without any guide, hoping he'd just fit in and be happy. Not that there was much chance of that actually happening, with Voldemort most likely still ghosting around somewhere, but Albus could hope. Now that he looked at it, a hands-on approach would help young Harry immensely, showing him adults could be trusted and would care for him. Something that had likely never occurred to him before.

It was preferential treatment and sweet old Minnie would throw a hissy fit about that, but it wasn't bad to treat someone with special needs with extra care. He'd have to tell all the teachers about Harry's...situation, at least the Muggle part and the damage associated with that. They'd all have to look after him and it would help to explain anything that might come up so they wouldn't take it the wrong way. Albus knew some of the teachers could be very strict sometimes, but he personally hadn't had any problems with that. Perhaps he didn't truly know how children would feel in that situation, having been a prodigy from an early age and not likely to draw anything but gushing praise from any teacher.

He knew, however, that some children had problems with teachers and authority, and sometimes need help fitting into a new learning environment. Albus didn't know how well Harry would take to school at Hogwarts, especially given what he must have gone through with the Dursleys. He'd have a look at the Muggle school transcripts of Harry's – something he knew about from Muggle parent-teacher meetings but didn't usually bother with, as most Muggle-born attending Hogwarts had loving parents who kept up with their child's education.
Albus couldn't really hope for that much with the Dursleys, given what he'd found out today, but looking back again at some of the Muggle orphanage documents from Tom Riddle made his blood run cold. Reports of animal abuse, school bullying, theft, unexplained acts of violence, lists of warning signs just went on and on. It would have been obvious if only he had cared to look into the Muggle side of things. He'd not make that mistake again.

Time to call together the heads of House. He'd run it past them first and see if there were any suggestions. Which meant...gods, he'd have to tell Severus everything. How would the lad react to this new, horrible revelation about his best friend's son?

Shutting down his private little pity-party, Albus swept the rubble from where his accidental magic had cracked parapets, waving them back into shape, casting the repair spells quickly and easily. Another swipe removed the scorch marks from the stone roof as he left down the trap door and hurried to the Potion Master's office. He'd have to tell the lad about this privately. Given his own past with Muggles, he might take it hard. Very hard indeed.
Chapter Two

Someone was singing softly to Harry. He felt warm all over and generally really, really quite good. Gentle arms held him as he slowly awoke. He couldn't see far without his glasses, but he could easily identify the cloud of shifting dark blond hair curtaining his head in the dim, early morning light of his bedroom. As he lay on his back, drowsy and unmoving, he tried to listen closer but couldn't make out the words to the song. He felt he'd heard it before, though.

The arms withdrew and now light fingers pressed against his chest, barely touching but constantly moving in a regular pattern. He tried to say something but his mouth felt like it was full of fluff. A lilting, strangely distant voice spoke to him from above. “Hush, Harry darling, go back to sleep. The magic isn't finished yet. It is hardly begun.”

Someone was shifting above him, slowly sliding down his body. Ah! Yes, that was definitely his wife Luna, waking him up in a most special way. At least part of him was awake already, it seemed. As she continued to move down and over and around him, he gasped and his head rolled back into his pillow, his entire body briefly shuddering at the sudden intimacy.

Starting to rock back and forth, she leaded forward and whispered in his ear, “Sleep Harry. You need to sleep now.”

“Ahhh, love, how could I possibly do that?” he groaned numbly, not understanding her request. Groggily, he moved his hands to her sides and lightly stroked her flanks. Small, soft hands gently moved his away, pinning them to the bed beside his head. Pressing her upper body firmly to him, she dragged the tips of her breasts down his chest and back up, over and over again.

Independent thought rapidly escaping him, Harry tried weakly to struggle free, find her mouth with his, something to engage his unusually forceful wife and further their mutual pleasure. Immediately, whole unfairly, she stopped moving and chuckled quietly in his ear.

“Lay still or I'll get my wand and stun you, my once and future hero,” she said huskily. “I must finish this myself for the magic to work. Don't. Move. An inch. I will take care of everything.”

Everything sounded very good to him right now, even as strangely floaty as he was feeling, so he relaxed and let her continue her early morning exercises. He certainly didn't mind. Breathing a softly laughing “good boy” into his ear, she slowly sat up again, the sudden cold air between them making Harry frown in displeasure. He could now smell a sharp yet subtle scent wafting through the room, one he didn't recognize. Most likely another one of the rare incenses, herbs, or oils that she loved to collect. Maybe it was coming from the candles he could fuzzily see she'd placed at the four corners of the bed, their blurry flames flickering in the shadowy room. Didn't really matter, he concluded, his thoughts drifting away again.
Luna’s hands found his chest once more, her fingertips running lightly over and over again in regular patterns. It felt like she was tracing a picture or running a maze on his skin with her fingers but it also felt amazing, whatever it was. Everything she was doing this morning felt amazing. Her hair brushing his face, her fingers on his skin, her soft voice whispering in his ear, her quiet and lilting singing, her breasts eagerly rubbing against him, her thighs gently holding him, her...well, that part would feel good, wouldn’t it. Nothing unusual there. Best enjoy the moment and ask questions later.

She was singing again, a verse structure now apparent in the unknown words, her body rocking in time to the beautiful music she was making. His entire body seemed to hum along with it now. As she moved above him, her breasts gently swaying, she stared into his eyes, devouring him with her pale gaze and her body. At first he was worried about not being able to help control the pace but he now felt like it could last forever, like he could last forever. All tension had long ago left him and he was one with the moment, with her. He wished he knew the words to the song, or at least remembered where he’d heard it. It sounded magical, he could almost taste the music in the air.

Minutes seemed to flow together like their bodies did, relentlessly but also effortlessly. She was breathing heavier now, but even her gasping breaths seemed to be part of the tune. It was a gently hopeful song, no sadness even in the graceful tension of the quickly resolved pattern of notes. Her hands still hadn’t stopped moving, tracing the same shapes over and over again on his chest.

When she quickened her pace the song still held together, but more as a counterpoint to her movements. The few parts actually sung were chosen perfectly, added to accent her beautiful movement above him as she ground out the final moments of their pleasure. Her hands stopped their motions on his chest as she started to make gasping cries.

“Dearest, hold me now!” she moaned, pulling up on his shoulders. Not even thinking about it, he immediately sat forward, wrapping his arms around her body, pressing himself to her as closely as he could. She continued to move strongly, almost violently, finally bringing the both of them to a moaning, shouting, delicious, nearly simultaneous finish.

Falling backward on the bed once more, Luna wrapped in his arms still, he tried to gather his thoughts, clear his head, but everything was still so fuzzy. His wife whimpered softly and wrapped her hands around his encircling arms, pulling to gently and reluctantly free herself from his embrace.

“You are amazing, love,” she said, still flushed and shaky from their love making, “but I have one more thing I must do now. Hold very still, please.”

Remaining closely connected to him, she carefully reached over to the bedside table and pulled back a bowl full of some kind of oil. Placing it on the bed beside them, she dipped her fingers into it three times. He lay still, his mind in a haze of pleasure but also confused. He watched as she repeated the same pattern as before on his chest, now with the oil. It was strangely warm and tingled like it was full of electricity. Trusting his wife completely, he simply watched as she finished the design, her face scrunched up in extreme concentration, her hands almost shaking with effort. Every additional line, every new stroke seemed to take more and more effort. He wanted to say something, to help somehow, but some instinct told him not to, to stay still, that it was vitally important that he not interrupt.

Finished at last, her entire body shaking, she moved the bowl off the bed and then placed both of her still oil-soaked hands on the sides of his head, against his temples. She was leaning over him now, still entirely naked and smiling like sunshine itself, and all the cares of the world fled before the sight of her. Leaning forward, still holding his head, she kissed him long and deep before placing her lips
to his ear once more.

S he whispered quietly to him, “Hear these words from my soul again, beloved, that they may protect you in what is to come.” She took a deep breath, then started to speak sounds of terrible beauty and power. He couldn’t remember what they were from one word to the next, the knowledge seemingly spilling out of his brain immediately, but they were familiar, like he’d heard them before. But when?

The power passed through him and also filled him, and then she went silent and he felt suddenly numb. Unable to move, he could still hear and feel as Luna moved off of him carefully and away, off the bed, briefly searching for something in the room.

“I am so sorry, Harry,” Luna said softly from next to their bed, sounding immensely sad now, her wand in her hand. “Please forgive me once more.” She took another deep breath and then said one last word before darkness took him.

“Obliviate.”

Harry woke up shivering, body aching but head clear. A odd, still half-remembered dream was just fleeing his mind, disappearing entirely as he tried to catch it, leaving only a sense of something precious lost forever. He was forgetting something.

Well, it wasn’t Voldemort in his dreams so it can’t have mattered that much. He hurt all over, his neck had a crick in it from the book he’d had his head on, and his stomach was a huge knot, but the scar wasn’t on fire. Therefore, old snakeface wasn’t peeping on his brain. Good enough.

It was tough getting used to that. It had been years since Voldemort had allowed him a moment’s peace through their ever-strengthening connection. His cursed wound was on fire almost all the time for years while he fought a losing battle against the Death Eaters and their leader with his few remaining friends. It was only after Hermione finally taught him a minor amount of Occlumency that Harry had a good night's sleep, but it would still burn most of the time when he was awake.

He was on his bed, having fallen asleep slumped over his books after skimming most of the history and all of his other first year textbooks – they seemed so simple and straightforward now, looking back after all those years. He still needed to make sure the fiddly little details were memorized before tests and such but, overall, he thought he’d give eleven-year-old Hermione a run for her money. If that was a good idea, that is. He’d have to think about that – hiding his current abilities and knowledge.

After fumbling for his glasses for a short while he finally found them tucked under the rumpled covers and put them on again. He needed to make plans, lists, all that Hermione-stuff she always did when they got in trouble in their old school days. If he failed, people would die. Just like their old school days. So, brainstorming lists, checklists, planning lists, and maybe a saving-people schedule with little colored boxes according to how much he cared if the person died. With his foreknowledge, it should have been simple.

But things had already changed – Dumbledore had apparently directly and magically intervened with his Aunt and Uncle, possibly preventing the next six years of abuse he’d suffered during his first...lifetime. He needed terms for this, it was getting confusing. His “family” certainly had given him plenty of space yesterday, when he’d still been nearly immobile from weakness most of the afternoon. And then his Aunt had...made soup for him.

That had certainly never happened before and, despite her lemon-sucking facial expression, it had
been perfectly nice soup (if predictably from a can). And his horrible Uncle acted like he was invisible, simply looking over his head at something else and stopping until Harry got out of his way in the halls last night, instead of knocking him aside like he would have before. And no one even tried to touch his door, his Aunt having simply called out to him when she'd brought up the soup. Dumbledore must have done something to it, too. Maybe Muggle-repelling charms of some kind.

Getting up to take a quick shower before the household awoke (like he always had in the past...future...now, whatever), he found his thoughts wandering while he sung softly in the echoing bathroom, just barely louder than the falling water. Trying not very hard to avoid waking anyone with the noise, he reveled in the music he was making, not remembering a shower he'd ever enjoyed this much. Plans eventually sorted themselves out in his head as the hot water drove the last remnants of sleep from him.

There had to be a root cause. Was this all because of his collapse while shopping and the resulting brief visit to the Hogwarts hospital wing? Was it some other change to the history of this timeline, before he’d “arrived”? How much more would the world change when he started actively trying to prevent bad things from happening? Even the smallest new decisions would require him to think long and hard if he wanted to remain in control, and Harry knew from his previous time through these years that he'd seldom be given a second to think. Things just seemed to explode and fly at him at Firebolt speeds constantly. Even if he started with some successes things would change and he’d lose his primary edge. Especially when he started seeking out major events to change, like saving his Dogfather early. Which he had to do.

The Dursleys hadn't disturbed him the other night when, feeling a lot better, he'd come down for a cold sandwich. He'd taken a chance and just blown off all his usual cooking and cleaning chores. No backlash. So far, it looked like “cleaning up his room” and “taking out the trash” were the only chores Dumbledore had left his relatives mentally capable of assigning to him, and he didn't have to start in on those until next week according to his Aunt's stammered, eye-contact-less conversation. Hell, Dudley hadn't even tried to verbally bully him last night. Yeah, that stunk of magic. Harry couldn't remember a twenty-four hour period where the prick had ever been able to keep his fat mouth closed in the previous sixteen years Harry had known him. Then the Death Eaters killed and skinned them all – he'd had mixed feelings about that one.

A wonderful smell filled the kitchen as his breakfast finished cooking: a full, Classic English Spread Plus (plus tons more bacon, that was), but still loosely, sort of (not really) conforming to doctor's orders. After, he retreated to his room to do more planning and list making. Whistling softly while feeding Hedwig some of the bacon he'd saved from earlier, he proceeded to get his ideas in better order. Harry frowned in thought, quill poised above his paper. He'd start with the big items. Quirrell couldn't be saved; he'd already been taken over by Voldemort at this point and tried to steal the Philosopher’s Stone once. At least Harry hadn't screwed up Hagrid rescuing it from the bank vault earlier. Protecting the Stone itself didn't seem to be an issue. His first time through, the old snake hadn't been able to figure out the mirror, which was the real defensive measure Dumbledore had planned.

Defending his friends while Voldemort was in the castle had to be his goal. Hagrid's egg might not even get delivered but, if it was, he could arrange to owl Ron's brother Charlie immediately about the dragon as soon as the egg showed up. Speaking of dangerous beasts – what was he going to do about Draco? And good gods, what about Hermione?

Gripping the edge of the table with his tiny hands, he tried to control his breathing, shoulders shaking. He tapped his fingers on his desk to the rhythm of the song he was humming, attempting to calm down. Okay, threats, in order of most dangerous to least: Hermione, Voldemort, the Troll,
“First things first,” he said to Hedwig, where she sat on his desk, “I’ll meet the girl who will become the most powerful witch of her generation, possibly of all time, on the train. No option there.”

If Ron and him hadn't become her friend, how much worse would things have been for her? She might have died. Or become Darker, even earlier. Maybe...maybe if he’d been a better friend to the frizzy-haired young witch, she wouldn't have taken such a Dark path after their friends died.

He had to draw any fire from Quirrell away from his friends. Voldemort might try to involve someone in his plans this time, the same way he did in the second year. While he was thinking about it, ensuring Ginny never ended up in Tom's diary's clutches was also a “must” – he'd never had a clear idea of how much damage those months under his sway had done, but she'd never been truly mentally well after. Bargaining away her soul and voluntarily becoming the violent, amoral right-hand to the Witch Queen was only the final symptom of the problem.

The troll was easy, if it even happened: he knew a half-dozen spells that even a First Year had enough power to cast that would, in combination, delay, disable, or kill it. Keeping little girls from wandering around the night of the feast would be the best defense. He'd keep his friends close that night. In fact, allowing anyone to die the entire time he was at Hogwarts would be bad, so he'd have to do his best to prevent that, too. He wouldn't even try and lead Draco into a deathtrap, no matter how much fun it was to think about. Deaths in Hogwarts would reflect poorly on Dumbledore and they'd need him in place for years to come, battling the pro-Death Eater forces in the government who'd try to take over the school. Even if Harry's last few conversations with the old man hadn't been exactly...friendly. He'd regretted those unkind words, after Dumbledore was found dead that night.

“No getting caught trying to acquire Dark items of power or practicing torturing people, Mr. Potter,” Harry thought with a chuckle, Hermione's sing-song voice echoing in his head. At least Mad-Eye wasn't watching the Dursley house yet, so he could still get away with some stuff at home. Best hide anything too bad, maybe in a better trunk, before the Order reformed and the paranoid old dog showed up.
As for the other stuff, he could get to Diagon Alley with the Knight Bus – Knockturn Alley too – most likely without anyone's notice. Well, anyone but Dumbledore and his blasted little monitoring charms. He might not have been able to tell Harry was starving, but he sure as hell would know if he wandered into London on his own for hours.

“Maybe if I establish a pattern of travel,” he concluded, looking at Hedwig, who was still trying to take a nap, “I would be ignored long enough to make a quick trip.”

She ignored him completely this time.

The Trace on underage magic would sense if he practiced any spells, with his assigned wand or others (the Trace was on his house and himself, so black market wands were only useful to rogue hit wizards working out of hidden warehouses and the like), but he could work on potions if he could get the ingredients, so “no” to a spare wand and yes to lots of potion supplies. At least until he figured out how to break the Trace.

The Hermione in his head was screaming at him now, trying to get his attention – books. Of course. “Hogwarts, A History”, all years class books for all classes (not those awful ones by Lockhart, but the standard ones), anything he could find on advanced magical theory (might as well continue his education there). Maybe he could find some old Auror training manuals – the publicly available ones at least. Sort of the wizarding world equivalent of having copies of Soldier of Fortune magazine lying around. Might make a good cover if he needed to break out advanced skills early.

“Maybe I'll spend some more time on my wandless magic once I got to Hogwarts,” he said to Hedwig, “It's something I've never been really comfortable with.”

The owl simply stared back at him, shifting back and forth on her feet.

Not that he could practice that outside of school or even inside where anyone could see him, but maybe in the Room of Requirements. There might also be a way to get an exemption to the underage magic laws if he could buddy-up to Fudge, but that might not be worth it. Maybe hire private tutors? His trust vault could easily pay for it. Dumbledore might be convinced to help out with that if Harry could avoid looking like too much of a Dark Lord in training or an immature prat this time. He'd have to look into it, but the pure-blood elites like Draco obviously had them, so it might just be a matter of bribing the right politicians and bureaucrats.

Speaking of rotten politics, what about Sirius? Harry would have to figure out a way to get him out safely earlier or make damn sure everything happened the same way again. He'd not lose his Dogfather a second time, not to some random chance event and not to his own ill-conceived actions, like last time. He’d blast holes through mountains, light the Ministry of Magic on fire with just his mind, turn all the gold in Gringotts purple, whatever it took to prevent that. Maybe he could figure out a way to politically sell reopening his godfather's case quietly, limiting Fudge's own political embarrassment. Sirius' lack of trial was something that fell on a previous administration's shoulders (Bagnold had a lot to answer for) so, if played right, it might be something they could work out. Cornelius Fudge, Defender of Truth and Justice and friend of Harry Potter and his godfather; could be enough to swing Fudge his way, but it would have to be very quiet and might not be possible this year. Time to get some publicity, and not the crappy kind like his last life.

The thought of Sirius being stuck in that horrible place even one day more hurt, but he'd have to play this right. Get it wrong, Fudge might just arrange for an “accident” for Sirius while still in Azkaban, something no one would question. People died in there all the time. Playing politics would have to come after people were warmed up to the idea of Harry Potter.

Which brought Harry to Dumbledore again. For some reason, the Headmaster had stomped on his
Aunt and Uncle instantly after seeing him in the hospital wing. Dumbledore seemed more quietly angry than Harry had ever seen yesterday, but had spoken personally to him calmly and sadly, even subtly asking Harry to owl him if something was worrying him. Like his guardians beating him again.

Maybe that scan Madam Pomfrey had done at Hogwarts had shown something, like all his injuries from years of abuse. But why had she taken notice this time? Being a Quidditch player or just being at Hogwarts might have excused some of it. Perhaps a later treatment or potion, prescribed for something obviously wrong with him, had healed the long-term damage before she'd done a more detailed scan. In any case, Dumbledore was aware of his true situation now and seemed to be a lot more hands-on in taking care of him. Maybe getting Sirius out of jail early would cause him to place Harry with his godfather instead of his horrible relatives, wards or not. If Sirius' place was good enough for him to hide at and also work as headquarters for the Order, surely it would be good enough to protect Harry. If nothing else, he could spend a few weeks with his “family” and then leave for the rest of the summer. He was absolutely sure they wouldn't mind him leaving early.

An hour later, head in his hand and random scribbles on the pages instead of useful lists, Harry stopped to gather his thoughts. He spent a few minutes trying to calm himself, whistling a little tune while Hedwig looked on, one fluffy eyebrow seemingly raised. Harry looked back at her with a twinkle in his eye. Reaching over to play with her a little, he pondered Dumbledore's previous fears for Harry, things that he'd tried to do to control him in the name of protecting a young child. Things he'd done to “allow him a normal childhood” (Harry scoffed out loud at the idea) and to eventually prepare him to fulfill the prophecy. He'd trained with Dumbledore for less than half a year, and it had mostly been discussions about Horcruxes, not powerful spells or how to battle a Dark Lord and stand toe-to-toe with his power. But the prophecy said he'd fight Tom. Dumbledore had apparently read it as him having something better than a 50/50 chance.

What a load of crap that had been – Dumbledore had died before even finding the identity and location of all of Tom's Horcruxes, Harry hadn't had the power or skill required to fight even a holding action against Voldemort, and the search for the remaining shards of Tom's soul was a failure before it even started. And then Harry got to watch as nearly everyone in his life died to Voldemort's forces. No prophecy had saved them. Maybe this strange second chance was the power his foe “knew not” or perhaps it had actually been fulfilled when he'd killed the evil bastard the first time as a baby. Who knew? Harry decided he'd not let Dumbledore sacrifice his freedom for vague promises. The time to train was now; his childhood had never existed, this life or the last.

But there were other issues, most important that Dumbledore had shut him out for almost an entire year before just because he'd feared Harry was a security risk, what with the Dark Lord sending him horrible visions. That it might have been a two-way street, Voldemort looking back into his mind, was something they hadn't proven, but it hadn't helped how the scar had been making him half crazy and how he'd lost his temper so many times. There were also some political issues, but Harry had never really understood those. 1996 had been a horribly dark year but nothing excused him being ignored like that, not even his lashing out. Maybe he could get a better handle on it this time. Or maybe the best he'd end up doing is not punching those fat, stupid politicians in the face every time he saw them.

Yeah, his moodiness and his temper that year hadn't endeared him to his friends either. That was also too much of an echo of Tom's hidden violence and later aggressive madness for Dumbledore to risk fully cluing Harry into the inner-circle. Harry thought it might actually have been a fear of Voldemort taking over his mind, like Ginny and the diary, once the old wizard had realized the full horror of the Horcruxes after Voldemort's graveyard resurrection.

While it might be a link to Tom's soul, it certainly wasn't a Horcrux. The Hermione of his time had
assured him of that. Maybe it functioned similarly, but it wasn't trying to take over his mind. The only time Voldemort had tried anything like that, snakeface had gotten his mental ass kicked and had never tried again. In his opinion, Dumbledore had vastly overreacted to the risk. Harry's scar had some sort of connection to Tom, that was for sure, but he wasn't getting any special Dark powers, other than possibly Parseltongue.

But if Harry tried anything that looked too “Dark” or violent this time, it might be a possibility Dumbledore would again entertain. With proof backing that theory up, it might been taken more seriously – there was no way Dumbledore would risk a second Tom Riddle. When he was at Hogwarts the first go-around, he hadn't been anything like a skilled student, except for maybe the later years in DADA. Anyway, most of that was fairly Light magic, thus not drawing attention to him as a credible new Dark Lord. But now he'd need an excuse for every skill he showed, every powerful spell he used in this fight, not showing anything even slightly Dark unless it was life or death for him and his friends.

“Getting the DA started early will be key,” he mentioned to his owl, who was now sitting on a shelf in his closet.

She wasn't even looking at him.

Maybe get Tonks and Cedric involved. Older students. Oliver Wood? Hard to get him away from the Quidditch pitch. Wait, was Tonks still in school? Whatever. Get Flitwick to supervise the new DA or a dueling club, if at all possible. Exposure to experienced students would excuse a lot of fast power gain. And hanging out with Hermione would do the most, as everyone would soon believe her capable of learning just about any spell. Harry was going to have to depend on her and, while he admitted he was sort of scared of her, he'd have to remember this was an innocent little girl now, not the terror of Europe and ruler in exile of the British Isles.

Face contorted in pain, Harry started shuffling through the notes he'd made, something that only reminded him more of his bushy-haired old friend. She'd be eleven years old now, almost twelve, poring over her own books, safe with her mother and father (still alive and healthy) in her quiet, beautiful house (not yet burned down), unaware of what horrible things could happen or what terrible prices she'd pay one day for power. Hermione didn't even know he existed yet. Well, technically she most likely did: Harry Potter was famous and in books.

But that wasn't why she'd became his friend the first time and he wouldn't depend on a rampaging troll to convince her people cared about her this time. Hell, if it were possible, Harry would wrap the girl in powerful wards, lock her in a Fidelius-charmed room, and just toss in food and the occasional books until Voldemort was finally defeated. But the smartest person he'd ever met was vital to defeating Voldemort, and was obviously their greatest potential warrior in the fight against evil.

It was strange, Harry thought looking at his books again and trying not to cry, but most people had thought he was the one who was the powerhouse in their team. With a sad smile, he remembered he wasn't even in the top three.

Watching beautiful, brave Luna fight was like seeing an action movie. She always seemed to know what was coming before the spell was even cast. Everything turned out looking choreographed, Luna dodging things she couldn't have seen coming, distracting foes just in time to save friends from being blasted in the back, firing blind and trick shots that were simply not believable to any experienced dueler. And she was insanely powerful, able to fight for hours without tiring, face unchanging, a soft smile on her lips. And she never, ever gave up.

Luna was one of the few survivors of the attack on Hogwarts that had killed virtually everyone at the school, including every last teacher, leaving few students still alive. Many of those Luna had dragged
out of the smoldering ruins of the ancient castle by hand, her magic having been virtually exhausted in the fight. She had barely been able to Apparate out with the other survivors in the end, after the wards had fallen. Luna had never said how many Death Eaters she'd killed that day, but other survivors put the number of solo kills in the high teens at least, and that had been when she was only sixteen (almost seventeen). She'd only grown stronger later, especially after finally discovering her Seer abilities. She had still died, in the end.

“But everything is fine now,” he told Hedwig, who was still in the closet. He sat there for a few minutes calmly, just breathing deeply and tapping his fingers rhythmically on his desk, a strange, strong incense tickling his nose. “She loved me deeply and she is alive again and I'll never let that happen a second time,” he concluded, stating the obvious and daring Hedwig to argue.

She didn't.

Good. That was his final word on the matter and he didn't need to think about it anymore. So he didn't.

Then there was Neville Longbottom, the one who'd run the student's side of the defense of Hogwarts. With a good wand, Neville was a magical wrecking-ball, the best argument for the power of blood purity ever; strangely, this was something the Death Eaters never considered as they constantly underestimated the lad. Neville had trouble lowering the power of his spells most of the time, resulting sometimes in spectacular disasters even in classes like potions, where his accidental magic blew things up on a regular basis. It wasn't until getting a matched wand that things started calming down and he was able to correctly channel his stupidly-large powers into working spells.

He was possibly the strongest (though Flitwick was certainly more experienced) wizard at Hogwarts when he'd dueled Bellatrix during the Death Eater attack. He'd won in the end, blowing a hole the size of a basketball in the evil bitch, just before he'd been tagged from behind by some random mook and bleed out in the Hogwarts hallways. Luna had still retrieved his body, despite it being behind enemy lines at that point. No one knew how and she wouldn't talk about it.

Hermione hadn't cried when she heard about Neville in the aftermath of the fall of Hogwarts. In fact, she hadn't ever cried for her dead lover that he knew. But he'd seen the circle in the grass around where she'd been standing when she'd gotten the news, blacked instantly in a powerful accidental magic discharge. Nine years later it was unchanged by time, cursed ground where nothing was able to grow, as dead as her heart had become. Everything kind and Light in the young woman had evaporated that day.

Oh, Hermione. Why hadn't anyone noticed that she always, always had the power to do any of the powerful spells they practiced, especially in the later years? It was really only the emotion-based spells she had had trouble with previously. Stuff like the Patronus charm, healing magic, divination. Also, Dark curses had escaped her for a long time as she couldn't seem to get in the right frame of mind. But after Neville died, she hadn't had any trouble with them, or with Avada Kedavra.

There were other signs of her power, like how she was able to practice for hours longer than anyone else. It was really obvious, in retrospect. She had a deep well of magic when other people merely had shallow puddles, and it only grew as she matured. By nineteen, she was as powerful as any witch or wizard in the world and knew more spells than all but the most ancient of them. Her skills were incredible and she sought out knowledge and devoured it relentlessly — something that neither Voldemort nor Dumbledore really continued to do in their later year. She could do permanent enchantments with minimal preparation, could Conjure heavy metals and even some radioactive elements in combat, and no ritual had ever been beyond her ability, even ones that usually required an entire Coven of witches to cast. Even before she started boosting her abilities with Dark new
powers and Eldritch bargains, the Hogwarts founders themselves couldn't have been much more powerful and knowledgeable. No human alive knew how strong her magic was when he'd met her for that last time, in that terrible ritual.

Luna wouldn't join them until next year (he counted the days) but Neville and Hermione would be there with him in a month. They would be his core this year, along with Ron (nearly fatally lazy but a very skilled and methodical plotter when you forced his hand) and the Weasley twins (constantly ditching class to work on some of the most amazing magical inventions since the Founders' time). He'd need the Twins on his side until he could convince them the Marauder's Map was Harry's legacy so they'd hand it over. Maybe if he showed them the Room of Requirements after proving Sirius' innocence (and nickname) they'd consider it a fair trade.

Tapping his quill on the page, Harry was trying to remember something. What was he forgetting? Something about the map. Something it didn't cover? If it was important, he was sure he'd remember. But first, finish his lists. Harry tried thinking outside the box more, getting some more extreme ideas.

Though it was tempting, he couldn't get one of those fancy trunks like Mad-Eye had – someone would eventually notice even if Dumbledore didn't. The Headmaster had seen his room and current trunk and the old man had virtually a photographic memory. And that was if he didn't detect the crazy magic on the trunk itself.

He couldn't get any poisoned knives or goblin swords – those were almost certainly restricted and Dumbledore would surely spot them even if the Hogwarts wards didn't. Also violates the “don't look evil” plan. Same for undetectable poisons or cursed underpants or some such. He'd have to limit himself to stuff the Twins could get away with.

Other clothing had similar issues: if he got something he had to regularly wear (like armor), the Headmaster would wonder when he'd bought it. Especially if he was decked out like an Auror or a Hit Wizard all the time. Maybe if he bodged something together from spare parts. What kinds of things could he use?

Wand holders were obvious, maybe just one for his current wand. Once Dumbledore believed in the threat of Voldemort, maybe he could get away with a spare wand. Until then, just a quick-draw arm holster would work. Nothing with magic, though. So just leather and a simple friction releases with something attached to the base of his wand – just let them try and disarm him with a leather cord tied to it! He could make something from some of Dudley's old clothing, currently stowed in his bedroom closet, and maybe use some of the broken toys also shoved in there. Harry started sketching out the design and poking through the closet for parts, disturbing Hedwig who was still trying to take a nap.

The ice-cold Kentucky bourbon was rapidly warming to room temperature in his glass, but the dark-haired man didn't notice. The finely tailored robe he was wearing (not his usual, shabby lab robe) was still sparking slightly from the magical discharge, secondary static electricity audibly arcing into the overstuffed chair he was lounging in. The same accidental magic generating the electrical display had dispelled the minor cooling charm he'd placed on the glass of alcohol. Yes, magic to cool his glass. Not a waste, really. Only a berk diluted drink with ice when magic was available, was his opinion, but now he had something else on his mind.

"Excuse me Headmaster," he said, oozing with relaxed charm, barely keeping himself from crushing the glass in his hand. "I must have misheard. Could you...repeat that?"

"Oh my dear boy, this is all my fault," Albus said, almost in tears.

That part alone terrified Severus, who'd seen the old wizard calmly continue fighting Death Eaters.
without a moment's pause seconds after seeing friends cut down in front of him. “It's Harry Potter, James and Lily's child Severus: he's been at a Muggle relative's home this whole time, one I selected for him. And they've...they've been abusing him quite harshly I'm afraid. I'm so sorry, Severus. This should never have happened.”

Albus slumped into his own overstuffed chair, looking pale and completely defeated. “He's safe now, I made sure of that personally. Wards on his room, compulsion charms on the Muggles, long-term protection charms on the child. New tracking and health monitoring spells based on a magical artifact of an Ancient House. As for young Harry's current health, he is well enough now but...it looks like years of physical abuse, though not...we do not think...”

Albus seemed to have trouble breathing for a moment, then continued, “We'll have a mind healer on-site the first week of classes and once a month after to work with the boy. It is the least we can do.”

“A mere bandage applied late to a gaping wound? Yes, it does seem like that has been our level of effort up to this point, doesn't it?” Severus snapped.

He ground his empty hand into his eyes. Albus winced yet again.

“What about your worries concerning Potter, about him being Dark because of the curse mark, about his influence on a developing young mind?” the raven-haired man asked, his shoulders slumped, head bowed and hair hiding his face.

“Severus, that remains to be seen. He is not cruel, not Dark that I could see. He seemed neutral at worst about my confrontation with his...guardians. He didn't seem happy that they were being brought to task, merely...sad.”

Albus visibly pushed down his emotions. “But there are other worrying signs: I believe he is a natural Occlumens of some strength, or has become one because of the Dark scar or the abuse. I did not dare test him for fear he'd feel it, but the way his mood shifted around like it was on ice made it clear he was hiding his emotions from even himself behind strong mental shields. That is the only unusual ability I saw him demonstrate, which is most worrying in and of itself but certainly not Dark. One would expect some strange magical side-effects from the cursed scar. The Dark magic within it would fight against the boy's natural magical core, at least to some extent, and his magic would grow around the wound to contain it. You know my original theory, that it would strengthen the boy's powers.”

Here Albus paused, tapping his fingers. “But instead his magical aura is...muted, stretched. He seemed magically...well, frail for a boy his age. He might even have passed out from a reaction to wand testing, though it is possible he was ill and that affected it.

“But if the question is, 'was it like with Tom?' The answer seems to be a resounding 'no'. Tom was arrogant in bearing, boastful when questioned on his favorite topics, and untruthful when cornered on his misdeeds. Harry seemed quite normal if a little shell-shocked. Amazingly so, given what he must have gone through. I will be checking up on him before the school year starts and later I'll get his Muggle school transcripts. Hopefully those will not show anything...dangerous, like with Tom.”

The old wizard sighed and looked at the young man in front of him. “It may come down to how he is received here. Can you put away your hatred of his father and lay aside revenge for the great discourtesies he showed you?” Albus asked. The old wizard's eyes started to twinkle, annoying Severus as it always did (as Albus knew it did). “Treated with love and care, he could be our greatest ally against Voldemort.”

Severus twitched at the name.
Albus continued, “If not for the Greater Good, then, perhaps, for Lily's sake. Did you know that Harry has her eyes?”

The glass shattered into sand in the Potion Master's hand, his other whipping out his wand. Not pausing for a second, Severus gestured at the spilled liquid on his chair and lap to clean it up with a single, silent spell. He noticed with interest that Albus hadn't even blinked at the sudden movement.

Putting his wand away again and straightening his robes, Severus gathered himself visibly. “Fine, Headmaster,” he said, words dripping, “if he is anything short of a completely useless, clod-brained, selfish, self-important, arrogant, preening brat then I shall teach him my fine art without harassment. I'll not coddle him, though. No matter what other dolts think, I'll not put him on a pedestal. And I'll have to be distant, too; my cover won't work otherwise.”

Albus stood with some effort, already drained though he was not even close to finished for the night. His project on the third floor was extremely exhausting, as carving a new space out of Hogwarts' magical structure usually was. As he started to leave, he spoke over his shoulder, “Thank you Severus. There will be hope in the boy's life again, I promise you that.”

Severus grunted for his reply.

Minutes after the Headmaster had left, Severus was still lost in thought, still unmoving, mind lost in the memory of flowing red hair and soft, caring green eyes. “Perhaps,” he said to the empty room, “perhaps for her...”

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Harry's head hit the library desk loud enough to bring frowns and stares from a librarian. They had already warned him off for humming too loud to himself. Best not anger them further, even if he had just realized how incredibly stupid he'd been, forgetting Hogwarts' greatest secret.

For the last week, he'd been going to the local public library every day. His relatives were glad to see the back of him and he was glad to be out of the house. It was useful for clearing his head, researching some Muggle-related stuff he'd need this year, and also making a good cover story for his Diagon Alley trip – if caught, he might even be able to pass it off as an accident that he'd called the Knight Bus and he'd simply taken advantage of it.

But, most importantly, it helped him finally remember the greatest secret of Hogwarts. In his defense, it was nineteen years ago as his personal history counted it. But still – how could he have forgotten Salazar's giant fucking basilisk?! 

He'd been researching snakes, in case he ever needed to make an army of them in an emergency or something. Also, because he was very, very bored and couldn't read his magic books in the library for fear of being discovered. That was when he suddenly remembered about another snake, the basilisk of the Chamber of Secrets.

Would he wait for Tom's diary to appear first? Just hold off “discovering” it until Second Year, so he wouldn't screw up Lucius leaving the diary with Ginny? Maybe Lucius didn't know what the diary really was or what Tom's soul fragment would do once it gained control of someone. And it would be really, really hard to sleep at night knowing the huge deadly snake was just waiting there under everything. But could he control it? Maybe he could go to Dumbledore about it, tell him about the ancient secret.

There was a thought: maybe he could pretend to have some of Voldemort's knowledge in his head.
Technically, he did. It was just in the form of visions of what he was doing, beamed into his brain through the scar link in the later school years. And after school, from him hunting down and beating the crap out of Death Eaters who died conveniently after monologuing at him. Well, all that and some of the Dark knowledge Hermione and her gang had wrench from the burning shell of Europe, whatever he'd been able to understand and to stomach using. So quite a lot, really.

Harry even considered how easy it would be to head-off some of the other fears Dumbledore had by “exposing” other secrets about that link. Maybe tell the Headmaster that he sometimes got visions of his parent's deaths and Voldemort killing other people and such. The old man was already worried about Harry and this would give him something concrete to latch onto. That Harry already had Occlumency shields would help Dumbledore trust Harry's mental security more. Also, if he ended up showing some advanced knowledge of Dark and secret spells that he couldn't possibly know about, well, that was why. A good excuse to cover a multitude of situations.

It would give Dumbledore simple problems to solve, like his scar hurting when he was around Quirrell, and draw the two of them together closer and faster than the first time around. Harry thought that much of the uncertainty and distrust between the two of them had been the Headmaster trying to figure out how compromised Harry's mind was by Voldemort's failed attack when he was a baby and the resulting cursed scar's effects.

Yes, this could indeed work. He'd be able to confide everything important that happened to him to the most powerful wizard in the world without fearing being locked up as a madman and the Headmaster would get to feel he was helping Harry deal with the situation.

Not realizing how he cursed himself, Harry briefly smiled and thought, “What could possibly go wrong?”

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He was going to have a heart attack, standing right here in the train station. This was crazy. He wasn't fighting Death Eaters, he wasn't seeing his friends slaughtered by giants, this wasn't a ritual of blood and death and madness and fae power beyond human comprehension: it was just a crowd. What the hell was wrong with him?

Harry gulped again and tried not to turn on the spot and run. His whole body ached (except, hilariously enough, his scar), he felt sick and jittery, he wanted to stun everyone in sight or yell at them or something. He was a mess.

The Dursleys had left him between platforms 9 and 10, not even looking back. Vernon had snorted at the lack of a platform 9 ¾ and then smirked at him, turned, and left, having determined Harry and his school trunk were now somebody else's problem.

He'd been standing there for ten minutes. The pressure was now drilling into Harry's head, sweat beading on his brow. He reviewed where every weapon he owned was and what he had on him right now, which was basically just his wand in the new makeshift dueling holster (he'd done some improvements after looking at a real one again while shopping). Anything really interesting had to be left behind at home as the Hogwarts wards would surely pick them up.

The shopping trip last week had been...odd. Disguised in an old Halloween costume of Dudley's (black Sith robes from Star Wars, hilarious), he'd picked up more than he'd originally intended and hadn't gotten caught. In fact, after getting some gold from the bank, everyone just accepted his money without asking any questions. Hood down, he'd even managed to shop in Knockturn Alley. He hadn't gotten anything truly Dark, just maybe a little sharp and pointy and poisonous. A good, uneventful shopping trip.
And then Dumbledore had showed up at his Aunt's door minutes after he'd returned, just after he'd changed out of his disguise, scaring the piss out of him. But the old man hadn't even asked to come up to his room, simply talking to him briefly in the hall before having yet another meeting with his relatives. Dumbledore had left without talking to him again, whatever his task was completed.

Harry hadn't freaked out then, though, either at Dumbledore or the crones in Knockturn Alley – a place honestly more dangerous than here, this safely padded and supervised public place, a neutral ground where the wealthy and powerful sent their kids off to school. So this latest bizarre reaction was worrying him a lot.

Crowds – they had meant danger to him, before. Anyone could be a Death Eater, a Faewalker, a Shapeshifter, or worse: a Polyjuiced Ginny Granger. He knew that was now impossible, intellectually. The Bargain hadn't been sealed, wouldn't if he could stop it. Ginny was sane, sweet, lovable, sane, not-at-all-dangerous; a normal-eyed ten-year-old girl who was most likely walking up behind him right now! Harry whipped his head around and almost drew his wand.

“Shit, shit, shit,” he thought, realizing he'd freaked himself out just thinking about meeting the Weasleys.

Harry was there early, for the first time in his life, and he'd have no excuse not to pass through the entryway this time. Dumbledore's instructions were crystal clear on how to do it. He couldn't stall any longer in case someone was watching him. “Remember the cover,” he repeated over and over behind his mental shields. “No mistakes, no more second chances, CONSTANT! VIGILANCE!”

Looking both ways then dragging his trunk (bird cage in his other hand) through the portal, he saw the last thing future-him had ever thought he'd see again: the Hogwarts Express. It was gleaming, loud, steaming, and not at all broken and on fire, lying beside scorched tracks, tiny little bodies scattered around it like seed-heads blown by a giant.

“Pull it together, Potter!” he yelled inside his head, trying to relax while continuing to trudge forward. “Look!” he thought, “There's a disguised Auror, being terminally bored looking after little kids getting on a perfectly safe train that no one has ever died on. And there, some of the parents of the students, gathered and chatting to the brats through the train windows. And no one trying to kill anyone, just like it should be.”

Harry slid to a halt and started concentrating on his breathing, looking down at Hedwig as a distraction, attempting to calm himself somehow. He could do this. He just needed something normal, a task he could complete to advance mentally past this. Hermione instantly, horrifically, came to mind, but he didn't know if she was even here yet. He was still very, very early, so he decided to not think about Dark witches and instead went to buy a couple of papers to read while on the train. He grabbed a *Quibbler* and a *Daily Prophet* without even looking at them, practically throwing the correct change at the bemused attendant.

His current plan was to grab Ron, find an empty set of seats, and then go hunting for Neville and...her. Harry figured he could be looking lost and confused in about fifteen minutes and keep it up until the last second before the train left, which was when Weasleys were genetically programmed to show up. But he couldn't look too lost or someone else might pick up on it and try to help. He had a few plans there, but he didn't want to employ them as they would involve lies and misdirection, possibly to his future friends.

Putting down Hedwig's cage and stuffing the papers into his trunk, he turned around and looked directly into the face of his doom, not three feet away. His wand snapped down his sleeve as his arm whipped up, just like he'd practiced; a silent cutting curse was in his mind, his next spell after that (a maximum strength shield) ready on his lips. He had almost started the wand movements before
realizing he was about to murder a cute little frizzy-haired eleven-year-old girl in the middle of a crowded train station.
Chapter Three

Harry froze, his wand steady as a rock, just as he'd been trained.

“Umm, that is a little rude you know,” said perfectly normal Hermione Granger, eyebrows creasing together over her large brown eyes, “and whatever you're attempting to do, it didn't work and I don't think we're allowed to do any magic until we're actually on the train; as it says in *Hogwarts, A History*, the train is actually an extra-territorial part of the Hogwarts grounds, sort of like a foreign embassy I assume.” She wound down a little and grimaced again, frowned, then moved the point of his wand to one side with an outstretched finger, away from the center of her chest.

“That isn't at all safe, as you should know; it says in *Magical Safety for the Cautious Wizard*, which is a completely sexist title for an otherwise functional pamphlet, that wands should only be pointed with purpose at the duly designated targets of spells, as accidental magic can still happen through them or a spell might fire off wordlessly with mistaken intent or someone might even get poked in the eye, I guess, but it doesn't actually say that which is strange because it is something I'd think they'd mention in a book aimed at younger kids and it looks like everyone here is running around very haphazardly even now but I hope the halls at Hogwarts have a 'no running' rule as it isn't very safe to run with pointed objects.”

The young witch wasn't even stopping for breath. Harry lowered a now shaking hand and re-slotted his wand in his makeshift sleeve holster, checking out of the corner of his eye that the almost-napping and obviously useless disguised Auror hadn't noticed anything.

Good gods, she was still talking, something about wand care and the proper instructions not being included in the student information packet. He didn't even remember getting an information packet. Harry looked her up and down, marveling at how young she seemed. He'd known, intellectually, that it would be like this. But Dumbledore and Hagrid, when they'd been alive, weren't that much older looking than they were now. Hermione, Destroyer of Europe, was so small and cute. Well, Harry was actually shorter, but that wasn't his point of comparison.

“Here,” he thought, “she's slowing down again.”

“Uh, okay. I-I didn't know that. Err, sorry about before. I'm Harry Potter,” he said, shakily. “Uh, g-glad to meet you,” he stammered, sticking out his hand slowly. She paused for a moment, then briefly and lightly took his hand. A quick smile seemed to Apparate on and off her face for an instant before the slightly disapproving mask slipped down again.

“You're in books,” she accused him. He gulped guiltily, for some reason ready to confess all his sins which somehow now included literary ones. “I've read all kinds of things about you in modern wizarding history books which are-”

“Uh, umm, most of that isn't true, you know. I-I think people have a lot of guesses about what happened, but they weren't there,” he gently interrupted.
Hermione's eyes grew wide and the mask slipped, leaving shock. “But it says very clearly in—” she started.

“Come on, we should find our seats before they're all gone,” he said, interrupting again. Being as brave as he'd ever been, he pushed down his screaming horror and gently touched her hand.

Annoyance, thoughtfulness, then signs of something newly realized all flashed on her still-unmarred and open face. “You want to sit with me?” she asked, slowly, cautiously. “And, maybe talk about history books?” she ventured, almost disbelievingly.

“Sure,” he said with a small smile (not too forced, he prayed), “I don't know much, though. I've been staying with my non-magical relatives since Voldemort—” he stopped, tried again, “since I was young. I've only read about the magical world for the month since my birthday.” Her face started to fall, he panicked. “But I'd love to talk to you about what you've read,” he said quickly.

Mask gone, face bare to the world, eyes wide, she looked at him with a strange, twisted, sad smile. He almost ran for it again. “I'd like that. Uh, my name is Hermione Granger. Sitting with you would be, I mean,” she said, quietly. Her gaze dropped and she tensed, “I mean, if you really want to...”

“S-sure,” he stammered again, grabbing his trunk, mind screaming, “Follow me, I'll lead the way.”

She was amazing. At 32, she had been inhumanly intelligent (literally), but at 11 she was merely shockingly smart. Talking to her now, he knew he couldn't keep his cover working. He was panicking, sweating, stammering. She would see through it, not with a Seer's vision but with cold, brutal logic and collected observations. He'd already deviated from history and his plan and was directly drawing her attention. He was dead, so dead, but at least she was reading now and not talking or looking at him. His hands shook as he tried to get out his history books, like she'd ordered him to, so they could compare collections. Thank gods, she was just reading for now.

“But those brown eyes wouldn't even need to see me to drill out my secrets,” he thought, “She could do it over owl-post, or semaphore, or maybe atmospheric readings from a professional weather station in my general geographic area. Gods, maybe she can magically smell me lying, pretending to be someone else.”

He finished getting out the few modern history books he'd purchased on his Gringotts and Diagon/Knockturn Alley run two weeks ago, knocking his newspapers to the floor in the process. He hurriedly snatched everything up and put it all on the seat next to him. Hermione sat directly across from him still reading. Everything was so quiet with just the two of them in the compartment. At least she wasn't giving him commands, commands he was too panicked to avoid automatically obeying.

He needed to pull it together and start acting normal, fast. He needed to be her friend, early and true, to avoid global catastrophe. Not a stammering, whiny little dishrag like he was acting now and had been last time. It was safe, she was safe, this compartment on the Hogwarts Express was safe. Harry started to slowly relax.

“See, it says here,” she started up again, not seeing Harry flinching, “that you mysteriously disappeared after the attack on your parent’s house, which was left in ruins, but you killed You-Know-Who with your enormous magical powers and were saved after, though from what you were saved it doesn't say, and placed with, quote, an unknown protector, where you would be safe until ready to rejoin the wizarding world, close quote.”

“But here,” she said, pointing an accusing finger to another book, which took the accusation quite
well and remained stoically silent, “it says the house was only moderately damaged and the forces of Light, lead by Albus Dumbledore, who is our new Headmaster now, though he isn't new at Hogwarts, mind you,” she said, starting to get out of breath, “just new to us because we're just starting this year, simply found you and placed you somewhere You-Know-Who's remaining forces couldn't get at you – silly that, it is in print, so why not just put down 'Voldemort’ – and I guess that you being with muggles makes sense; you seem to be telling the truth about that, based on your clothes and no wizards knowing about where it was, though I could see that some muggles might know where it is because even though some of the better wards would screw up muggles they couldn't use those because that would break the Statutes, and I don't see why they didn't just keep you at Hogwarts since it is a castle and widely known as the best warded area in the country if not the world, so you simply being with muggles really doesn't make any sense.”

“You have to help me here, Harry,” she finished, starting to breath even heavier, continually flipping rapidly through the books, reading both at the same time while talking.

She was right, he thought: he had to help her out. It would risk his cover (that is, that he wasn't a time traveler from the future) but this behavior was even worse than she'd been with him and Ron, about a month from now. Hermione was desperate for answers, like finding them was the only way to keep him from running off and leaving her alone, and she was freaking out in that very Hermione-specific way about it. He had to do something now to head off the isolation and shunning that would happen (that had happened before during the next month) if she kept having trouble interacting with people.

When they'd been living in a tent in the ruins of London, just before the fall of Hogwarts, Hermione had explained some of her more...extreme behaviors. Up to that point, he'd had no idea what she was having to deal with. Talking it over with a younger her might help.

“Hermione,” he started to ask, not really thinking it through, “how many concurrent trains of thought can you maintain at one time?” She froze, stared at him, then looked scared and started to breathe even faster.

“I mean, I'm sure it is, just, whatever is normal-” she started to babble.

“I think it's really neat, you know. You're reading two books at once, comparing them, and talking to me all at the same time. Are you thinking about what I'm asking right now as a separate thread of reasoning while also continuing to analyze what you remember from the history books against each other for errors?” he asked, throwing caution to the wind.

“Wha, I mean, yes, of course but it doesn't...I mean, it works well for simultaneous retrieval and analysis with social interactions running at a slower, uh, in a real-time...but I can't actually do multiple things at once, so holding the place in a line of thought...but at once? The brain doesn't work like that, it...task swapping...what I am saying, why are you...?” she seemed to run out of steam and just sat there, glancing up at Harry with a frightened look on her face, now almost hyperventilating.

Hermione's eyes shot between her trunk, the door, him, his wand sleeve, his trunk, the window, the distance between them, all in a flash, but she didn't move. Her books sat forgotten on her lap but she was careful not to damage the pages even though her hands were clenched into painfully tight-lookign fists. Harry stayed very, very still, not wanting her to panic and try to run. Or try to curse him into an unnatural shape.

“Woah, calm down,” Harry said gently, “You know your human biology: you're always breathing like that because you need the increased oxygen flow to your brain or something, right? Panicking will only make it worse. The Accidental Magic you did when you were younger, that thing that made you like this, it didn't magically provide for that, did it? Just upped the speed on some things a little and changed some minor chemical stuff and maybe added some kind of magical memory layer,
sort of like those wizarding portraits? Perhaps some short-term memory enhancements for better buffering?"

Mix in a little future knowledge with some good excuses and he'd help her with this, Harry thought. He had to. As an adult, she had trusted him with details of her childhood brain-enhancing accident, but not until after she'd struggled with it her entire time at school, unable to really trust her friends, always feeling like a freak. Harry could certainly relate to that childhood fear.

She shook her head back and forth, starting to breathe a little shallower but now quivering a little. Her fight-or-flight response was scaring shitless the primal magical part of Harry's brain, the part that had evolved to *taste* the magic in the air. The area certainly had a strange flavor now, the magical-lizard part of his brain screamed at him to run. Someone with her power using Accidental Magic right now could just flash-fry the entire compartment. So, even though she hadn't brought out her wand yet, he was still moving really slowly when he leaned forward to try and explain himself.

"I'm not going to try and hurt you, I swear. I've read a lot about how the human mind works is all, and I noticed some strange things that only a muggle who was looking for it would notice. Reading two books at once while analyzing their contents while talking to me, all at the same time, was a bit of a giveaway. I think you're safe with the wizarding world so long as you don't overdo it too much – they'll think you're just really smart," he said, trying out a little smile. It almost felt right, that time.

"I mean, I think you're smart too, Hermione," he quickly added, "but they'll just think you're like a young Dumbledore or something." Looking down at the floor of the compartment, Harry frantically tried to come up with a logical explanation for what he knew.

"Reading about magic," he started, trying to explain, "I wondered if people could permanently change themselves with spells. I mean, Voldemort was said to have done all sorts of Dark rituals to gain power. And there are curses and magical diseases that can change your body, like becoming a Werewolf. Werewolves are the way they are for life, so there's that. And there are potions that can change your vision, your appearance, or make you smarter, stronger, or luckier temporarily. So it would follow that doing it accidentally should be possible.

"Well, like, take me. I turned a teacher's hair green once, and that might have been permanent. I think some wizards must have shown up to fix it later, as she didn't seem to remember about it the next week. There would have to be some people around to fix kids doing stuff like that by accident. Oh, and I think I did something to my own hair, once – just look at how it won't lay flat and is this awkward length. If someone tries to cut it or comb it, it goes back to like this in less than a day, magically. So I know some stuff like that is possible."

Hermione was looking a lot calmer now, listening to his frantic explanation. "I saw you doing something not really possible and you couldn't have known any spells before getting your Hogwarts letter and going shopping for books, and I've read the class books and haven't seen a spell to do that, so whatever happened to you had to have been Accidental Magic. I don't think something like that is a reason to be afraid of you or hate you, especially if it was just an accident."

Her eyes narrowed, then widened. "You mean that?" she said slowly, "You're not going to give me to the magical scientists to dissect, like in E.T? Or, or try and kill me because you're afraid? Or tell everyone I'm different so they'll hate me like at my old school? I don't understand. Tell me, why are you saying these things?" She was almost crying now, eyes wet, body shaking.

"Holy. Shit," Harry thought, "Just talking to her about this is working? I thought I'd doomed this from the start, talking about her own future observations on what happened to her mind when she was 9. Oh gods, this could work. I want it to. It is honest, for some strange reason, so she won't pick up on any lies. Wait, no, now she might see me thinking about plotting, so give her the honest and
truthful details immediately, as much as possible.”

“I just, I wanted,” Harry took a deep breath, “I want to tell you what I was thinking about because, I, uh, I want to be your friend. Not just a friend to whatever teacher you’re imitating to provide a smooth social façade, but the real you, Hermione. I’m not afraid of the real you. Sometimes, people want to know the real me, too, but I don't let them. Because I'm scared they won't like it. I'd understand if you didn't want to tell me about yourself. I bet your parents don't even know – more like they wouldn't understand.” Thank the gods he was still smiling. He might survive this yet.

She sat quietly for a few minutes, just looking him over, then something changed in her face. “No, no. There is something wrong,” she said, panic in her voice. “You know too much, not enough information for your initial assumptions or your conclusions. You can't know this much. Are you...have you been spying on me? Are you reading my mind, or, or can you see my past with magic?” Eyes now as large saucers, Hermione asked, no demanded the answer to the most important question she'd ever had.

Shaking like a leaf, she asked just above a whisper, “You have to tell me: what are you?”

“I'm a wizard from the future,” Harry said.

First, she gave him a quick quiz on her life, asking about things he really shouldn't be able to know but any good friend of hers should (a logical test given that the total number of Hermione-friends at this point was 0). Afterward, she sat quietly to hear a summary of his story about going back in time (not including details on how or who) and what had happened while he was shopping and got sick.

Five minutes later, he guessed she'd already worked out possible problems, paradox issues, threats, opportunities, and his new place in her life. But she hadn't said another word yet, just sat there staring at her books in her open trunk, thinking.

He noticed she had a lot of sci-fi books, which she'd looked at significantly while thinking about his revelation, in addition to the school books and other books on magic in her trunk. He remembered some of them and was able to figure out most of what she had thought about while tapping their spines.

She was a huge Trek fan, even at this point, and Trek (especially TNG) loved time travel stories – so that was one point of reference for her. She'd most likely read everything the local library had in the sci-fi section, too, so that was something else she was remembering. Maybe some stuff by theoretical physicists, nonfiction stuff that read like fiction. Harry only had a pop-culture version of most of the actual mechanics of time travel, and much of that from Hermione herself, but it should be enough at this point.

“Heard,”” he said, responding to her unasked question, “there are no paradox problems that I am aware of, so it should be safe to tell you some of the things I know. As you heard, no return device is available, and a non-looping, multi-timeline situation is possible but unconfirmed. I haven't found any deviations from my original history from before I went back. That's why I've got all the history books. I checked multiple old and modern magical and muggle histories, but imperfect memory recall is a problem for me. Not so much for you, at least that's what you said when I asked once.”

He grinned at her and she briefly smiled. “Oh, and the magic is painful, Dark, and came only with great sacrifice,” he said, quickly cutting off another line of questioning. “I won't tell you how and I don't really know the details anyway, but you shouldn't ask or try to figure it out. It isn't worth it just to save your dead cat or something like that, only the greatest calamity or global existential threat could possibly make it worthwhile.”
She seemed pleased now and continued to sit there in silence, smiling a little. Eventually she spoke again. “Here I thought that learning magic at a magic castle was going to be the most interesting part of this school year. This exceeds all expectations, Harry. Assuming that is your name. Well, might as well assume that part is the truth for now.” She tilted her head to one side and continued to think out loud. Or at least a little of what she was thinking she said, possibly for his benefit.

“Now for possible threats and scenarios. Not some kind of magical kidnapper or the story wouldn't be required. Ah, and you're not here to kill me, like in Terminator?” she concluded, calmly. “At least, you haven't tried yet. No reason to tell me this stuff if that was the case either, so not a mission to kill me on a crowded train – that wouldn't make sense,” she shared out loud, almost in a whisper but still smiling.

“You aren't a gender-changed or disguised me from the future. Hopefully not your own father – that would make you looking me up disturbing in a number of possible scenarios. No,” she said, answering her own question out loud, “I'm not your mom or anything, but you are afraid of me. Of who I'll become in the future? Of what will happen to me?” she posited, the smile slipping.

Harry held up both hands. “Please, don't try to figure it out,” he said. “I know you in the future, but it is complicated and it might hurt you a lot, emotionally, to know the details. I'll tell you what I know about upcoming dangers, but I can't just give you the details right here, right now. Most of the really awful stuff might not ever happen, especially with me here changing things. Just telling you this is a huge change. But if I gave you too much, too fast, you'd likely go off and change things yourself, in ways I can't predict.

“I'm sure you're smart enough to still pretend to be who you were planning on pretending to be at Hogwarts,” he said (she blinked but quickly nodded after working it out), “even with the knowledge I've given you. But if I told you everything, you might not even try. And I'm here to save the people who are important to me, the people who died too young or in a long, drawn-out fight against a great evil, or, or because I failed them.” He looked down at the floor and took a deep breath.

“And that evil – I swear, it wasn't you. You are one of the people in danger, a victim, one of the people I want to save.” She once again smiled, a little sadly, then it was wiped from her face as if by magic.

“The evil is Voldemort,” she whispered suddenly. “That is why it is you, the Boy-Who-Lived. He isn't dead. Oh no. No no.” she said, monotone and lifeless.

“That's correct. I'm sorry, Hermione,” he said.

“So he's the one who...he kills your friends, like he did your family before, and he killed your parents and your loved ones and everyone you know and now the entire country and maybe the Earth is in danger. Oh Harry, why?” she moaned heartrendingly, head in her hands, “Why is this happening? Why do you have to do this? Aren't there powerful witches and wizards? Why me? Can't Dumbledore handle this? Someone else?” She was begging him with questions to which she already knew the answers now, which wasn't a good sign.

Harry slowly moved to sit down beside her, keeping enough distance so she wouldn't freak out. “I'm so sorry, Hermione. This isn't what anyone wanted. But you, you are one of the powerful witches. Dumbledore can't do it all alone, even if we could risk sharing the details with him. He has his own battles to fight, battles where the outcomes might change if I just up and tell him everything.

“There are certain rules to this sort of thing, I was told by a very smart witch in the future, and if I go and tell everyone immediately then I've shot my future knowledge all at once. I'll try to tell Dumbledore all the facts I know somehow, without letting him know how, but I can't just tell people
what is coming because that is the best way to guarantee it won't happen at all.”

He was trying to be reassuring but she had started freaking out anyway; both his presence next to her and the discussion itself were way outside her comfort zone. “Voldemort has a way of cheating death,” he continued, “but now I know about it early and I'll tell you and you'll hide the secrets in a dozen brilliant places where they'll be found by other people even if we both die because I screwed something up, so even then he wouldn't win. But we won't die. We'll save everyone. This time.”

She slowly, carefully stacked the books from her lap over beside her on the seat, then jumped him and nearly crushed his ribs in a classic Hermione-hug. It was too much and now Harry was crying, too.

It was worth it, he knew that now. All he'd suffered since being captured and thrown back. All worth it even if just to get another Hermione-hug. She was so strong, he knew they could do this together. He didn't know why he'd blurted all that out, but it turned out fine in the end. Why had he ever doubted telling her was the right thing to do?

“Hey, this compartment free? And have either of you seen a toa-BLIMY!” they suddenly heard a shout from the doorway. Ron was standing there, Neville just behind him. They were both staring at the two of them hugging and crying all over themselves, confusion on their faces.

Harry was surprised to see Longbottom now, but maybe Neville had lost his toad early, or maybe had realized it early for some reason. The train wasn't even in motion yet. Ron still had his trunk in the corridor and seemed to have been looking for a place to put it. They were both obviously shocked.

“I'll just...maybe there is room somewhere else,” Ron started, looking very uncomfortable.

Harry, still half-hugging a sobbing Hermione, motioned him in. “No, no, this one is free mate, we're just a little emotional right now,” Harry said while wiping his eyes. “You're welcome to join us.”

Still worried looking and only half-smiling, Ron edged into the compartment and started stowing his trunk. Taking a seat next to where Hermione had been sitting, he looked like he was constipated.

“You both all right or what?” he blurted out.

“Yeah yeah, we're fine, just fine. She's just really sad about my parents and everything. This,” Harry said, hugging Hermione back gently, causing her to squeak a little in surprise, “is Hermione Granger. I'm Harry Potter. Nice to meet you.”

“WOAH!” Ron blurted out. Neville slipped and fell in the corridor where he'd been listening in and made a lot of noise banging into walls on his way down. “Uh, I'm Ron Weasley,” he said politely, but was quickly distracted again from good manners. “Hey, you got the scar and everything?” he asked, tactlessly.

“A little rude mate, but yeah, sure,” Harry said, lifting his hair up. “Pretty wicked looking, eh? But that's why Hermione here is so sad, thinking about how I got it. So go easy, huh?” he suggested. “Maybe we can drop it for now and help cheer her up?”

Ron looked chastised and excited, both at the same time – typical, really. “Right! Umm, sorry about that Hermione,” he said to the still crying girl.

“No, it's okay,” the girl genius replied, mind obviously spinning. “I was just surprised by how brave Harry is being about it all,” she said, un-crushing Harry's torso and starting to wipe her eyes. This covered her complete scan of Ron, his clothes, his second or third-hand trunk, his hands, his shoes,
likely location of his wand, and what he ate for dinner for all Harry knew. She also subtly turned her head to the side a little and scanned a slowly recovering Neville.

“Oh wow!” the last scion of Longbottom said from the corridor, slightly muffled sounding. “I’ve found him! He was just over here under this empty trolley.” He stood up again holding a large toad and hovered awkwardly in the doorway for a second.

Harry waved him over. “Glad to hear it. You can stay if you like. Plenty of room here or you can just hang out for a while, your choice. As I think you heard, this is Hermione Granger and I'm Harry Potter.”

He stuck out his hand and shook Ron's. Neville's pure-blood instincts and well-honed noble training kicked in at last. After juggling Trevor into his pocket, he shook Harry's hand in greeting, saying, “H-hi, I'm Neville Longbottom. Nice to meet you.”

Harry grinned at his bravest friend. He'd not leave Neville's side this time, not leave him at Hogwarts to fight alone, to die alone, to break Hermione's heart forever. He'd arm the last Longbottom with all of the secret and future knowledge at his disposal and train him to be the strongest general in their army. Then they'd kill Voldemort and every Death Eater on the planet. And Hermione wouldn't even have to think about selling Ginny's soul and her own eyes to the Faery Queen to do it.

Early in the morning on September 1st, with the vast majority of students yet to arrive on the Hogwarts Express for the Sorting and first day of school, Albus Dumbledore met with the Heads of House. Spread around his slightly-cramped and distractingly blooping office, they looked as bored with the long meeting as he was as it headed into the second hour. But there was still one last item on the agenda in front of Albus: Harry Potter.

“Before everyone returns to readying their bodies, souls, and class plans for the return of our beloved students,” he said, eyes twinkling, “there is one last thing I will mention; as you may know, young Harry Potter is joining us this year.” Three of the four Professors gasped and looked pleased, if not surprised. The fourth’s face shut entirely down in an instant.

Most of the staff had heard the rumors but hadn't had official confirmation. Harry Potter's location had been one of the most closely guarded secrets of the Magical world for almost ten years, so of course there had been some rumors. Also, Hagrid was involved at this point, so nothing was really secret about it anymore.

“Yes, very exciting I'm sure,” Albus said. “However, there is something everyone should know about Mr. Potter's current...situation.” Here Albus sighed deeply. “This is sensitive personal information that is being shared only with yourselves and Madam Pomfrey and, as per Ministry Educational Information Privacy rules, is to be used only for assisting in furthering Mr. Potter’s educational success. It is not to go any further than this room.”

Now the three showing any emotion at all were looking worried, trying to remember what kind of information those rules applied to usually. Filius' face had a look of dawning horror as Albus continued, “Mr. Potter has not had a good...family environment. Since his parents were killed, he has lived with his mother's sister, Petunia Dursley, her husband, and their son.” It was quiet for a moment as everyone tried to remember the woman and which wizarding family that was. Filius said something that sounded like, “oh no,” but the other two still seemed confused. Severus wasn't moving at all and had no expression.

“Yes, they are muggles,” Albus said, grimly talking over the starts of confused muttering. Time to get to the worst of it. “They hate magic and were unfortunately not kind to Mr. Potter. Their son,
Dudley, was encouraged to hit him and mock him with the assistance of neighborhood friends.

“Mr. Potter was forced to do virtually all the house and yard work, laboring every waking hour when not in school from a very young age. He was punished, physically and mentally, when he failed to complete a task to his guardian's satisfaction. Other times, punishments were inflicted when they noticed his accidental magical expressions, when he got better grades than their son, or for no reason other than his presence in their lives.

“His aunt and uncle struck him extremely hard on several occasions, sometimes giving him serious injuries. According to his aunt, they tried to, and here I quote her, 'beat the freakishness out of him', close quote, every time there was Accidental Magic in their presence. He was poorly feed most of the time and forced to use a small cupboard as a bedroom until just recently.”

Even for lifetime educators who'd had to deal with students from harsh homes before, this was still unthinkably awful and the shock was visible on their faces. In the wizarding world, children were rare and precious, carefully protected by society in general and usually spoiled by a cloud of ancient great and even double-great-grand relatives. Most magical families had only one or two kids (Weasleys were the outlier here) and divorce was almost unheard of. Wizards and witches (especially witches, for some reason) lived a long, long time and extended relations (even in “small” families) sort of accumulated. Such abuse, especially remaining uncaught by doting great-grandmothers, was unheard of. It would have resulted in severe social and legal penalties for any wizarding household to have been run in such a manner.

Severus still hadn't moved or reacted at all yet and was staring stonily at the bookshelf over Albus' left shoulder. The Headmaster took a deep breath and tried to rally his spirit to finish what needed to be said.

“We discovered the physical abuse after Hagrid gave him his Hogwarts letter and took him to Diagon Alley on his birthday last month. While shopping, Mr. Potter collapsed at Ollivanders Wand Shop from exhaustion, both magical and physical. He was taken to the Hogwarts hospital wing where Madam Pomfrey examined him. After treatment, he was returned to his relative's house where certain...protections were arranged to ensure his safety.”

Total horrified silence filled the room. Minerva was the first to recover.

“Headmaster! After discovering all that, how could you have left Mr. Potter with those horrible, horrible muggles?” she demanded shakily, her face chalk-white with shock. Albus grimaced, frowning deeper now.

“Ah yes. Certainly, removing Mr. Potter from such an environment would be the usual first step. Leaving him there is simply unthinkable in normal circumstances. However, there are serious issues with allowing him to enter the magical world right now. There would be a fight over his guardianship by complete strangers and his fame would make it impossible for him to live anything like normal life. My mere presence at his house, if uncovered by certain people, could cause untold danger for him.”

Looking evasive, Albus danced around the next part carefully, unwilling to be specific. “There are also other...issues, ones magically entangled with the boy, that would endanger his very life if he were to leave his Aunt's house for any significant period of time outside the school year. That house is, unfortunately, the only place he is currently safe from these dangers and is where he must remain. He will not be defenseless, however, and powerful protections have been provided so he will be safe from his relatives and receive the education he deserves.”

“This situation has already been taken care of, at least for the last month,” he said. “These...people he
has lived with have been magically constrained, required to treat him in a sane and humane manner by binding oaths and minor compulsion charms. In addition, strong magical monitoring was placed on Harry to show his location and current health status. I checked up on him in person two weeks ago and he was doing...better. He was much healthier and had been left entirely alone and was properly fed. None of the muggles had so much as spoken unkindly to him since my initial intervention.

“Mr. Potter has been spending most of his time alone in his, now normal and humane, bedroom reading ahead in his class books. A quick conversation with him showed that he was well along in at least the theory portions of all of his classes.”

All four of the professors reacted this time, even Severus, all looking surprised. Most First Year students never cracked a book before the first day of class. Albus noticed and clarified. “Learning seems to be a great comfort to him, one of the few pleasures he had managed to hide from his horrible relatives,” he said sadly.

“In addition to reading his class books and some simple story books I left with him, he has also taken to spending long hours in the local library, reading muggle books on various topics that interest him. Most of them are quite advanced adult books.” Sharing this revelation seemed to cheer Albus and the others some, but there was more to tell.

“Now, for his future,” he said. “During his holiday breaks, he will stay at Hogwarts. I believe having the teachers and, hopefully, some of the new friends he will soon make stay with him at the castle would be best for obvious reasons. If he loves the Hogwarts library like the muggle one he has been visiting this summer, he should be more than pleased to stay over the holidays. Maybe we can take that time to show him some of the holiday spirit and caring that has doubtless been missing in his life so far. Next summer, he will be assigned a caregiver who will stay in his house in the spare bedroom, watching over him and tutoring him in any classes he might be having issues with, muggle topics or magical.”

Hoping to bring the appallingly painful meeting to a strong end, Albus Dumbledore allowed his face to show how serious he was about this. His eyes ceased any and all twinkling, his mouth didn't even hint at a kind little smile, and his hands were pressed white-knuckled against the top of his large desk. That he was, in fact, deadly serious about this only helped.

“As you can see, this is all extremely painful and personal, and could affect Mr. Potter's ability to...relate to other children and fit in at Hogwarts. Please give him all the consideration and leeway possible when dealing with any conflicts that come up. Regardless of the teachers involved or his assigned Head of House, any punishments, at least for the first few weeks, will be assigned only through Minerva, working as Deputy Headmistress.”

“Minnie,” he said gently, speaking to the faint-looking elderly witch, “I intend to have you work closely with the Mind Healer we have contracted to help Mr. Potter.” She bobbed her head once briefly in acknowledgment. Albus then sighed again, holding up a hand to forestall the growing agitation in three of his Heads of House.

“Also be aware that this Mind Healer, a Mrs. Andromeda Tonks, will be in the castle every afternoon for the first seven days of the school year, starting the day after tomorrow, and once a month following that. Mr. Potter will be meeting with her during those times for extended evaluation and assistance. This could interfere with some of his assignments and homework in this first week and allowances should and will be made. Mr. Potter will also be meeting with Madam Pomfrey tomorrow afternoon for a complete physical and magical exam. Classwork may again have to be scheduled around any treatment regimes she assigns. Whoever is Mr. Potter's Head of House should
work with his class schedule to manage this best, working out the details directly with his teachers.”

Sighing again, Albus rubbed the sides of his head with both hands, the headache he'd been fearing since he woke up this morning finally manifesting. His four Heads of House looked almost as bad. Minerva was shading her eyes with one hand, staring at her lap, shoulders set stiffly. Filius was sitting hunched and deflated in the extremely oversized (for him) chair, his eyes seeming to be looking at something far off only he could see. Pomona was barely able to avoid weeping openly at this point, her eyes were wet and heavy. Severus' face was now a gargoyle-like scowl, gray and stony, his hands attempting to strangle the arms of his chair.

“Preferential treatment of a single student isn't something to be done lightly,” Albus said, speaking softly, “but it should be clear that when a student has a situation as unique and sensitive as Mr. Potter's, special considerations must be made. I have already personally failed Mr. Potter in a most grievous manner; the protections I meant for him failing in almost the worst way imaginable. The damage this has caused may be so severe that he will never forgive me once he learns the depths of that failure.

“Hogwarts, however, will not fail him. For the next seven years, we will be teaching and protecting Mr. Potter, healing the wounds he now has as best we can. Hopefully, he will one day be able to look back on his time at Hogwarts as one filled with memories of kind friends and wonderful experiences. It is our job, as his teachers and protectors, to make sure he has that chance. That is all.”

Albus stood up and walked off without another word, disappearing through a secret door behind a bookshelf they'd not noticed opening silently. The Hogwarts Heads of House were left to collect themselves in silence (except for a quiet sniffle from Pomona), three of them leaving the Headmasters office without saying anything or even looking at each other.

Minutes after the others had left, Severus finally pried his fingernails out of the slightly damaged arms of his chair and stood up. Moving to Albus' desk, he carefully opened a few drawers looking for something. Finding the almost full bottle of Firewhiskey he'd been searching for, Severus Floo'd directly to his office from Albus' fireplace.

No one saw Severus Snape again that day until just before the Sorting Feast.

It had all started because he'd been trying to make friends, something he hadn't really known how to do the first time through his childhood. The train compartment had been quiet and awkward, like only four shy 11-year-olds can make it.

Hermione had tried mentioning that she'd already read all the way through this year's textbooks. Ron and Neville had simply looked a little ill at the idea of all that reading. So that conversational gambit went nowhere. Then he'd made the mistake of saying how he'd done the same. And that he had next year's, too. Hermione had gotten a predatory look in her eyes and he hadn't stood a chance.

Since that mistake, Hermione had seemed glued to his books (the second-year spells and potions textbooks from Harry's trunk, which she'd immediately commandeered) and Neville and Ron had barely said anything since they'd showed up in the compartment. Harry wanted to start them all interacting and talking more, hopefully bringing them together and into a team as soon as possible, but he didn't want to show off his impossibly adult-level skills or start Hermione on some rant on a strange subject, so he tried bringing up pets as a possible common point. Neville had been shooting furtive glances at the others and seemed to be the most shy, so Harry started there.

“Hey, Neville. I'm glad you found your toad. He's your one allowed Hogwarts pet, right? Had him a long time?” Harry asked the twitchy boy.
“W-wha?” Neville said, startled by Harry's question, almost dropping the toad in question. “Uh, y-yes, sorry. Umm, Trevor was a present from, uh, f-from my great-uncle when I got my Hogwarts letter this year,” he stammered out, clearly embarrassed that everyone was now looking at him. No one else seemed to have anything to say about this and the compartment was awkwardly quiet again. Hermione simply returned to reading. Harry barely avoided grinding his teeth. Had he ever been this uncomfortably shy?

“How about the rest of you?” he asked, trying to jump-start things again. “I've got an owl, Hedwig. Got her last month when Hagrid delivered my Hogwarts letter.” Harry got the birdcage down and set it on his lap, showing off the beautiful white-feathered owl to the others. Hermione perked up and actually set her book down, Ron looked very impressed and leaned over for a closer look, and Neville seemed a little intimidated by the large bird but was at least taking a peek.

“She's quite lovely, Harry. Snowy Owl?” Hermione asked.

“Yep, and she's great. Been very patient with me so far as I haven't had anyone to write to, really. Just wrote Hagrid once to think him for getting her for me. He doesn't seem to like writing letters, though, and I was going to see him soon anyway, so it was only the one letter. Anyway, Hedwig will sit with me when I read and has been a good friend so far,” Harry said, struggling to sound like an excited little kid again.

Ron looked a little jealous as he pulled his rat out of his pocket. “This is my pet, Scabbers the rat.” he muttered, sighing as he held out the scruffy looking old rat for everyone to see. Even though Harry had anticipated this, he still had to clamp-down hard to avoid drawing a wand and hexing the fucker on sight. Maybe this wasn't such a good topic, he thought, staring at his parent's betrayer.

“He's very nice.” Neville said politely. Hermione looked unimpressed, frowning at the ugly creature. “Good for her,” Harry thought wryly.

“How long have you had him?” Neville asked unexpectedly.

“He's been in the family for, like, forever. He was my brother Percy's even before he went to Hogwarts but Percy got tired of him I guess since he got a new owl for becoming a prefect. Well, that's what he said but I think he really gave him to me so I'd have a pet for my first year,” Ron replied.

Hermione started frowning more, her eyebrows drawing together at that information, most likely calculating the impossible age the rat had reached and also what all the breeds were and their major attributes, both at the same time.

Before she blew the entire thing wide open by accident with her tenacious intellect, Harry gently squeezed her arm, trying to hide the action from the others. She looked startled and glanced over at him, again about to say something. He barely shook his head no and she blinked several times and frowned at him, but didn't try to say anything. Yet.

“He isn't very useful and mostly just sleeps all the time. He doesn't seem to have any special powers or magical abilities or anything,” Ron said sadly, putting the rat back in his pocket.

“Interesting, Ron. I didn't know there were so many types of pets in the magical world. I just saw the letter say owls, cats, and toads,” Harry said, slightly stiffly, trying to make this horrible conversation work. “I wonder if that is to keep people from just getting any old thing, like snakes or spiders or something.”

“Did you have to ask for special permission to take him?” Harry asked, never having heard how the
rat was actually allowed at Hogwarts.

“Yeah, we had to get approval for Scabbers when Percy brought him. The Headmaster approved it, though Percy said Filch didn't like it and complained. The Headmaster said that since it was a trained pet and there were already less well behaved rats in the castle, it wouldn't be a problem,” Ron said, grinning.

Hermione looked slightly disgusted and disapproving and glanced at Harry again, a questioning look in her eyes. Harry tried to distract her again, asking, “Hey Hermione, do you have a pet this year?”

“No, of course not,” she said shortly, her teacher persona almost scoffing. “I thought,” she said archly, starting into full Professor mode, “and my parents agreed, that a new pet was a big responsibility and as we didn't know how much classwork would be assigned in our first year or what kind of facilities would be available for the care of pets, we put it off until next year.

“I'd kind of like a cat, though. My mother is allergic to them, however, so I was thinking there might be a spell or a potion that would help her or maybe we could find or make a hypoallergenic magical cat but I've looked in all of the spells in *The Standard Book of Spells* and all the potions in *Magical Drafts and Potions* and couldn't find anything like that. All the magical creatures I've been able to find are huge and covered in horns or something. Maybe Harry has a book that has more normal, acceptable pets.”

Glancing again at Harry and seeing his slightly worried looking face, she realized her fellow students all had pets already and reviewed what she'd said in her head again. Looking slightly panicked, she quickly tried to correct the mistake.

“Your pets don't seem to be very large, though,” she said apologetically to Ron and Neville, “so proper care shouldn't be too hard. And Harry, according to *Hogwarts, A History*, the castle has an owlery which could take care of your owl if it was too much trouble on your own, so it doesn't look like proper pet care should adversely affect any of your studies.”

She looked pleased with herself for avoiding the unintentional insult while providing useful information. Ron and Neville looked slightly stunned but both slowly nodded at her.

“Well, at least she's a little better so far than last time,” Harry thought, smiling weakly at his manic, walking reference library of a friend.

“Sorry, Hermione, I can't really help you with the allergy thing but you're free to check my books.” Here Hermione got a wild look in her eyes and he hurried to the his next point lest his trunk instantly be ravaged by her.

“Do either of you know any spells like that that work on pets?” Harry asked Ron and Neville. “I’ve only known about magic for the last month, so I’ve never really seen any spells,” Harry added, only sort-of lying.

Hermione nodded at him, having had similar issues, but Ron and Neville were stunned. “W-wait, h-hold on!” Neville stammered in shock. “A-are you telling me that *Harry Potter* has never seen magic? D-didn't you grow up seeing witches and wizards all the time?”

“Shit,” Harry thought, “I didn't actually want to discuss this yet.”

“Well, uhh, I was raised by non-magical people. My aunt and uncle. They know about magic but don't like to talk about it and don't like it. I mean, they really don't like it,” he said, lamely. “They aren't very nice people and didn't even tell me my parents were magical, how they died, or anything
about the wizarding world,” he finished, not even having to pretend to act sad, hanging his head just a little.

Neville just sat there open-mouthed. “Bloody hell,” Ron muttered, staring at Harry with a shocked look and growing frown, his previous jealousy over pets completely forgotten.

“Language!” Hermione gasped, shooting Ron a shocked look. She then took Harry's hand in both of hers and looked him in the eyes, smiling gently, her public persona dropping away like a window suddenly opening.

“I'm so sorry, Harry,” she said, obviously meaning it. “I don't know much about magic either; my parents also aren't magical and I've only known I'm even a witch for a little while. But maybe Ron and Neville will be our friends and show us some of the stuff we don't know about the magical world.”

She. Was. A genius. He could hug her. He most likely would in a few seconds.

Harry had no idea where she got the idea for that speech (some teacher she'd known?) but it was perfect. He smiled a little at her and she barely nodded at him – yeah, she knew what she was doing and had figured out he was trying to get re-acquainted with his old friends.

“Yeah, yeah! Of course, mate!” Ron almost shouted, looking increasingly excited. Neville seemed really upset but nodded vigorously in agreement.

“R-right, we'll be your friends and help you with stuff in the magical world,” Neville said quietly.

“Hey, wait!” Ron shouted, “I know a spell. Let's see...” He grabbed a sock that had fallen out of his sloppily packed trunk and held it up. Pointing his wand at it, he said another nonsense rhyme, like the first time he'd met Ron and he'd tried to change his rat yellow, this time targeted at the sock. The sock instantly lit on fire.

“Ron!” Hermione yelled at him. “That wasn't even close to the Color Change Charm!”

Ron and Neville were too busy stomping out the sock fire to respond. Once it was out and Neville and Ron had sat down, Hermione looked ready to rip into them again, so Harry jumped in first.

“Hey, it didn't work but it was still kind of cool. I think that one is kind of complicated, actually. Maybe something easier? There was one I wanted to try that should be safe,” he said, snapping his wand out of his sleeve holster and readying it. Focusing and trying to make it look like it took him some effort, he pointed his wand at the slightly blackened sock and cast the simple Levitation charm. The moment the final syllable of “levi-O-sa” left his mouth, the sock twitched once violently and he almost threw up all over the floor. His vision lost all color, his grip on his wand slipped, and he fell to the floor, hard. His head was ringing with a high-pitched tone and it felt like Harry's entire body had been kicked repeatedly – he was barely holding onto his breakfast. Hermione was yelling something and Ron and Neville were trying to help him up but he didn't have enough strength to even lift his head.

Ron and Neville were being pushed back now as someone took their place at his side. Small hands fluttered in panic on his throat, face, wrist, back, and arm – Hermione's, he thought – then gripped him firmly and gently pulled him over onto his side, also rearranging his arms and legs in what Harry blearily recognized as a first-aid safety position to prevent choking.

Well, of course Hermione would know first-aid – it was in books, after all. He didn't think he was going to throw up but she'd obviously anticipated that as a possibility given what he'd told her so far.
about his journey back in time and subsequent unpleasant redecorating of an ancient artificer's shop floor.

It was clear now that something had gone very, very wrong with his magic. It felt like when he'd passed out in Ollivanders but he wasn't actually throwing up or losing consciousness yet. Harry had a sinking feeling this was extremely bad. Maybe getting thrown back in time by Darkest Blood Magic and sacrificial rituals had side-effects that Future Hermione, Witch Queen of Darkness, hadn't realized. Not being able to shove that in the Idiot Queen's face sort of blunted the appeal of showing up her plans, though, and there was no way he'd take it out on poor, cutely-panicking, present-day Hermione.

After what seemed like hours but must have been only a few minutes, Harry's head finally started to clear and some small amount of strength returned to his body. It still felt like someone had run him through the belly with a sword after beating him about the head and arms for a day, but at least he could sit up on his own.

Hermione was still at his side, worry clear in her large brown eyes. Ron and Neville looked very freaked out and were fidgeting on their seats, staring at him.

"Are you feeling better now, Harry? Do I need to get an adult?" Hermione asked.

"No, no that's okay Hermione. I'm feeling much improved now," he lied. Her eyes narrowed as she obviously saw right through him, but she didn't follow up yet, maybe because the other boys weren't in on his secrets and were in hearing range still.

He hadn't figured out yet why this time Hermione seemed so much more compliant. Harry was sure that the Hermione he knew before would already have gone to get someone, his arguments totally ignored, and tried to badger him with questions about why he collapsed as they carted him off. But it wasn't a totally different person: Hermione still seemed ready to burst with questions, just more restrained for some reason. But Harry realized that he'd have to figure out a way to talk to her soon or she'd explode before they had a chance to talk in the common room later tonight.

Crawling back to his seat with her help, he had to move his textbooks and notepad out of the way. Then inspirations struck. After reassuring Ron and Neville that he'd just felt suddenly sick, it had happened before, and he'd seen a Healer about it and everything, he waited to put his plan into play. Ron and Neville seemed skeptical but lost interest soon and went back to playing some card game.

Grabbing a random textbook and opening it as camouflage, he placed his notepad on his lap on his right side, next to Hermione. Flipping to a fresh page, he started writing a fake letter to her.

Dear Hermione,

Hey! Pay attention! I need to talk to you about this. Please get your notebook and play along, pretending to make notes from your textbook to respond.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter, Sick Time Traveler

Slightly tipping the page toward her while pretending to be suddenly interested in some line in his book, he gently nudged her leg without looking at her. He knew she'd seen the message when she moved her paper to her lap, also tilted towards him.

Harry! What happened?
He quickly wrote his reply:

Something like when I first got matched to my wand while I was shopping.

She scribbled back:

Oh no! You should see a healer immediately!

Quickly reacting, he wrote:

It is OK Hermione, I'll see one when we get to the castle. I'm not suddenly worse. I think it was my magic failing for some reason.

She gasped and he quickly glanced at her. Hermione's eyes were huge and she almost said something, before she noticed him shaking his head no. Ron and Neville hadn't noticed what they were doing yet and seemed happy playing cards quietly (well, except for the explosions) on the other side of the compartment. Hermione was writing something like crazy on her paper.

Harry, I think going back in time took more out of you than you think. If it was going to use up several adult magical's power, maybe it took all of child-you's power, too, reaching into the past to complete the spell? What if you're permanently damaged by this? What if you can't do magic or fight Voldemort because of this and we are all doomed and you're going to die and I'm going to die and there's nothing-

Harry put a gentle hand on her elbow, interrupting the worried flow of words she was writing. It looked like she wanted to cry again. He started writing again, trying to reassure her.

It will be OK, we will figure this out together. I'll see Madam Pomfrey in the Hospital Wing tonight or tomorrow and see what she can do. With your help, I know we can do this.

She was calmer now, but still looked really worried. Maybe he could distract her with another issue.

Hermione, the sorting into Houses will be tonight. We need to end up in Gryffindor together with Ron and Neville so we'll be able to spend time together in the common room. It will make everything easier in the years to come.

The Sorting is done by a magical item. You put it on and it puts you in a House. I think you can ask for a House, though, so we need to convince Ron and Neville to tell it where they want to go. But we shouldn't tell them about the thing, itself, because it is a secret.

Hermione read what he'd written but seemed confused at the end.

Harry, what is the magical item?

He simply wrote:

It is a piece of clothing.

She started looking worried now.

Exactly WHAT is it? What kind of clothing?

He replied:

It is a thing, you know, that you wear. It has a round bit and you put it on. And-
Harry suddenly realized what was wrong. He couldn't tell her about it for some reason. Every time he tried to write down what, exactly, the Hat was, he ended up saying something different. Now he was worried, too. Hermione was already writing more.

*Harry, I bet it casts a spell on you so you can't tell anyone about it! Makes sense to me. Many powerful magical items protect themselves somehow that so people can't come up with ways to defend against them.*

He scribbled back:

*No, that doesn't make sense Hermione. We used to talk about the...thing all the time at Hogwarts.*

Nibbling on her quill, Hermione paused in thought for almost a minute, then started writing again.

*I bet it lets you talk to other people who have had the same spell cast on THEM. That way, most people who've gone to Hogwarts can talk about it to each other and they'll explain it away as adhering to the tradition if they find themselves unwilling to talk to other adults or kids who haven't gone to Hogwarts about whatever it is.*

Realization rocked Harry. He hadn't even figured that out after years at school last time; this was totally new information and all because he'd brought Hermione into his confidence. Harry was starting to get a good feeling about this. Then it all came crashing down again.

*Hermione, if it is more complicated a magical item than I thought, will it know I've traveled through time? Will it know I've been sorted before? What if it says something to Dumbledore or just says something out loud? Everyone will be there tonight! I didn't think about this before, I thought it would just sort me into Gryffindor again!*

She was rapidly writing a reply before he'd even finished:

*No, wait Harry, it can't do anything that might reveal people's secrets, otherwise no one would agree to use it. I'm sure it'll be fine. Lots of rich kids from powerful families get sent to Hogwarts, and there is no way anyone would want their kid's mind used as blackmail or something like that later in life. It has to have protections against giving up your secrets.*

Hermione looked so sure of herself that Harry was almost reassured by her reasoning, but he couldn't seem to convince himself that she was right. Now he was dreading tonight's Sorting and the disaster that might follow.

Before he even started to formulate a plan, the compartment door was thrown open and a thin, smirking, white-haired boy walked in, bookended by two other huge boys. Glancing at Harry's forehead, the Aristocratic one smiled.

“Ah, the rumors were true: the famous Harry Potter *is* on the train,” Draco smarmed, frowning as he looked around the compartment at the other students.

“You have attracted an assortment of useless hangers-on already, it seems.” Turning back to Harry, he offered his hand, saying, “My name is Draco Malfoy. You need to have someone to help you make the right kind of friends. Useful, powerful, influential friends. Someone like me.”

It was a long, drawn out fight against Voldemort. The Ministry had fallen but Hogwarts still stood, a beacon of hope to the forces of the Light. Most of their friends were in their sixth or seventh years and they were already making plans on how to form their own, new-wave Order of the Phoenix. Dumbledore's death had almost shattered the old Order, and it was full of adults who'd tried to keep
them out of trouble and out of the inner circle for years. No one really trusted them to let the young people take over important roles. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had big plans for the future, especially once Neville and Luna joined them.

Currently, though, they were hiding in the smoking remains of London, long after the Dementors had left of course, trying to stay one step ahead of Voldemort's hired Hit Wizards.

Sitting in the flickering campfire, Harry sulked. Half of his best friends were here. The war was going horribly. London was trashed. And he couldn't sleep.

They were camping out with some muggle survivors in a Red Cross aid camp, all the better to blend in. Nice people, something about being suddenly homeless and jobless in a “terrorist” created wasteland really brought people together.

Everyone else had gone to sleep long ago and all the wards around them that Hermione had put up made better guards than him, but he still couldn't sleep. Just when he thought he'd try anyway, just to be more comfortable lying down if nothing else, Hermione plopped down beside him.

“Stop pouting, Potter. Makes you look like a little Firstie again,” she said, smirking at him. He rolled his eyes at her and tried a jab in response.

“Yeah, well, I didn't look in the mirror much first year. Except for that one time, you know.” Hermione snorted and started laughing, the laughs turning into a cough. Whatever it was, she didn't have it too bad. It was something magical going around, got in the lungs, cleared up after a few potions and some rest. Not like the killer plagues some of the Death Eaters had tried to use that one time. God, that had been a nightmare. Looking back at Hermione, he noticed it was her turn to be lost in thought. He had a good idea what she was thinking about.

Hermione didn't think anyone knew what she'd been up to last year, but Neville's cherry-red face every time they returned from “studying” in the “library” told the story clearly enough. Some weekends, they “studied” so long and hard, Neville didn't actually make it into his bed all weekend, leaving his snickering roommates all the clues they needed.

Harry was happy for them, really. Sure, he'd thought about Hermione that way for about 15 minutes fifth year, maybe, but she was obviously not interested. And anyway, Neville was a solid chap, totally perfect and dependable for Hermione. Maybe she'd bring him out of his shell a little. Maybe he'd calm her down some.

“Penny for your thoughts, Hermione,” he said, poking her in the arm. She batted him away and sighed.

“Wouldn't be worth it, would it, with the failure of the British Pound. Got any of those new Euros?” she asked, wryly.

“What's with the taunting, Herms.” Glaring at his offensively bad shortening of her name, she sighed again and gave up.

“I was just thinking about how you and Ron were the first friends I ever had, okay?” she said, visibly annoyed with him.

“Sure, Hogwarts was wild that year. And the girls we were sorted into Gryff with were total pillocks. Present company excluded,” he quickly added with a cheeky smile.

“I am trying to be at least slightly emotionally honest, you wanker,” she shot back, but without any real heat behind her scolding. “Girl trying to spill out her heart and deepest, innermost feelings here,
so just shut it and consider yourself lucky to be witnessing such a rare and beautiful event. Take
notes, there will be a test later.”

Harry looked at her with both eyebrows trying to escape his forehead before blowing out a sharp
breath. Sitting back he said, “Well, this oughta be good.”

“Innermost. Feelings. Potter,” she growled at him through clenched teeth. He held up his hands in
surrender. She whispered something that sounded like “fuckhead” but relaxed a little.

“It's like this, Harry. You two were literally my first friends, ever. I was...well, compared to what you
had to put up with, it seems a little whiny. But I was really badly bullied basically my entire school
career. Malfoy and his goons were only the most recent and visible. It started long before Hogwarts,
though, and that was honestly not as bad as before. Did you know I was taking advanced secondary
level classes when I got my letter?” Harry shook his head, a little confused.

“Yeah,” she said straight-faced, “turns out, I'm really smart.”

“Really?” Harry replied, similarly.

“I've got documents proving it,” she deadpanned back. Shaking her head, she continued.

“I skipped grades three times, was in all kinds of accelerated learning and advanced placement
programs. They really didn't know what to do with me. My parents didn't like how I didn't have any
friends and wouldn't push me into University yet, but I might have been able to do that if they'd let
me. Maybe it would have worked out better, who knows. That was just when I got my Hogwarts
letter and everything changed. Or at least most of it.

“Before, I was...not popular with the teachers. This was even before my...err, brain-thingie.” She
looked embarrassed to be talking about it again, but Harry just nodded his head and rolled his hand,
indicating she should continue.

“They didn't like being corrected by a weedy little know-it-all girl when they were wrong and they
fought back with their students, mostly by showing them it was okay to pick on me. Then it
escalated.

“I was grabbed by older students and locked in some outbuildings overnight, several times. First
time, I was found the next morning, crying and scared out of my mind, hours after my parents started
a full hue and cry when I didn't come home. The next time, they looked there first and I was only
terrified for a few hours. Same thing after that, but still really exhausting and scary. I was also tricked
into empty classrooms and locked in so I'd miss my classes – that happened more than once. My
locker was vandalized over and over, people stole my stuff, tried to poison my food once, even. I
think that bitch might have been genuinely psycho, though. Never saw her again after she got
suspended.

“Anyhow, not much was done to the students they caught and I ended up changing schools multiple
times because my parents couldn't get them to protect me. At the last one, some ultra-exclusive
London private school (I honestly don't care to remember the name as I was only there a couple of
months) I was at least protected physically. Everyone there was scared to death by the fancy security
system and their no-tolerance policy for bullying. Just meant it went underground, though. Snide
comments in the halls when no one can hear, glares and taunting when teachers and security cameras
weren't around. Pushing and some genuinely gross “pranks” in the girls bathroom. Actually got
chased home by a mob of teenagers once, which is saying something given how little time they had
to hate me. It was a lot like Hogwarts, really, now that I think about it.”
She got a far-off look again, this time with a frown on her face. Harry felt sick. He'd never known about this. The only way that could have been worse was if they'd had wands. He was worried about what came next. Sure enough, she relentlessly continued.

“So, I did some research at Hogwarts my fourth year: turns out mundane kids can sense magic a bit, not much really, and they absolutely hate and fear it at an instinctual level. The stronger the young magical, the stronger their reaction. Think you might have had some of that, too, but you never talked much about your schooling before Hogwarts.

“Things didn't have a chance to get too bad at Hogwarts before people were mostly too scared to pick on me. Because of you and, to some extent, Ron and his brothers. But it was still not great. Showing off in class the first few weeks certainly didn't make me any friends. Did you ever notice when I stopped that, just after the Triwizard fiasco kicked off? Yeah, after vocally supporting your claims not to have entered, every time I offered an answer in class the other girls would glare at me. Later, I'd find something missing from my book bag or magical paint on my bed or something. I quieted down real quick after that.

“But I was talking about the first year. I didn't spend just that one Halloween night crying in the bathroom, you know. My roommates hated me at first. Later, they just sort of tolerated and feared me. Some of the older girls, mostly not the Gryffs though I think one got me once, they would jinx me in the bathroom when they thought they could get away with it. Had to visit the hospital wing more than you that year, I bet. Only time I could get to myself, to let myself cry in safety, was in some lonely bathroom that no one used. You know how I am, if I can't emotionally dump on someone. It just builds up in my whatsit, magical secondary emotive memory or whatever. More than a little Myrtle in me, that was for sure.”

Hermione patted Harry's arm, pretending to ignore his clenched jaw and shaking fists. “It's all fine now, Harry. I know people who care for me and are true friends. You and Ron are okay too, I guess,” she said, smiling cattily at him. Frowning at Harry's lack of reaction, she sighed and jumped him, knocking over his coffee mug and sending him crashing to the ground. Wrapping her arms around him in a crushing hug, the young woman giggled like a little girl.

“Harry, cheer up. We'll get through this mess together and then everything will be good and bright again.” She grinned a little nervously, but it still helped.

He'd cheered up at the time, but had still noticed that her bright smile didn't reach all the way to her eyes. It never did, really, not after three months later when Hogwarts fell and she heard about Neville.

Oh, she still smiled sometimes, later on. Like when she'd found an especially nasty curse, or got a chance to use that curse on someone with the Dark Mark, or had just used that curse on someone and their smoking corpse was at her feet. But her eyes didn't smile. Ron had tried to help her, even after she'd started pushing everyone away. It had taken almost three years before he and Luna had called it quits – just after the wedding in fact. Hermione had decided not to attend, even though they'd all tried to get her to come.

Ron had lasted longer than anyone, and he'd been there when Voldemort finally caught up with her. It was Ron who had caught that Avada Kedavra for her, saving her life but killing the last piece of her heart left alive. An angry and grieving Ginny had found her after that, attacked her, and eventually become her new best friend, the two massively unhappy women finding common ground in revenge. Then, a few years later, Ginny became her wife. He hadn't been invited to the wedding. He hoped Hermione had managed to smile during it, all the way to her eyes.

The next time Harry saw Hermione, she didn't have eyes.
Chapter 4

Harry Potter and the Witch Queen
by TimeLoopedPowerGamer

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter.

Chapter Four

The blond ponce had just barged into the compartment, exactly how Harry had remembered. At least some things didn't change.

Glancing around, Harry saw Ron getting ready to start shouting and Neville trying to hide by squirming deeper into his seat. Hermione was still pretending to read and had covered up both of their notepads, which Harry realized were now absolutely covered in horribly incriminating information.

Looking at Draco, it didn't seem like he'd noticed anything on them and the angle was wrong, so maybe they were safe for now. He'd have to work out a way to burn them or something before they got to the castle. Maybe get Hermione to work a fire spell; Incendio was a First Year spell and she'd already read the book, shouldn't be an issue. Get a bin and burn them in the bathroom or something. He'd have to ask Hermione about it after Draco left.

Blinking slowly, Harry realized that he'd left Draco with his hand hanging out for almost a minute now, just staring blankly at, or rather through, the increasingly red-faced boy. Harry had been thinking about other things and had just sat there with a blank look on his face this whole time. Draco's hand dropped to his side at last, both hands now clenched into fists.

"Well, that wasn't what I meant to do. But why not?" Harry thought, continuing to stare at a point slightly behind Draco's head. "I'm an adult this time – no reason to let this little shite try to intimidate me."

After a few more seconds, Draco cracked. "What's wrong with you, Potter? Are you totally mental or being intentionally insulting? How dare you sit there with blood traitors and mudbloods ignoring me, Draco Malfoy?" he demanded, red-faced and furious. Ron growled at this but still didn't say anything, also looking to see what Harry was doing. Draco's goons were just standing there, confused. Harry wasn't fighting back or even saying anything at all and they weren't trained on how to deal with this passive reaction.

Harry sat perfectly relaxed, still expressionless, still staring through the white-haired boy. Draco was having a very hard time working out what to do. "I don't have to put up with this, Potter. My father is a very important person and I will not be insulted and ignored! He will hear of this!" he said, stomping back into the passageway and slamming the compartment door closed.

"Woah," Ron whispered, "that was seriously cold, Harry. Awesome." The redhead's eyebrows were raised all the way and he looked at Harry like he was a strange new type of sandwich. Harry shrugged but still smiled a little.

"Not nice," Hermione scolded him with her Professor voice. "But, he was also being mean. That mud-word he used was extremely rude, I assume?" she asked, looking at Ron and Neville.
Neville looked really uncomfortable but didn't say anything, his face bright-red. Ron clenched his jaw but responded, glaring at his shoes. “Yeah, it's basically saying what it sounds like: your blood is bad. Stupid idiots think because your parents are muggles, they aren't much better than animals and neither are their kids. You're a witch, Hermione, simple as that. The rest doesn't matter, at least to people who aren't total gits.”

Her Professor facade cracked a little, a tiny smile touched her lips and her eyes shined, then Hermione swallowed reflexively and put her cover persona back in place firmly.

“Thank you Ron, that was very informative,” she said archly. Harry was still trying to stay out of it but couldn't help grinning. Neville looked relieved and Ron embarrassed but everyone was finally able to relax a bit.

Getting a ton of snacks from the cart lady later improved everyone's mood (well, not that much Hermione's – her parents being dentists had warped her irreversibly) and they spent a few minutes chatting about their families. As Harry knew now that simple charms kept magicals teeth perfect for life (and because he didn't care) he stuffed his face while they talked.

Mostly Ron and Hermione did the talking as Harry wouldn't say anything about the Dursleys except that they hated magic and were awful and Neville only talked about his Gran and didn't seem to want to bring up what Harry already knew about his parents. No one asked Harry about his parents, for obvious reasons. After a bit, Harry tried to change topics.

“Hey, Ron? Which House are you going to be in?” he asked the redhead.

“Gryffindor, of course!” Ron said. “All my brothers went there and it's a family tradition I guess. You'll end up there too, I'm sure,” he said, not sounding entirely convinced. Harry frowned briefly, wondering if he and Hermione were giving off Ravenclaw vibes or something.

“Yes, I think so,” Harry said. “I heard...I heard my mom and dad were in Gryffindor. So I think that's where I want to go.”

“This is it,” he thought, feeding them the information to try and ensure his plan worked.

“I heard you can ask to go into a specific House when you're sorted,” he said, casually, “and they usually let you. You have to be firm about it, because they might try to talk you into going somewhere else. I was just thinking it would be really great if we all ended up in the same House.”

All three of the others perked up at that, then looked thoughtful, still munching on snacks.

Later during the unending train ride, Neville and Ron were bravely trying to play another game of Exploding Snap while half-asleep when Harry once again nudged Hermione and showed her his notepad. He needed to make sure of this.

Hey, Hermione!

She quickly grabbed her notepad and wrote back:

Yes Harry?

He scribbled quickly and she read as he went:

I know you've read about the houses and I wanted to make sure you didn't think Ravenclaw was a better one. I need you near me, especially with this strange problem I'm having with my magic. If you were in another House, we'd only be able to meet in the library or in free time on the weekends and there would be a good chance we wouldn't be in the same classes.
Mind visibly racing, Hermione responded:

Well, I had thought about Ravenclaw. I hear they appreciate knowledge and learning more than the other Houses. Dumbledore was in Gryffindor, though, and he is a great wizard. I'd like to be like him some day.

Here, Hermione bit her lower lip and looked hesitant before continuing.

But most of all, I want to be in the same House as you, Harry. And I meant what I said. I do want to be your friend. I haven't had any friends before and you are the most interesting person I've ever met. Not like other kids my age.

Glaring briefly at Neville and especially Ron, she kept writing.

Which is something I was wandering about. Tell me, how old are you, really? What year were you in?

“Shit,” Harry thought, “I hoped this wouldn't come up until later.” He didn't want to discuss it but felt he had to now that she'd asked.

It is complicated. My sixth year was screwed up and I never really finished my last year of school, but I fought Voldemort for 15 years after that. I was just past my 31st birthday when I was sent back.

Hermione's eyes grew wide and she started to stare at him but quickly ducked her head when he looked over at her. She'd abandoned the notepad and was twisting her hands in her skirt, hiding her face behind her hair.

Looking over at the others, Harry saw both Neville and Ron almost nodding off, so he took a risk and reached over to gently shake her shoulder. She flinched a little but looked up again with scared eyes. He motioned to the door with his head then got up and quietly left the compartment. Ron and Neville didn't seem to notice. He waited in the hall until Hermione finally joined him, almost a minute later.

Glancing up and down the corridor, Harry checked to see if they were alone. With the noise of the train and the doors to all the other compartments closed, they should be private enough for a short conversation. Distracted for a second, Harry noticed again that Hermione was actually a little taller than he was at this age, something he'd almost forgotten. Still looking guiltily at the floor, she stood against the door to their compartment like she really didn't want to be there.

“Okay, what is it Hermione, what's wrong?” he asked, startling her. She mumbled something he couldn't hear over the train. He took her arm and pull her away from the door, further down the corridor.

“This should be fine, no one will hear us. What's the matter?” he asked.

“I didn't know,” she whispered.

“Know what?”

“That you were actually an adult. I thought you were almost our age, like 15 or 16 maybe. That you'd gone back in time while you were at school,” she whined.

“I don't understand, how does that matter?”

She looked at him like he was crazy. “You've an adult, Har- Mr. Potter. I'm just a kid and here I am
acting like you're my age. If you were only a little older than me, that might work. But you're as old as teachers, as my parents. I can't believe I acted that way around you, Mr. Potter,” she said, burying her face in her hands. “You must think I'm awful and disrespectful and a silly little girl now.”

Finally understanding what was going on, Harry sighed deeply. “Hermione, no. Of course I don't think that. Look,” he said, putting his hand on her shoulder, “I knew you, back in my time, since this day, today.” He frowned, realizing that didn't make any sense, and tried again.

“That was almost total twaddle, sorry. We were the same age. I went to Hogwarts with you. I grew up with you. I was a good friend of yours and I hope to be again. I didn't think of you like that before and I certainly don't now.”

She looked up at him again, hope in her shining eyes. Smiling reassuringly, he gently squeezed her shoulder. “My first time at Hogwarts, I was a scared little kid and my life had been rather horrible up to that point. Now I have more...life experience than that young boy did. But I'm still excited to be going to Hogwarts, even though I know most of the lessons through Sixth Year – well, at least for my electives. I wasn't a model student back then, so I'm sure there are many more things for me to learn. But that isn't the real reason I'm looking forward to going to school again. What I'm really looking forward to at Hogwarts is a chance to see old friends and get to know them all over again.”

She was still shaking a little but wasn't about to start crying now. He could see she was going to give him a ribs-crushing hug at any moment, so he simply gave in and let it happen. Stopping himself from frowning again, he wondered how much damage that friendless month had done to her during his previous life at Hogwarts. Holding an 11-year-old Hermione as she barely kept it together, he thought dark thoughts about preteens.

He knew it wasn't as bad, physically, as Harry had suffered at the hands of his cousin and so-called guardians, but the psychological torture must have been intense. This only reinforced Harry's long-held opinion that all little kids were crueler and more psychopathic than even Voldemort – strangely, an opinion which he had founded sort of backed up in scientific studies in some of the psychology books he'd read in the last month.

Finding himself unable to practice magic for a month until starting (again) at Hogwarts, Harry had sought out something useful he could do, something to help his old (and now new again) friends. Thinking back to how strange they had been when he’d met them, he realized that many of them and their parents had major psychological issues, some issues he later found out only soldiers and police usually had in the so-called civilized nations and refugees and child soldiers had in worse-off locations.

And why wouldn't they: parents dead or magically tortured into insanity, extended family killed or driven out of Great Britain, friends, loved ones, and strangers murdered in front of them in the streets of Diagon Alley; anyone would have unresolved issues after that.

He couldn't remember hearing of any of his friends ever getting psychological help – Harry certainly hadn't ever received such help himself at Hogwarts. Mind Healers were rare, even in this prewar period, and most were dedicated to curing magically induced mental issues, not “mere” childhood issues – something that was barely recognized in the wizarding world – let alone PTSD or other trauma-related syndromes.

After seeing how strongly Dumbledore had reacted to (he assumed) discovering Harry's abuse at the hands of his so-called guardians, Harry had thought it might be a higher priority to find some basic muggle books on the subject of both child abuse and the kind of trauma survivors of Death Eater attacks would have. Last time at Hogwarts, it seemed like Dumbledore had just shrugged off most of the issues Harry had. Maybe the old man hadn't realized the depths of the abuse he'd suffered or just
assumed he was a drama queen, but this time the old wizard had seemed ready to kill his muggle relatives because of what he'd found out.

Perhaps Dumbledore had had more experience with this kind of abuse than Harry knew. He had only vague recollections of the old wizard's family from some research he'd done after the man's death; a long-dead sister, a father who'd died in Azkaban, and an estranged brother was all he'd found. For whatever reason, Dumbledore's reaction had seriously surprised Harry.

Before, he'd practically been told to “man up” and get over his issues by any adults he'd complained to. All the bullying his friends had suffered had gone practically unpunished. No one had even tried to comfort them, the victims. Remembering how badly his own teenage years had gone, the bursts of uncontrollable anger and the damage his Accidental Magic had done, Harry sarcastically thought to himself that that might have been the wrong approach. So he went looking in the muggle world for answers.

The librarians had looked at him a little strangely when he'd asked for their help finding the books, but assisted the mature-acting boy after he'd (honestly) said he was looking for books on the subject to help some of his friends. Normally, he knew such a flimsy excuse and the topic itself would draw more attention, but the Charms Dumbledore had placed on him seemed to make any and all muggle adults less likely to interact with Harry – most seemed to not notice him unless he directly asked something of them. His relatives had certainly ignored him like that. So his questions about books helping survivors of violence, death, and child abuse had gone relatively unnoticed.

The books he'd found had presented facts in such a way that even a non-professional like him would be able to understand. What he'd read suggested again that the issues both he and his friends and their families suffered from were worse than he'd originally thought. He concluded that the only real solution was professional help, from a combination of Mind Healers and muggle therapy.

This was a type of healing he'd seen regularly given to soldiers from the UN Expeditionary Forces, troops who had landed in mainland Europe late in the war after Voldemort had finally struck-out against countries like France, Belgium, and Germany, following his consolidation of power in Great Britain.

Harry had assisted in several missions, embedded as a native information source for forces attempting to retake the magically occupied island nation. He had seen that the Americans especially had ensured their fighting men and women were given the help they needed to deal with the worst battlefields humanity had ever encountered, magical and muggle weapons combining into horrors never before seen. That the UN forces had been fighting a losing battle from day one only increased the need for such help.

Both the muggle and magical elements, which had worked together openly after the shattering of the Statute of Secrecy on a global scale, had experienced grueling combat and come out the other side of those encounters with major mental issues. Horrible dreams, insomnia, flashbacks, panic attacks, paranoia, all were treated with both magical and muggle techniques to heal the mind.

The idea that many of his friends had been suffering from these same problems made him burn with anger. Someone should have helped them, he thought. Adults in the magical world had much to answer for. Maybe Harry could somehow get at least the children to muggle experts.

Which brought him back to his current situation, trying to comfort his new-again muggle raised friend. This was something a little less serious than witnessing murder at age six, but much more common. She'd been different and the demon-spawn known as normal children had mauled her for it, possibly driven to greater depths by some kind of “manaphobia.” All muggle-born had to deal with this very specific way of being different, with no help from the magical world until 11. Almost
forever as children saw such things.

It seemed like muggle kids could sense magical kids, and usually reacted very poorly. Even without Accidental Magic to draw attention, they were able to see something was different with the young witches and wizards and shunned them, at best. Dudley leading his torture squad had only focused the bullying and driven off less dedicated harassment. Harry was sure others would have taken the fat boy's place, given the chance.

Harry could almost agree with Salazar on how harmful muggles were to young magicals, as all his muggle-born friends had similar stories to Harry's. Behind the pure-blood propaganda, what the "Dark" founder had wanted was no muggle raised magicals at all, with any muggle-born fostered with full or half-blood families and raised in the magical world instead of the muggle from birth.

His objection to those raised outside the magical world going to Hogwarts was obvious: until they were of school age, those children had to remain ignorant of magic along with their parents. Thus, they would enter the school at a serious disadvantage, taking up space that could have been used to educate those raised in the magical world, those who would almost always do better because of that advantage. This was in addition to the issues of keeping the magical world hidden with two muggles added to the secret per muggle-raised Hogwarts student and the issues those children would have from being forced to live in the muggle world for 11 years. Waiting until their Hogwarts letter arrived was pure torture for most of them and Hermione was certainly no exception.

His first time through, he'd been no help to her. He'd practically ignored Hermione's feelings until the troll incident and that entire time she must have been suffering. After joining a fantastic new world literally full of magic, something she'd taken as her last hope for happiness, she had still found no comfort. Brilliantly skillful in this new ability she was again shunned by her peers, her deeper problems again ignored by her teachers. She must have been so excited getting on the train and so disappointed when everyone at her new school treated her as bad or worse than before.

Grimly smiling, he gently hugged his old friend, young again, and helped her return to their compartment. They had much to discuss, he had magical knowledge to share and, most importantly, books with which to distract her. She would still be twitchy from previous bullying and related ostracization, but he'd do his damnedest to make sure she'd never be so alone again. She'd never be forgotten and left crying in a bathroom all afternoon and god help Ron if he so much as opened his fucking mouth this Halloween.

Being awake during the entirety of the Hogwarts Express train ride was a lot less boring than Harry had anticipated. Even though Neville and Ron quickly drifted off into serial naps, Hermione kept raiding his trunk for new books, flipping through them quickly one after another. She'd made it to the Third Year Charms book by the time they'd started to slow down for Hogsmeade station. Everyone rushed to put on their robes, with Hermione standing in the corridor while the others changed.

After putting Harry's books back into his trunk (Hermione had to take that over, using some secret female packing strategy to stuff it all back in) they found themselves some of the last to leave the train. The huge voice of the half-giant Hagrid (Harry had to remind himself that was again a secret now) called them to the boats with the rest of the first years. Seeing the castle whole again was almost as good as seeing it for the first time. The last time Harry had seen it, it was still burning with Fiendfyre after Voldemort's final attack, not a tower or wall still standing.

Now it was lit with joyful lights, waiting for them to arrive to start the feast. The four new friends found a boat of their own and the group started out to the castle. Hermione kept up a constant barrage of questions, whispered just over the sound of the boats gliding over the lake, directly into Harry ear. The topics covered the lake, the castle, Hogsmeade, Hagrid, and Harry himself. She was
careful not to ask anything related to his future knowledge, but Ron and Neville still gave them strange looks at her questions and his whispered replies.

Piling out of the boats, the scared looking little kids were handed off to McGonagall, who lead them through the castle to just by the Great Hall. The Head of Gryffindor House briefly looked the young students over with a slightly sour look on her face. When her eyes met Harry's, she flinched slightly and quickly moved on, telling them to wait until she came back to lead them to the Sorting, the feast to follow immediately after.

“That was strange,” he thought. “Wonder why she reacted that way. She obviously recognized me. Hard to miss the scar. But that wasn't her reaction last time.”

Standing and waiting with his four friends for her to return, he saw Draco Malfoy and his goons (predictably) approaching again. He decided on the same strategy as before – no reason to change what was working. He whispered to Hermione, “Whatever he says, don't react. Let me try something. Pass it on to the others.” She gave him an annoyed look but nudged Ron and started to whisper at him. Harry slide forward a little so he was slightly in front of his friends and waited, not yet looking directly at the blond idiot.

“Potter,” Draco sneered at them, “seems you still have poor taste in your associates. I once again recommend you dump the penniless redhead, the mudblood wench, and the squib and consider an entirely better class of friends. People such as myself.” He grinned as if he'd said something both brilliant and amusing.

Harry once again simply stared at Malfoy with a completely blank face. Behind him, Ron had started to say something but Hermione interrupted in a hurried whisper that shut him up again. Neville wouldn't have said anything anyway and was simply watching along with most of the waiting children.

“What is this? Are you both stupid and mute? Answer me when I talk to you!” Draco demanded, face growing redder by the second. Harry simple stared through the moron's head, face still expressionless, but body loose and ready in case the mouth-breather did something extra stupid.

His magic might be malfunctioning but, even with an 11-year-old's body, Harry could still take him easily. He'd hung out with US Special Forces troops for years and had picked up some basic moves in return for patching up their minor training scrapes with his semi-competent Healing magic. No pure-blood ever learned real, physical fighting techniques and, even at 11, constant chores had left Harry wiry and tough, if a little skinny from poor nourishment. Draco would be demolished in seconds.

Starting to open his mouth again, Malfoy was interrupted by McGonagall returning to take them to the Sorting. Whispering reminders to Neville and Ron to be calm and insist immediately they be put in Gryffindor, he followed the group from near the back. Briefly squeezing Hermione's hand, he smiled and repeated his advice, adding, “It'll be fine. Nothing to worry about, just make sure to ask for Gryffindor and we'll talk again after the feast.”

The Great Hall was as impressive as he remembered, the ceiling a beautiful starry night sky. All the tables were full of older students, an uncomfortable number of which he remembered dying during the war. Many of those at the Slytherin table had joined the Death Eaters but older pure-blood students from all Houses joined what looked like the winning side eventually. Fewer Gryffindors than others, obviously, but Wormtail had a fair number of young imitators from the House of the Lion.

After the same strange song it had sung the first time, the Hat and McGonagall started the Sorting.
All the first years looked so young and tiny to him now, even more so as they took their turn to sit on
the stool and wear the Hat. Harry didn't remember all the assignments from last time, but everyone
seemed to be getting sorted the same way. Made sense. He hadn't interacted with anyone but his old
friends and they were all going into Gryffindor anyway, the same as last time.

He didn't exactly remember, but it seemed like Hermione spent a little longer under the Hat than she
had the first time. Long enough that her Sorting had been the longest up to that point by far, but not
long enough that people started whispering. She looked extremely pale and shaky as she took her
seat at Gryffindor table to modest cheers from the Lions. He'd have to ask her about what had
happened later.

Neville also seemed to take a slightly longer time than the others, but was still sorted into Gryffindor.
Malfoy was, of course, almost instantly sorted into Slytherin. Soon they started the P's (Parkinson,
Patil times two, Perks) and the room started getting much quieter, with almost no cheers between the
Hat's pronouncements. Harry was a little more aware of his surroundings this time, being about 80%
less terrified, and saw many older students trying to spot the famous Harry Potter among the Firsties,
their necks craning to get a better view. The teachers at the main table had apparently already spotted
him and their occasional quick glances at him were extremely unsettling.

McGonagall was prune-faced and still busy with the Sorting, her attention entirely on her job (as
usual), but two of Heads of Houses had strange emotions cross their faces every time they looked at
him, similar to McGonagall when she'd met them after the boat ride. Was it...sadness and pity? That
was something else new. Last time, they had all been pleased and excited to see him. More changes
because of Dumbledore, perhaps. The last Head of House, Snape, was the oddest. Instead of the
sneers Harry remembered, his face was entirely blank and he simply stared straight ahead at the
opposite wall, unmoving and stiff in his chair.

Seeing Quirrell sitting there fidgeting nervously with his tableware next to Snape made him quickly
look away – Harry wasn't really looking forward to challenging his mental defenses against
Voldemort's shade so soon, so he carefully avoided eye contact with either the front or back of his
head. He'd take care of that snaky bastard soon enough.

And then it was suddenly Harry's turn. He realized he'd been standing there for several seconds after
his name had been called and lurched into motion, recovering quickly and walking steadily toward
the stool. McGonagall seemed to control her features carefully as he glanced back and up at her, only
slightly twitching as she stood behind him and watched as he dropped the Hat onto his head.

"Oh ho, what do we have here?" Harry heard echoing through his mind. Taking a deep breath, he
kept his cool and decided to test his luck a little.

"Uh, hello," he replied. "I've heard good things about Gryffindor, so I'd really like to go there with
my friends."

"Yeah, yeah, we both know it won't be that straight forward," the Hat responded.

Harry's blood froze. Was this the Slytherin thing again? Was Voldemort's soul fragment in his head a
more powerful factor with his own magic broken? He had expected the Hat to notice something
strange about him, but if his Cursed Scar didn't twig it last time, what was happening this time?
Maybe it was something else?

"We both know you've been sorted before." the Hat said next, Harry quietly panicking at the
unexpected pronouncement. It was quiet for the longest time, then the Hat said, "Strange. You're not
disguised or Polyjuiced or something like that, yet you have the mind of an adult. No childlike
wonder or confusion here. I don't remember much about previous Sortings, but I would remember
something like this happening before.

“Hmm. Yes, some hardening of the heart, maybe from the sad things that sometimes happen in the worst families. But so long ago, almost a forgotten memory despite the pain. The rest is more like a veteran warrior, used to death and loss. I've seen the worst damage caused by war to young kids in my days, some even in this year's Sorting, but nothing like this.

“But none of that really matters, because as I've said, you have already been Sorted.”

Harry wasn’t too proud to admit to himself that he totally panicked after hearing that. Trying to mount a defense, anything to keep this disaster from ruining his plans, he decided to just ask.

“I don't understand. Why do you think I've been Sorted?”

The Hat sighed in his mind. “Well this is all most unusual, so why not. I'll explain the secrets of the Sorting to you. I would ask that you not tell anyone else, but I'm sure you would anyway if it was to help you save lives. I can see that clearly enough. Just don't release this secret without good cause.”

Harry quickly nodded his head. He realized this was really dragging on, students starting to look uneasy at the amount of time this was taking. He was well on his way to challenging the record for longest Sorting for the second time.

“Well, the first thing you should know, young Gryffindor – yes, I can tell that I where you were sorted, for reasons I'll soon explain – is that there are certain Laws, both magical and legal governing the creation and use of magical Artifacts that have both Sentience and Mental Magical abilities.

“First, the magical Law: no Sentient Artifact can possibly be made to act outside specific Rules, set when the Magic is laid down. If you could actually figure out what rules a human mind runs on, you could make a magical object indistinguishable from a human's mind. Otherwise, the magical object will be much more limited. I, for example, can only assist in Sorting students and advising those associated with Hogwarts in related student issues. Also, I have a second task which Godric himself secretly put into me shortly before his death. I will not discuss that second task for my own reasons, do not even ask.

“Second, the legal status of Mental Magic Artifacts: no such item is allowed to report results of it's Legilimency outside of registered uses. These legal limitations are strongly guarded – Hit Wizards responding to unregistered use of Mental Magic Artifacts tend to curse a lot first and ask questions of anything still capable of rational thought later.

“If I were to report thoughts of students or attempt to read and report thoughts at any time other than the Sorting, I would be destroyed, Founder's artifact or not, and anyone trying to use me for that purpose would end up in Azkaban for life. The use of such is also not allowed in trials or questioning suspects. It is too easy to influence most items that can read minds, changing their reported results – I am, of course, of such power as to be beyond any corruption.” The Hat seemed more than a little smug at that statement.

This was all news to Harry. He'd never suspected anything like this before but it made sense. Why wouldn't everyone have magical, mind-reading hats otherwise? That second task sounded a lot like delivering Godric's sword to someone worthy, something that had saved Harry's life when he'd been fighting the basilisk.

“Oh Great Sorting Hat,” Harry started.
The Hat interrupted him immediately, “Seriously?”

“Okay, fine. What you are trying to say is, you won't tell anyone about it if I tell you why I show up as already sorted?”

“Correct, child.”

“Can't you simply read my mind and find out?” Harry asked.

“Nope, doesn’t work that way. I can't actually read that kind of information, just general emotions and feelings and such, including emotional histories of people who wear me. You know, that touchy-feely kind of stuff that kids need help with and adults lie about,” the Hat replied.

“Then how do you know I was sorted? Can you tell me?”

The hat sighed again in his mind. “Sure, why not. I put a magical mark on everyone I've ever sorted, indicating which House they were sorted into. It is only active and detectable when someone is inside Hogwarts, however, and most of the magic that was designed to take advantage of this mark has eroded or been lost over the years.

“Originally, the House dorms and some other locations and items were automatically set to work only for students belonging to the correct House. Now, the original locations are no longer used as dorms and the magic is replaced with spoken passwords and such. But the original magic is still applied to every student.

“Also, a minor mental compulsion is put on the child to keep details of the Sorting a secret and keep them from discussing it with anyone who hasn't gone to Hogwarts. The Sorting Song I sing is actually a cover for this Charm being cast over all the new first year students. It is also when I do the initial reading on new students, to determine where they see themselves going and how they feel about it. I count how many people have firm choices and which can be Sorted to fill quotas for House slots. But the secrecy charm is the most delicate part.

“This powerful and ancient magic, which is completely safe to use on children by the way, is effective even over the long-term. If someone tried to force a Hogwarts student to tell the secret it wouldn't protect it, but anything short of a life-and-death situation would find them choosing to simply not say anything about me. This is why one can't tell other people about how the Sorting works, at least the exact details, like what magical object is used. Otherwise, every student (except for the muggle-raised) would know how it works before their First Year. Every book on Hogwarts would have the details and people might try to manipulate me.”

Harry was stunned and confused. “This is a lot to take in, Hat.” he finally thought. “Also, a little creepy. But sure, that makes sense.”

“Well, while I'm sharing, did you know the Houses weren't originally anything but color-coded dorms?” the Hat said. Harry was getting tired of surprises and realized that his Sorting was really dragging on, but this information was literally priceless.

“No, Hat, I didn't. What exactly does that mean?” he replied.

“It's like this, Harry: the Founders didn't actually base the Houses on attributes they liked or animals representing them, or even their names. It was simply based on colors they all picked out: Red, Yellow, Blue, and Green. Not even their favorite colors. Those were the original names of the Houses, but soon after their deaths people started trying to associate attitudes and names with the Houses. First, the Founders' names replaced the colors as House names, then, a few hundred years
later, the animals were added.

“It is rather sad, actually. The Founders knew that factionalization was dangerous, so the colors were simply ways to tell the Houses apart. Even Salazar agreed, at the time. They originally even shared a single, large set of common rooms as well as having separate, color-coded dorms. The only other things the colors were used for was the House points system, seating arrangements, a few enchanted items, and inner-house sports teams. Ever wonder why the current dorm locations are kind of strange, with two in towers, one in a subbasement and one in the dungeons? Those are not the original locations, which are much, much larger. They moved them sometime in the 1500s and again in the late 1700s. Current student populations are at an all time low, and they've only been shrinking for the last two hundred years or so.

“Harry, the very idea that young children should be split into groups based on how seemingly inquisitive or ambitious they are or could be is quite insane. I certainly can't tell the future and the concept that there will be even near an equal number of loyal or brave students ever year is absurd. I was originally enchanted simply to make sure friends and relations weren't split between Houses unnecessarily and that all the Houses ended up close to numerically equal. If you wanted into Red House and it wasn't full, I'd let you sort into it. If your childhood bully was in Blue, I wouldn't sort you into Blue House. Do you seriously think someone like Neville is a perfect Gryffindor, based on the traits ascribed to it? Consider that he might simply have wanted to be with you and his other friends!

“This original system was changed and corrupted when the Houses were renamed and reinvented as strange trait-based groups. I still ignore it, for the most part, but with the changes in student dorms and extreme factional violence, especially between Slytherin and Gryffindor, I have had to make sure someone won't get too badly bullied by their peers. A child who wasn't seen as brave enough would get bullied in Gryffindor, for example, but some families are now known for being in a certain House and would have even worse issues if they weren't sorted as tradition dictated. For example, putting a Weasley boy into Slytherin would be like throwing chum to the sharks, even if the child was, say, very ambitious. Not that I'm saying anything about a boy, specifically, not even one I'm about to sort. Just a hypothetical example. Makes it hard when I can't put many muggle-born or even half-bloods into Slytherin. More of them every year who can afford the tuition. So anyway, those House traits are a self-fulfilling and self-imposed structure, one the Founders never intended.”

“Woah, wait a second,” Harry said, mind churning, “does that mean Draco Malfoy wasn't put in Slytherin so quick because he's an evil git, but because you needed to fill the Green House quota of pure-bloods? And I guess because you really, really wanted to be sorted that way?”

“I can't comment on other student's Sorting results like that, but the situation you describe is certainly possible, even likely,” the Hat replied evasively.

“But this is taking so long that people are starting to get worried. Why don't you tell me why you've already been sorted and then I can decide whether you are a threat to Hogwarts that needs to be magically restrained while the proper authorities are called,” the Hat finished in a suddenly serious tone, obviously no longer playful or teasing.

Mouth dry, Harry quickly decided nothing short of the truth would work here. Licking his lips reflexively, he concentrated carefully on his mental link with the Hat. “Well, uh, yeah. So. There was this ritual and I went back in time and-” Harry started.

“Welp, that's enough for me, shut up now thanks,” the Hat quickly interrupted.

Blinking slowly, Harry once again considered how surreal his life was.
“Wait, wait, wait. Seconds ago, you were threatening me with the Aurors to get me to tell you about why I'd already been sorted, but now you don't want to know anything?” he asked, incredulous.

“Harry, really not going to go into detail, but that's right. Magically messing around with time and then actually telling a creature of pure magic about it is a very, very bad idea. Worse than meeting yourself, which by the way you absolutely shouldn't try to do. And if it is possible that might happen, don't even think about trying to tell me about how you are keeping it from happening. Look, I'm going to sort you immediately, just saying where you've already been placed. Can't really do otherwise, at this point. So you go to Red-”

“No, no, wait! Please! I need to make sure you sort a Firstie next year, Luna Lovegood, into Gryffindor! She got horribly bullied in Ravenclaw last time and she is, was, argh...she's a good friend of mine! Just telling you about that should be enough to-”

“GREAT. FINE. SHUT UP. Merlin, I really hope you don't destroy all of...what did that one muggle-born kid call it? The theological physicalist or whatever? Blue House or Ravenclaw sorted, named...uhhh, Hawks? Went back to muggle college for his degree and post-grad stuff. Dumbledore was so proud of him. Then, just before the war, a Dark wizard cursed him, leaving him in one of those wheeliechairs, or whatever muggles call it. Has to talk with a muggle device now but still does such great work. Was the thing called...place-time? Everything, including yesterday's kitchen sink, boom. Saw stuff about it from that bushy...errr...one of the other students this year. She wouldn't shut up about it. Don't do it is my point. Anyway, have fun doing whatever and stay out of trouble in GRYFFINDOR.”

Sweat was slick on Harry's forehead and his legs shook as he stood up and removed the Hat. McGonagall gingerly took it from Harry and turned it over and around in her hands, staring at it for a while. Harry stumbled to the Gryffindor table, taking a few steps before the Weasley twins, the first to recover, shouted, “WE GOT POTTER!” and the entire Gryffindor table exploded in cheers.

Hermione and Neville were saving him a sport between them which he dragged himself toward as the entire table stared at him and cheered. His two friends were near fainting with stress but were also absurdly relieved looking. Hermione was also now just starting to appear annoyed at him, as if it was his fault he'd taken almost 10 minutes to be sorted. Neville just seemed glad it was over.

Hermione immediately started whispering questions into his ear again, which made some of the older students raise their eyebrows at the two Firsties apparently necking right in the middle of the Great Hall. Ron had been quickly sorted and was now sitting with the twins across from Harry, practically bouncing out of his seat with joy. Thankfully, the food appeared almost immediately after Dumbledore's strange speech, which Harry missed entirely this time because Hermione's superbrain could apparently whisper questions in his ear while also listening to the ancient wizard.

As good as his own cooking had been over the last month, nothing satisfied like a Hogwarts feast. Harry enjoyed himself while dodging or ignoring the more serious questions of his fellow Housemates, trying to keep in mind how little he should know about the wizarding world at this point. Attempting to be a little more sociable and a little less like the emotionally damaged boy he'd been during his first time through this year, he tried to engage in conversation with some of the older students he'd never interacted with previously. He had limited success but at least now they wouldn't think he was quietly plotting their doom or something.

The meal went by in a joyful flash, but when dessert was about to be served Harry's Teacher Sense started tingling. Sure enough, McGonagall was just about to sneak up behind him and grumble something. Harry turned and smiled at her and she paused, a worried look crossing her face, then continued walking over to Harry's place at the table.
“Mr. Potter, the Headmaster wishes to meet with you immediately after the feast is over. Please wait for me outside the Great Hall once everyone is dismissed and I will take you to his office. I have already informed your House's Prefects of this so they know not to expect you until later.”

“Got it, Professor. I'll wait for you there,” Harry chirped. Nodding once, she turned and quickly walked back to the teachers' table. Trying to avoid the Headmaster's gaze, she sat and stared at her folded hands.

“Minerva? How...how did he seem?” he asked, barely above a whisper. Clenching fingers together until her knuckles turned white, she quietly growled back, “He seemed well, Albus. Better than we could possible deserve.”

Sitting in Dumbledore's office again was both familiar and strangely different. Harry was in a large, overstuffed chair with his feet swinging, staring at all the strange clicking, swinging, blooping, glowering, and humming devices that covered the Headmaster's office. McGonagall had given no hint about the topic of the meeting as she led him to the gargoyles (password for the day: “sweetroll”) and the Headmaster hadn't looked up from his paperwork until Harry was seated along with McGonagall. When he did, it was without his usual twinkle; instead he appeared to have rings under his eyes and a sad smile on his face.

“Mr. Potter, welcome to Hogwarts,” he said gently.

Slightly unnerved, Harry gulped and tried to remember to talk like an 11-year-old. “T-thank you Headmaster. I'm, uh, very glad to be here.” Harry replied, uneasily.

The Headmaster peered at him owlishly for a few seconds, then relaxed visibly. “Good, good. Well young Harry – may I call you Harry?” he asked.

“Yes, of course Headmaster,” he quickly replied.

“Please Harry, at least call me Professor Dumbledore. I fondly remember my days as a teacher and would rather be reminded of that than the paperwork that currently collects on my desk as Headmaster.”

“I understand, Professor,” Harry said with a grin.

“It is getting late, Harry,” Dumbledore said, a small twinkle returning to his eyes. “I will be brief so that all the old people can get to bed on time. What the young people decide to do is, of course, between them and their Heads of House.” McGonagall cleared her throat loudly, glaring at Dumbledore.

“Ah, yes, quite right,” he said, smiling quietly now. “Harry, I am sure you enjoyed your time in the hospital wing as much as any of our students but it is necessary for you to receive the next in a series of checkups with our Healer. Tomorrow after classes, we will need you to see Madam Pomfrey for an extensive series of medical tests. This will be entirely painless but does involve an overnight stay.”

Harry's mind spun. There was something obviously wrong with his magic. Trying that simple spell had left him incredibly tired and he was only now recovering. It hadn't even worked and he still felt a little light headed. Maybe a visit to the hospital wing would come up with some answers.

“Okay, Professor. I'll check in with her right after classes,” Harry said, then almost slapped himself for forgetting he wasn't supposed to know his way around. “I, uhh, think I remember where it is from last time.”
Dumbledore smiled at him. “I'm sure, Harry, but make sure to ask a Prefect if you get lost. Though getting lost will certainly be a major pastime for first year students this year, as is usual, it wouldn't do to keep Madam Pomfrey waiting.”

“Well,” Dumbledore said, slightly more tense than before, “one last thing young Harry: this Wednesday after classes there will be a different sort of Healer in the hospital wing, one I hope you'll agree to talk to. Her name is Doctor Tonks and she is a Mind Healer.”

Dumbledore shifted uncomfortably in his chair, looking at some spinny thing on a corner of his desk. “Allow me to explain. As a Healer like Madam Pomfrey works on the wounds of the body, a Mind Healer works on the wounds of the soul. Usually, she heals the damage done by magical spells that target one's mind or soul, but sometimes...sometimes bad things happen, events that are entirely mundane, that cause similar injuries.

“Words have Power, Harry, and she is skilled at listening to the words people use. Understanding comes from this and Doctor Tonks uses her skills and this greater understanding to help people and heal such hurts.”

Turning back to Harry with a sad look in his eyes, Dumbledore continued, “I would like you to spend some time talking with her this Wednesday after classes, and for the next few days after that. If you feel uncomfortable talking to Doctor Tonks, you do not have to continue seeing her. But I would like you to consider at least giving what she has to offer a chance, even if it only turns out to be a kind ear to talk to about your classes or your favorite type of sandwich meat.

“Her specialty is listening, after all, and we need to make sure she feels appreciated.” Here the corners of his mouth turned up, but he didn't really smile.

This was exactly what his friends needed, Harry realized. He had no illusions about his screwed up psyche being fixed this way, but maybe he could wrangle it into sessions for Neville or Hermione. Some of the older students he knew less well were missing parents or other relatives and most of the adults had seen some awful stuff.

Maybe he could somehow “fake” getting better. Having the Boy-Who-Lived helped this way by a Mind Healer might make it a more popular treatment option. Harry realized what the Daily Prophet would likely do once it got out that he was being treated for “madness” with a Mind Healer. The headlines almost wrote themselves. No matter, it was worth it for his friends. Not trusting his voice, Harry simply nodded slowly.

In a split second decision, Harry decided to share his latest magical health incident. “Professor Dumbledore, I...I had another episode on the train.”

Instantly looking worried, Dumbledore's face fell. McGonagall leaned over and put a gentle hand on his arm, looking worried.

“I am so sorry to hear that, Harry,” Dumbledore quickly said. “Could you tell us what happened?”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry said. “Uh, I was trying to do a Levitation Charm to show my friends how it worked. And I did everything right but...the sock only twitched and then I felt really weak and sick and fell down. Uh, Hermione took care of making sure I didn't hurt myself but I couldn't get up for several minutes. I didn't pass out or, uhh, throw up like the other time and I was feeling a lot better by the time we got to the castle.” He shifted uncomfortable in the chair, something about huge looming adults making his tiny child brain way more nervous than he really should be.

“I'm sorry, I really am,” he continued. “I, err, didn't say anything before and maybe I should have but
everything was so busy and exciting....but then you said I'd be going to the hospital wing and that reminded me, so...” He ran out of things to safely say, hoping that was enough and not too much at the same time. McGonagall was patting his arm comfortably, her face scrunched up and lips pursed, obviously holding back some kind of scolding. Dumbledore nodded silently and relaxed slightly after listening to his explanation.

“I see, I see,” Dumbledore said, nodding wisely. “Thank you for telling us, Harry. You are certainly not in any trouble. As I remember, I ran through the entire First Year Charms textbook on my first train ride to Hogwarts, casting one spell after another. This left me so entirely exhausted that I fell asleep in the clotted cream tureen during dessert at the Gryffindor table. My classmates teased me about that until Fourth Year, if I recall.” Dumbledore seemed to realize he'd gotten off track and coughed. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry would swear that McGonagall rolled her eyes.

Briefly looking at one of the strange spinning devices, Dumbledore smiled suddenly. “Good, good. Thank you for your time, Harry. We all have so little of it but it is always good to share it with a fine young man such as yourself. Well, you should hurry over to the hospital wing now. Madam Pomfrey would be quite upset with me if I made you wait until your scheduled checkup tomorrow after falling ill earlier. I certainly do not expect any problems so this is just to make sure. Minerva will escort you there and then back to your common room where I am sure your new Housemates are waiting to talk with you before heading off to bed.”

“That was a strange thing to say,” Harry thought. “How could he-”

Glancing at the odd nicknacks around the office, Harry realized that some of them must be monitoring student locations around the castle. Of course! If some bratty 16-year-olds could make a live map of Hogwarts in their spare time, of course the Headmaster would have something as good or better. That would explain how the Heads of House always seemed to be able to find misbehaving students, but only if it mattered enough for Dumbledore to be involved. Must not cover the Chamber or the Room of Requirements, though, same as the map. And it seemed, from what he said, that Hermione must be waiting for him in the Gryff's common room.

“Well then, Professor, I shouldn't keep them waiting. I'm sure everything is fine. I feel much better already,” Harry said, getting up to follow McGonagall out of the Headmaster's office, a smile pasted on his face.

“If Dumbledore had something as good as the Marauder's Map, what about voice monitoring?” Harry thought, “Magical image recording? Spell monitoring or even mind reading devices?”

Walking to the magical spiral staircase, he realized he was hitting some kind of paranoia event horizon and seemed to be getting relentlessly sucked in. It was clear that either talking with Hermione in the common room or sneaking off with her weren’t safe ways to discuss things. He couldn't even try for the Room of Requirements until he was sure he wasn't being watched.

He'd have to figure something else out, some way to safely answer her questions. And soon. She would not be pleased if they had to wait until this weekend or even a minute longer than necessary, and he knew he would suffer if he failed her.

His medical checkup had been inconclusive (as he expected) and he had simply been given a couple of nasty potions (also as he expected) and told in no uncertain terms to not cast any spells unless a teacher was present until tomorrow's more extensive exam.

McGonagall led him to the Gryffindor entrance, opened it (password: “courage and truth”), and gently pointed out the First Year boy's rooms. Waiting nervously until she left to move further into
the room, he quickly became confused. He had expected the questions to start moments after he entered the common room. The lack of bushy-haired ambushers...worried him. There were a couple of older students taking advantage of their later curfews to catch up, snog quietly in a corner, or (for one studious Seventh Year) getting some early studying in, but otherwise the common room was quiet. What had Dumbledore seen? Maybe she had gotten tired of waiting.

Shrugging and thanking his lucky stars for the delay in his interrogation, Harry went up to the dorm rooms he so fondly remembered and got ready for bed. Seeing his roommates were already all asleep, he quietly closed his curtains, carefully adjusted his wand holster under his pajamas so it wouldn't pinch, and tried to drift off to sleep.

What seemed like ten seconds later, his bed shifted suddenly. He quietly inched his wand down his arm and cursed his inability to set up proper wards. He couldn't risk passing out and spending the next day in the hospital wing. Harry carefully kept his eyes closed and continued to pretend to sleep. Who could be after him now? Draco couldn't get in here – not yet anyway. He had avoided even looking at Quirrell at the feast earlier. Could he even get one spell off before whatever was wrong with him made him throw up?

“I can see you're awake, you know – one's breathing pattern changes slightly at arousal,” the bushy-haired one whispered directly into his ear. Harry barely avoided screaming like a little girl and instead squeaked quietly.

“Interesting point not mentioned in *Hogwarts, a History,*” she continued, speaking in one continuous stream without breathing, “one which I just found out from a Prefect today, is that while the girl's dorm stairs are warded against males entering (an alarm sounds in the Head of House's office and bedroom and the trespasser is physically thrown out, I am told) the *boy's* dorm has no such alarm, which is totally sexist if you ask me but I'm sure it was designed by someone who thought that equality was a couple of horizontal lines used in 'maths' and not something that women either had or deserved and based on what I've seen so far the entire wizarding world is in sore need of some woman's suffrage, which I don't know if it even happened in the wizarding world as apparently no one votes for the Minister for Magic, which is not a viable system of-” She was suddenly cut off as Harry put a hand over her mouth, opening his eyes with a wince. She was glaring at him already but wasn't struggling. Still, not a good sign.

Hermione had crawled onto his bed and was currently on all fours, leaning over next to his head, whispering up several doctoral theses into his ear. Her hair was now tickling his noise. “Hermione,” he asked in a whisper, still covering her mouth, “what are you doing?” He took his hand away. She glared at him for a second before continuing.

“Oh, getting more information from you, of course,” she said, looking incensed at his stupid question. “I assumed that common areas might be monitored by either teachers or Prefects, so meeting you here was the obvious solution.”

“So, you don't see anything...improper about being in the boys dorm after curfew?” he asked with a grin, wondering where the rules lawyer he knew had gone. She was still self-aware enough to blush a little, it seemed.

“Harry! We're *eleven.* At least physically. Don't be obscene,” she said, looking disappointed in him, still leaning on her elbows next to him and whispering inches away. “Anyway, it only says students have to be in bed in the dorms, not in their own, specific beds. Just 'in bed'. Maybe they later clarify what is expected for older students, but in the mean time: I am in the dorms. In a bed. So hush.” Harrumphing, she glared at him again.

“Okay, wow. So. How did you do it?” he asked.
“I bored them into inattention,” she said, obviously proud of herself, “After you didn't show up after a while, I went to my room. And then I came back to the common room, wandered around some, and asked someone where I could get a glass of water. Then I came back again asked where the bathrooms were. Then again, and asked if there were extra pillows. By that point, all of the older students were annoyed with me and either pretending to be busy or had simply left. So the last time I just wandered around some and then hid behind a chair in the corner and waited. I saw you arrive and snuck up here after waiting long enough for you to get ready for bed. Figured someone might detect it if I tried any spells, so I didn't even try.” She looked extremely pleased with herself, grinning widely at him.

“Well done, Hermione,” Harry said, “But what about monitoring for voices in here?”

“Ah, glad you asked,” she said, “Magical monitoring either works based on remote access to the audio in a room, in which case muffling the noise enough should work, or direct magical interaction with the people in the room. The second case would require a strong ward or privacy charm to defeat if it was targeted on a specific person, but I do not believe that kind of spell would be used on a school child for no reason.” Here she paused.

“You didn't do anything to draw attention to you like that, did you Harry?” she asked crossly.

“No, nothing like that. It was just a meeting about my, err, health issues.”

“Good. In any case, do you know how the laundry is done around here?” she asked. Harry blankly shook his head to that non sequitur. “Well, the clothes and sheets are magically cleaned. Like with non-magical laundry, this leaves a noticeable residue on the sheets and blankets. For places where medical magic is practiced, such as the hospital wing, everything is actually washed by hand to avoid this, it seems.

“I talked to a very helpful 5th year Prefect and a pair of red-headed twins – Ron's brothers, I think. Anyway, they seemed very interested in the questions and provided some very useful information on what that kind of magical residue might do to monitoring charms.” Harry continued to look at her blankly. Hermione waited with bated breath.

“So?” he said, eventually. Hermione sighed and rolled her eyes. “So, get under the magic-soaked covers so we can have an eavesdropper free conversation, Harry.”

Both of them crawled under the blankets (amazing how many are needed when you are in a dank castle), Hermione lit the end of her wand with a quick spell, and they huddled up again. It was stuffy with Hermione’s face inches from his and she had peppermint breath.

Harry immediately started explaining the year's known dangers to her before she tried to start a magicals radical privacy organization (first thought on horrible names in his head, Wizards/Witches Helping Improve Privacy Screens, or W.H.I.P.S. – he carefully didn't mentally explore why Hermione and whips seemed to spring to mind together so quickly).

Topics he covered included Quirrell and Voldemort's shade, teachers with mind-reading abilities, potions class and Snape, Blood Purists and bullies, dragon eggs, and what was really behind the third floor door.

Harry carefully explained how he thought they should just leave it alone because it seemed like it was designed to avoid hurting any students Quirrell might use to try and trip the traps, not actually keep him out, and the final Mirror of Erised had been working when he interrupted the first time around and was likely the final piece of the trap. He very carefully didn't explain how final trap worked, and Hermione seemed to notice this and avoided asking questions.
By the end of it, Hermione was having to physically keep her mouth closed with one hand and was vibrating enough to shake the bed. “Harry!” she quietly squealed, “This is the best school year ever! We're going to have so much fun.” Her eyes were shining and she was grinning ear to ear. “Well, so long as you don't do anything stupid, that is, like try to fight an adult Dark wizard at 11,” she amended, staring hard at him.

“No, no,” he quickly said, “my plan there is to expose him when Dumbledore is around to take him down. Somewhere away from students and innocent bystanders.”

“You'll let me know what you are planning and when,” she didn't ask.

“Yes, fine, okay.”

“And you'll let me help plan stuff.”

“...fine.”

“And, and you'll be my best friend,” she said quietly, not looking at him and picking at a fuzzball on the underside of the covers.

“Deal,” Harry said, sticking out his hand, still under the stuffy, heavy blankets. Hermione stifled another laugh and used his offered hand to drag him into another crushing hug, the two of them making a blanket-ghosts-hugging shape under the covers.

Out of breath from silent laughing, Hermione finally released him and reviewed. “Well, let me see: no looking teachers in the eyes, no responding to bullies in the halls, watch out for Snape and don't engage him, no battling ghostly Dark Lords at age 11, no pity-parties in the bathrooms. I think I've got it. What about your magic being messed up? Did Madam Pomfrey say anything about that?”

“Err, well,” he started weakly.

“Spit it out, Harry,” she said briskly.

“No one really knows anything yet,” he said, sighing. “It seems like it is some kind of magical exhaustion type of thing, but it is like my magical core is permanently 99% empty or something. I can't really cast any spells and it hasn't gotten much better in the last month. But they're going to do some more in-depth tests tomorrow after class. I'm sure it will be fine once they figure out how to treat it. The only thing they were really worried about was me being a squib or somehow losing my magic entirely.”

Hermione looked worried at this, but he quickly tried to divert her attention. “Look, Hermione,” he said, “I'll keep you informed on my treatment and in the mean time, I'll just have to depend on you as a sort of Seeing Eye Witch, like with the helper dogs for the blind. You can cast all my spells for me, do my classwork when I'm called on, do my homework for me because I'm too weak to lift my quill—” Here Hermione interrupted him by slapping him on the arm and glaring at him.

“Okay, fine, fine. But I'll still need your help, you brilliant young witch you,” he said, causing Hermione to burst again. “Whatever happens next, we'll work it out together.” She smiled and took a deep breath, then seemed to suddenly wilt with sleepiness. Hermione must have been running on pure adrenaline all evening, he realized, and now she was crashing.

“That's everything, then?” she asked, holding back a yawn.

“Well, it is the reason Voldemort is still alive,” Harry said, causing Hermione to gasp. “Basically, his spirit can't pass on while pieces of his soul are still stuck in some enchanted items. Each one was formed with a Dark ritual that involved a murder. And there are a lot of them hidden away, more than four I think. Maybe as many as six or even twelve. Dumbledore started searching for them and gave me some of the details. After...things got bad and I was on my own, I was searching for them with...with some friends but we didn't have very good leads.

“We were looking for them but we never figured out where they were, which is one of the reasons why...why we couldn't win against him. Wouldn't matter if you killed his body, he'd just come back again as a spirit and make a new one, or possess someone like our current DADA teacher. They could even try to possess someone themselves, then you'd end up with another copy of Voldemort who'd try to gather up his disembodied spirit and absorb it into the copy.”

Hermione was somber at this revelation, thinking silently. “But they can be destroyed, right?”

“Right: really high-level Demon Fire spells, basilisk venom, possibly some very rare enchanted weapons, possibly the Killing Curse on living containers, but making those would be stupid,” Harry replied.

“So it seems simple,” she said. “Get the information about the ones you know to Dumbledore early along with how he was searching for them last time. He's a powerful wizard and, if given extra time, should be able to do more than you were able last time. There is no reason an 11-year-old should have to solve that problem. If it involves wandering all over the UK looking for hidden objects, adults really need to be in charge of it. Say you're having dreams about them or whatever. Even the third-year Divination stuff I was reading about seems kind of hard to prove one way or another, so you could claim prophetic dreams, I guess.”

“I had a similar idea, Hermione. Might work,” he said. “I'm going to wait a bit until things calm down, though. See if I can get a reputation as reliable and not entirely insane so maybe someone will listen to me.”

“Hmm, yes,” she said, smirking at him. “Sanity was the first attribute of yours I noted. That and your extreme height. They both make for a strong first impression.”

“Haha, funny, Hermione,” he sighed. “But it is time for all good super-genius witches and broken, time traveling wizards to get some sleep.” He had to endure an extremely toothy grin in return, followed by a tongue maturely being stuck out at him.

“Sleep tight,” Harry said in a sing-song voice. “Don't let the giant basilisk in the ancient Chamber of Secrets under Hogwarts bite.”

Hermione paused while crawling backwards out from under the covers and gave him a questioning look. Harry looked back at her with a straight face. Eventually she shook her head and grinned, obviously thinking he was taking the piss.

“Yep,” Harry thought, “this is going to be the best school year ever.”
Chapter Five

Still wiping the sleep from his eyes, Ron dragged his book satchel down the corridor towards the Great Hall. Breakfast came way too early. 10:00 AM classes had to be a crime. The Wizengamot should investigate.

Just as he was stepping off the central stairs, he heard a grunt and a thump above him. Looking up, Ron saw Harry Bloody Potter jumping from floating stair to floating stair, seemingly too impatient to wait for the things to float to a stop on their own. Ron was just in time to see Harry jump up onto the side of another stair, chinning up onto it in a flash, then blindly hopping over the railing on the other side, ending his fall square in the middle of a flat landing on a stairway fifteen feet below him.

Several heart-stopping jumps later, Harry was off the stairs and running straight for him, having navigated them in a tiny fraction of the usual time. And he wasn't even breathing hard.

“Ron!” Harry yelled at him, skidding to a stop.

“B-bloody hell, Harry. Where's the flippin' fire?” he stammered, backing slowly away.

Moving so fast he seemed to Apparate, Harry ran up and grabbed the front of his robes, growling, “Listen very closely, Ron. I don't have much time. Hermione is in the hospital wing. She was attacked. There is a chance I'll need to exfiltrate the castle with her in about ten minutes. I need you ready in the front entryway, outside the Great Hall, in five minutes. The signal to start this operation is me shouting 'Butterbeer.'”

Harry frantically looked around them again, then leaned in closer and continued, “When I give the word, and ONLY IF I give the word, you need to throw stuff and fire off every loud and annoying spell you know at random to create a distraction for as long as possible so I can get out the front entry hall. After that, either escape or immediately surrender. They won't do worse than give you detention, but you have to wait for my signal.”

Harry shook Ron by his collar like a limp doll. “Can you do this, Ron? Can you?”

Ron's eyes grew wide. This was his chance for an adventure with Harry Fucking Potter. Hells yes he could do this. “I-I'm your man, Harry. I'll be ready in three minutes. Wait for 'Butterbeer,' then go crazy in public. Got it.”

Harry suddenly grinned, but with all his teeth showing. It was more than a little frightening. He slapped Ron's shoulder really hard and snarled, “Good man. Knew I could count on you. If you don't hear from me after twenty minutes, just walk away and go to class as usual. Debrief after Herbology if I don't give the signal. If I have to leave, I'll owl you with a dead drop location in a few days. In that case, contact me using it during the Hols. Stay frosty, Weasley.”

Harry then sprinted at full speed down the corridor in the opposite direction to the hospital wing, slapped a wall in an apparently random location which opened a secret passageway Ron had no idea
was even there, and finally disappeared down it in a flash.

Ron was frozen for a few moments, brain still not catching up with what had just happened. It was still the first week of classes and he was already getting into adventures with Harry Potter.

“Time to move,” he thought to himself, running down the corridor toward the Great Hall. Whatever an “exfiltrate” was, it might happen to that poor nerdy Hermione girl. Harry needed his help. He hoped she was okay and that he wouldn't need whatever a “dead drop” was. Sounded dangerous. Man, Harry was one intense dude.

He was standing on a rocky, wind swept shore. Warming Charms and a half-dozen layers of clothing almost kept out the horrible northwestern Greenland cold. He couldn't even remember if it was winter or not. He hoped this was winter. Any colder didn't seem possible. Snuggled into his chest was his slightly-barmy (but very cuddlesome) wife. She was currently staring into the choppy waves and ice flows, looking for yet another impossible creature.

“Dear,” he started to say.

“No, we are looking for a type of white whale. Not a deer at all,” Luna interrupted. “Really Harry, imagining you could see one out here. What are you thinking? A poor deer would freeze to death in this weather.”

“How could you be so cruel to an imaginary creature?” she asked, looking back at him from inside his encircling arms with mirthful, dreamy eyes.

Sighing deeply and suppressing a smile, Harry said, “Of course, I apologize my lovely. I can only hope no imaginary hooved mammals were harmed by my indiscretion.”

“I believe we squeaked by this time, lover,” Luna replied. “You didn’t seem to be imagining it clearly enough to actually summon one from the Outer Plains.”

“Right, good,” Harry said, trying desperately to regain control of the conversation. “So, this whale. Uhh. Has a...”

“A long tusk or tooth coming out the front of its head. Looks sort of like a unicorn horn,” she replied, scanning the waves again.

“Ooookay. So this unicorn whale lives around here, does it?”

“Yep,” Luna said, still scanning the distant waves, now bringing a pair of Magiglasses to her eyes. The large device looked like a pair of ski goggles on a stick. Based on the old Omnioculars design, it gave her both normal and magical sight at a fairly good magnification and replayed anything seen through them on demand. This model also had a spell residue tagging feature, but that wasn't what Luna was interested in this time.

“See any yet?” he asked a few minutes later.

“Not yet, Harry,” she lazily replied, snuggling back into his chest. He wrapped his arms tighter around her, holding them both against the driving wind while trying to remember how much he loved his slightly mad young wife. Seeming to sense his impatience, she dropped the Magiglasses and let them swing from the chain around her neck. This freed her hands, which she wrapped around his where they held her around the middle of her bulky coat.

“Harry, we can't have you growing bored here!” she exclaimed, turning slightly in his arms to look
into his eyes again.

“Any number of dangerous magical creatures on ice sheets hunt using boredom. They can sense it, like sharks with blood in the water. Anything would grow bored, just staring at white snow and ice all the time, and these creatures track that feeling, homing in on it before pouncing and devouring their prey. So I completely understand how you feel, but for our safety I must do something about it.” She was now smiling brightly, like the sun reflecting off the icy shoreline.

Luna carefully removed one of her gloves and stowed it in a pocket. Her hand quickly grew red in the freezing wind. Shifting slightly to bring out her wand, she proceeded to drag it briefly down each side of her coat while whispering a few words. Tucking her wand behind her ear and under her huge, fluffy, fake-fur hat, she started removing his gloves, too. Harry looked at her questioningly but she just smiled and slide them into pockets on his coat. She retrieved her wand again and cast a warming charm on each of his hands.

“Luna, that won’t be enough to keep them from freezing in this weather,” he said gently, not understanding what she was doing. His wife only grinned wider and put her wand back into her coat sleeve. Grasping his hands with hers (one gloved, one bare and growing colder by the minute) she turned away from him again and pressed her back into his chest.

Feeling around carefully, she maneuvered his bare hands to her sides where she’d waved her wand earlier. To Harry's surprise, there were now small slits in her coat. His hands were guided deeper by her smaller ones and he found that not only the coat but her sweater, blouse, and long underwear had also been cut open by the spell, leaving his slightly chilled hands to brush against the bare skin of her sides.

Shuddering briefly at his cold touch and humming a cheery little tune, Luna playfully twisted back and forth in front of him, causing his hands to rub against her stomach. He took several deep breaths, leaned into her shoulders, then moved his palms to her chest. His fingers brushed against her ribs and found...nothing. She wasn’t wearing a bra, for some reason. Had the cheeky witch planned this ahead of time?

Hold her tighter to him, he crossed his arms over her chest and cupped her gently, left hand to right breast and vice-versa, running his palms across her nipples slowly. She giggled, her entire body shuddering briefly in his arms. “Your hands are cold, love,” she whispered over her shoulder. “Better keep them there until they warm up again.”

“Whatever you say, beautiful,” he responded quietly, rubbing gentle circles on her soft skin. Taking a deep, shuttering breath and collecting herself, she retrieved her glove and put the Magiglasses to her eyes again. “It might be some time until I see them, you know. You should keep us both from becoming bored. For safety purposes.”

“Absolutely,” he said, squeezing suddenly and causing her to gasp and twitch in his arms. “I’m all about safety.” His right hand slowly glided lower down her body, pausing occasionally to stroke her warm skin. He paused just below her firm belly, his hesitation a question. She immediately widened her stance and put a free hand on his elbow, pushing his arm and hand down. He tucked his hand under her belt. She wasn’t wearing any knickers under her multiple layers and thermal bottoms.

Snuggling back into him again, she lazily scanned the icy waves far out to sea. Minutes passed in comfortable silence, broken only by the occasional giggles and soft, shaking mews from the blond in his arms. Fingering a lusty young witch on a freezing shoreline in Greenland wasn’t a normal mission for the Hero of the Light, but he’d be damned if he wouldn’t do his very best. He wasn’t aiming for anything earth-shattering but his slow and casual attention hopefully kept her from becoming bored. He certainly wasn’t anymore.
Despite the light sticking charms on their feet, she almost slipped on the icy rocks after a particularly complicated maneuver that ended with her audibly applauding, her cries loudly and enthusiastically praising his skills. Playing Seeker, brewing complicated potions, dueling Dark Lords, pleasing witches – all needed skillful hands and he liked to keep in practice.

After that, he decided her chest was a safer place to keep his hands warm after all. Her brief, aching whine when he shifted positions suggested she didn't agree, but Luna quickly settled back into his chest and continued to look out to sea as before, if on slightly shakier legs.

He was having enough trouble with his own...situation at this point that he had little sympathy, but he knew she'd repay the favor. With interest. She always did, usually in surprising and sanity-endangeringly inventive ways. He'd just have to face that later. For now, mission accomplished.

His mind drifting (somehow) away from sex, he asked a question he'd asked many times before, sure he'd get a similar answer. "Luna my heart of hearts, why do you love these strange and rare creatures so much?"

She stiffened almost imperceptibly, then immediately relaxed again into his arms, twisting and arching her back to rub herself against his hands again. "It is a...complicated story, my heart's desire," she said in a low, husky voice, "but it may be time for you to know it. Do you truly want to hear this thing, something which once known, can not be unknown?"

"I...wait. Isn't that one of those Internet jokes?" he said, incredulously.

"Interesting that you should say that, my love," Luna said, slowly gyrating in his arms still. "The Internet is the final playground for those tricksters, the lesser Fae. Oh, they do love their cruel jokes on humanity. They feed on pain and suffering just as easily remotely as in person. It is the emotional damage that matters, not the distance. But that is not who I am. I am much...stranger."

"Of course not. You aren't strange, you are my lovely Luna," Harry said, hugging her body to him and feeling her melt into his embrace.

She sighed contentedly. "Thank you, Harry. But I must be deadly serious for a minute. This isn't easy for me. What do you know of my father?"

"Xenophilius raised you as a single parent since...since you were nine," Harry started, "he had some...interesting ideas about wizarding politics, and he ran The Quibbler until...well, and he loved you and your mother very much, Luna. I'm sure of that." He hugged her close once again, feeling the tension in her body.

"Thank you again, Harry. As usual, you are correct," she said softly, wrapping her arms over her chest and over his. "What you may not know is why he was the way he was." At this, Harry grew still and listened closely.

"He was...do you know how old Flitwick was part-goblin, on his father's side?" she asked, looking over her shoulder at him. He nodded.

"He was...do you know how old Flitwick was part-goblin, on his father's side?" she asked, looking over her shoulder at him. He nodded.

"What's wrong Luna? Nothing you could tell me would make me love you less – you know that, right?" He rocked her slowly in his arms, waiting for her to look at him again.

"I am sorry, Harry. Through my silence and inaction, I have committed a lie of omission. I am not who or what you think. But I am afraid to say it out loud," she said, almost inaudibly. "Please. Bend your head and I will whisper the secret in your ear, for only you and the not wind to hear." Leaning
over Luna's shoulder slightly, he tucked his head in and waited. Turning her head, she now breathed directly into his ear, tickling him softly.

“The truth is, Harry, I am—” she started. Static and a loud, high-pitched whine filled his head, shutting down one of his senses. He nodded twice, hearing her story and understanding at last why Luna was who she was, then he said something to her. She nodded back sadly. For a few minutes he squeezed his wife tightly again, holding her as she sobbed without sound. Then his senses were once again his own and his wife was weakly reaching for the Magiglasses again.

“I love you, Luna,” he said into the scarf covering the side of her neck, “and I always will, no matter what.”

“I know, Harry,” she said quietly, once again scanning the waves, “and I will love you for all time and in any time as well. I hope you can remember that, no matter what happens, and also that I am sorry for any pain I cause you.” Harry suddenly felt her body tense and she took a huge, gasping breath, shifting his hands on her chest in interesting ways.

“Harry, look!” she shouted, pointing with one hand while staring through the Magiglasses. Off in the distance, fairly clear to see was a whale-shaped creature, larger than a dolphin, pale as a drowned corpse, and just poking its head out of the water by small piece of floating ice. It had a huge horn shape growing out of its nose.

“Amazing!” Harry said, shocked to see one of Luna's strange creatures in person at last.

“Here Harry, take a look!” she said excitedly, offering him the Magiglasses. Then she squeaked as he hurriedly dragged one hand out of her coat and over her sensitive skin. Taking a long look through the device, he could clearly see the mythical creature Luna had described.

“Isn't it lovely,” she said, wiggling against his remaining hand, her nipple now hard as stone again. “Best Honeymoon. Ever,” she groaned.

“Absolutely,” Harry said, still in awe. “What was it called again? A Nargle?” he asked, still confused to actually be seeing this.

“No, Harry. I told you before. It's a Narwhal. A rare and beautiful creature.”

Tickling her gently, Harry replied, “Just like you, my brilliant young witch.” She started giggling and was soon laughing long and loud as they continued to watch a small group of the animals poking around the ice flow, huge tusks waving in the air.

Waking up Thursday morning, Harry had cursed for the first time in a long time (a curse he would surely be repeating regularly now) whoever thought it was a good idea to have a midnight Astronomy class in the middle of the fucking week. Half-remembered dreams haunted him then were quickly forgotten as he tried to gather the strength to drag himself out of bed. What had it been? Magic and love and secrets. Everything cold but wonderful. Sort of like this stupid castle this morning.

“Why not Friday?” he mentally grumbled. Sure, it would screw with people's “date night,” but it wasn't like broom closets closed early or anything. Yeah, classes didn't start until almost lunch on Thursday, but breakfast was still over at 9:30 AM like usual.

He'd skip it, maybe bug the elves in the kitchen for a sandwich between classes later. Shit, and he still needed to talk to Hermione about last night, so maybe that would be a good chance to introduce her to them in a safe environment. Hopefully that would help avoid her becoming something horrible
and dangerous in the future. She-Who-Knits would never torment the house elves again if he could help it – not even the vicious little Outer Plain rejects deserved that. He’d fucked up bad in their last blanket-conference and she was still paying the emotional price. Even if it took hours of hugs, he’d help her through this. Stupid future knowledge.

The first class was in the greenhouses and had a long walk, but he could sleep in until almost the last minute. No one was early to Herbology, except for maybe Neville. People could trickle in late as they were setting up and not get docked points or get in trouble. Harry was just going to...go...back...to-

A loud bark by his ear sent him shooting straight upright, knocking Hedwig off the bed in the process. Looking at him like he was a wild and dangerous idiot (which he guessed he was), Hedwig fluttered over to his trunk and glared at him. Clutching his wand in one hand, Harry tried to calm down, taking several deep breaths.

“What is it, girl? I was trying to get some sleep,” Harry said calmly, trying not to piss off the magical creature of Wisdom who was also his friend. Hedwig was obviously agitated, hopping from one leg to another.

“Hedwig, is something wrong?” he asked. The owl bounced up and down in front of him, somehow looking even more worried.

“What?!” Harry yelled, leaping out of bed and scrambling for his pants and robe. “Who's in trouble, girl? Where?”

Hedwig quickly walked over to the copy of *Hogwarts, a History* sitting closed on his trunk and thumped it with her beak. Harry paused, half into his robes, confused.

“What, there isn't a class with that-” he started to say, then it hit him. Hermione's favorite book.


“The corridors somewhere?” Nope.

“The...outside, the school grounds, maybe the greenhouses?” he asked. No several times.

“Oh no. The hospital wing?” he asked in horror. Hedwig bounced once, quickly, flapping her wings. “Fuck fuck fuck. Was she attacked, Hedwig?” Hedwig bounced again, then shoved her head toward the door.

“Right. I've got to go. Right. Need backup and a plan. Fuck it, I'll plan as I go. Backup is a secondary objective.” He turned to Hedwig again. “If I'm not back tonight, girl, find me. I'll have gone into hiding with Hermione.” Hedwig nodded once, not arguing.

Harry grabbed his book satchel and strapped it to his back, leaving his hands free. Checking his wand holster, he glanced around the room he might not be able to return to ever again, then sprinted out the door at full speed.

If Hermione was in danger, simply being in the hospital wing might not protect her. Worst case scenario: a Death Eater plot to kill her, possibly Voldemort's shade. He wouldn't have time to find the perpetrator or convince anyone of the danger, so he might simply have to run away with her. If she was stable, he could get them to the wilderness, maybe run through the Forbidden Forest until they reached a road. Then the Knights Bus into central London and disappear into the mundane
world. If she couldn't leave her bed yet, he'd just have to guard her with his life.

Blowing through the common room at full speed, he almost ran over a Second Year, who swore at him as he ran out the portrait hole. Best plan for both possibilities. Find out her medical state. Hopefully, she'd be awake so he could get some answers, fast. If not, covertly capture and interrogate a classmate or other bystander for information about the attack. Then find out who did it and kill the motherfucker who DARED- no, no wait, revenge wasn't the point, survival was. Get away safe, plan, strike back.

“Get your priorities straight, Potter,” he growled to himself. If only his fucking magic was working. Didn't matter, you worked with what you had. He had decades on-the-job training fighting Dark wizards and Death Eaters. He had a “can do” attitude and brave friends. He had a steak knife hidden in his boot from dinner last night. Maybe, maybe he enough magic for one weak cutting curse – he'd have to aim for something soft, like the neck. Crying about it wouldn't help anyone. He'd just make do. Always had before.

Racing down the corridors at breakneck speed, Harry spotted Ron at the bottom of the floating central stairway and quickly parkoured down to meet him. Hardly breaking his stride, a plan was already forming in his head and his game face was on.

Reaching the hospital wing undetected had been easy. After hitting morning traffic in the halls, he simply ghosted in behind some Second and Third Year Hufflepuffs who'd been traveling in a pack, using them to avoid stares at the “famous Harry Potter” and his ever-so-interesting scar. The fewer people that remembered him being here this morning, the better.

Edging around some armor stands, he reached the doors to the hospital wing main ward. This was it. Inching the door open, he looked for the...there, the doorbell to alert Madam Pomfrey to someone entering the ward. It was triggered when someone crossed the doorway, aimed at adult knee height from a table next to the entryway, keyed to her office, main desk, and a ring on her finger. It was how she always knew when someone was in the ward, either needing medical assistance or bugging her patients. He wasn't sure which annoyed her more. Looking around, he could see the front desk wasn't currently manned.

Opening the door another few inches, Harry slide inside like a shadow, pressing himself against the inside of the doors. No one in sight, the front desk was still clear. Carefully dropping to the ground, Harry slide across the floor, towards the first beds. Combat crawling on his elbows and toes into cover as fast as he could, Harry reviewed what he knew of the terrain. The beds had curtains, but his brief initial glance showed only one bed with them drawn at least part way around. That was what he'd head for first.

Looking around carefully, Harry scampered across to the other side of the room and the beds there, staying as low as he could while still moving quietly and quickly. Hitting a row of beds again, he started crawling under them until he reached his target. Pausing under the bed next to the drawn curtains, he waited quietly, trying to listen for the slightest noise.

“Mr. Potter,” he heard from inside the curtains, “stop playing around and get over here now before Madam Pomfrey notices you.”

Leaping to his feet, Harry quickly ducked inside the sectioned off area to stand next to Hermione's bed. The young witch was sitting on top of the bed, legs swinging over the side, looking at him and rolling her eyes.

“How did-” he started.
“Really Harry,” she interrupted, “I shouldn’t be surprised. Who else would have overreacted far enough to try to sneak in to see me like that? I heard your trainers squeak on the floor once and cast a mirror surface charm on a curtain on the other side of the room to watch you crawling along the floor. Good thing the hospital wing is so clean, or your clothes would be filthy by now.” Pausing for a second, she swallowed nervously.

“All, uhh...I could feel your magical signature from the other side of the curtains. I've spent enough time around you to, err, know your magic anywhere. And, apparently, my magical aura...uh...is about four feet wide right now,” she admitted.

“That's...uhh...okay,” Harry said, not entirely sure how to react to that one. Intel on his mission came first. “So. What happened?” he asked pointedly.

“Just a Pimple Jinx in the girl's bathroom. I think one of the Third Years assumed I was your girlfriend. She didn't appear to like that idea and suggested strongly that my face would look better covered in huge boils.”

“That's, that's...you look fine now, I guess,” he said, sort of running out of steam. His previous panic simply evaporated into the air, leaving him shaken.

“You guess, Harry?” she said archly, glaring at him.

“Uh. I mean, you look beautiful as always, Hermione. I like your shoes,” he said, as smoothly as possible for his gender.

“Good save, Mr. Potter,” she said, smirking at him. “Madam Pomfrey's potion cleared it right up. Better than the counter-jinx and no possibility of magical backlash on a failure, risking permanent curse scaring. She commented on how fast it worked. The power of a healing potion is apparently dependent at least partially on the magical power of the witch or wizard in question. That is why they are mostly ineffectual on mundanes but will still work on squibs, just not as well in some cases.”

Looking down nervously again, she shifted on the bed and started breathing a little fast. “I'm...I'm guessing they work so well for me because of...of my magic,” she started, talking more and more rapidly.

“I had Madam Pomfrey measure it with a quick aura test, making her promise not to tell anyone the results, which I was allowed to do as it was an optional medical test and thus covered by the Healer-Patient confidentiality laws; those only require her to reveal the results to a parent or guardian if they specifically asked or if it related directly to a medical condition and as my parents are non-magical, they wouldn't really have a chance as non-magicals aren't really allowed in Hogwarts and anyway that is a silly rule as, if anything, they would be less dangerous to the Statute if they knew all about Hogwarts, and anyway the castle has some of the best muggle repelling charms anywhere, which is a very rude word if you ask me – it isn't like it is someone's fault if they weren't born with magic and there are far more of them than of us, so really we're the freakish ones and oh god Harry, I'm a freak and my powers are off the charts, my aura is stronger than most adult witches already, and, and I could have a magical core potential that might surpass Dumbledore's and why can you even stand to talk to me now after last night, why don't you think I'm a freak and, and you know I'll go evil and do...do horrible things!”

Hermione had shifted so quickly from babbling nerdgirl to breaking down and crying, Harry almost didn't catch her before she fell off the bed. Carefully sliding in beside her on the hospital bed, he tried to sit her upright but with no success. She collapsed into his arms again, weeping uncontrollably, clutching his robes and saying something about never reading another book, knowledge being too dangerous, and her Dark Powers already having started corrupting Lavender, Fay, Parvati, and Sally.
“Who the hell are Fay and Sally?” Harry wondered to himself. The other two were her roommates. Maybe they were as well? He didn't remember most of the girls very well.

“Doesn't really matter right now, Potter,” he yelled at himself in his head, “Focus on the crying girl genius superwitch in your arms who can accidentally reprogram brains and melt steel when she's upset.” He was still making hushing sounds and gently rubbing her back, but she didn't show any signs of calming down yet. At least the flesh wasn't melting off his bones, so maybe she wasn't angry at him. Yet.

Damn, Harry knew spilling the details of her future last night had been a mistake. She'd seemed shaken but calm when she'd finally crawled back out from under his covers and left to return to her dorm room. Before then, she had asked intelligent and logical questions and had seemed to be relatively calm about the whole thing.

But later that night, on the way up to the Astronomy tower for midnight class, she'd seemed to be avoiding him. When he tried to confront her about it in the corridors on the way back, she'd told him she just needed time to think. It looked like that hadn't worked so well.

Now she had medical confirmation of some of his story. She was very magically powerful already and had huge potential. She knew about Voldemort's rise, the Fall of Hogwarts, the Hunt, freeing the Elves, and even some of the stuff about the damn Bargain. She thankfully didn't know which of her new friends were going to die and how. He didn't know if she could have survived knowing that.

Tuesday's extensive and through medical testing hadn't gone well for Harry. Hermione had tried to tag along to the hospital wing late Tuesday afternoon, but he convinced her that she'd only get shooed out again by Madam Pomfrey. Also, he had to stay all night and she wouldn't be allowed. She'd pouted but only as a token resistance, to show that he owed her a future favor to make up for his crass actions. Girls were kind of evil that way.

The next morning (Wednesday), he woke up to another familiar sight: Madam Pomfrey standing over his bed. And she wasn't smiling. She told him she'd already gone over the results with Dumbledore then gave him the details.

“Mr. Potter, your magical core is intact and appears undamaged, and there doesn't seem to be anything obviously wrong with your magic,” she said, frowning.

“However, you just don't appear to have much of it right now. Your magical potential is calculated from your current magical capacity (measured through slowly and carefully filling up your magical core with a neutral power source and tracking the resulting magical pressure) and the expected growth over your maturation. Yours is on the low side of the top range.” Peering over her clipboard, she made sure he was paying attention.

“That is quite good. It means that if you are healthy, you should never really have any trouble casting strong spells and should excel at whatever class of magic you might have a natural aptitude for. Overall, it is quite good news.

“However, you don't currently seem to be correctly generating magical power. This is a little understood part of a magic, but it is generally known that food and sleep help recharge one's magical energy reserves. This is the energy depleted in performing spells and other magical feats, such as ritual magic, broom riding, transfiguration, and even to some extent potion making.”

Harry looked confused (because he was). “I don't understand. If magical power just refills naturally, why isn't mine working right? Can I just take potions to refill it?”
Madam Pomfrey sighed and looked slightly annoyed. “Yes, the Headmaster asked me a similar question. It doesn't work like that. We could give you a neutral artificial magical substrate, that is how we measure core potential, after all, and it is a treatment for some core collapse syndromes, but it wouldn't actually be usable in your spells. Any you tried would just fizzle and leak the neutral magic back into the air. Maybe some ritual could refill you with attuned power, but those kinds of things are usually very Dark and aren't a cure. The power wouldn't last, it would just leak out again if you weren't regenerating naturally to that level.”

She pinched her nose, obviously tired from working all night on the tests. “This isn't a bucket that is just so big and gets filled up. Think of it more like a balloon that stretches around your power. The balloon can only get so big, your magical core capacity, but it needs to be filled gradually. If it doesn't fill up naturally and slowly, or with your own attuned power, tears or stress points could develop in your core. Over time, that could result in a permanent loss of magical power or even death. It is much better to just rest and recover naturally, which is why we don't just shove a potion into people who get magically exhausted to artificially refresh them.

“From what we can tell, your magical power is refilling, just very, very slowly. Over time, it should get better as your overall magic level increases towards your potential as you mature. But that is a long, long process and might never result in your core returning to a natural power regeneration rate.

“Let us get to what this means for you, Mr. Potter. I've asked your Head of House to join us for this meeting. I hope you don't mind, but she needed to know the details so she can help arrange anything that needs to be done to assist you in your classes.”

McGonagall walked up to his bed, looking like she'd sucked on an entire crate of lemons. And...based on her reddened eyes, she had been crying. Dear gods, this was bad wasn't it.

“Mr. Potter,” the older woman said, “because of concerns about your magical health, we will be asking you to avoid all spell casting without direct teacher supervision. That means household and personal grooming charms as well. We will find a Housemate of yours who is proficient in such charms and is willing to assist you whenever necessary. I know this is awkward for you, but this is a health issue and not a punishment. Your Housemate will understand and respect this or answer to me.”

She took a deep breath and continued. “You will be attending all classes along with the rest of your House, but if at any time your feel in any way weak or faint, you will be required to alert the teacher who will evaluate your current magical state.” Here McGonagall stared intensely at him, daring him to argue.

“This medical condition of yours leaves you extremely vulnerable to magical exhaustion, much more so than most children your age. For now, any magic will be exhausting and dangerous at the best of times for you. You will be allowed to keep your wand, but if I find you've been practicing magic without supervision, I will confiscate it, only returning it to you immediately before classes. Do you understand the seriousness of this, Mr. Potter?”

“Y-yes Professor,” he said, not having to put on too much of an act to appear scared out of his mind. “I do. I...it doesn't feel good when I use too much magic and it scares my friends when I...when I don't feel well. I won't disappoint you.”

The Professor's face softened, slightly, and she nodded her head. “Good, thank you for taking this as seriously as it deserves, Mr. Potter. I would like to remind you that today after my class Doctor Tonks will be in the hospital wing for your first session. She is a registered Healer, so if you want to discuss your medical issues with her she is required to keep them in confidence, as am I and all of the teachers here at Hogwarts. Do you have any question, Mr. Potter?”
Harry felt sick but didn't really think any more information would help him. He shook his head no. They poked him a little more, gave him some more nasty potions, then kicked him out of bed to get ready for breakfast and his third day of classes.

“Okay Mr. Potter, story time,” Hermione said, grinning at him. They were both back under the covers on his bed Wednesday night after a thoroughly interesting day of him trying to avoid doing any magic. They had hours until Astronomy at midnight and they were allowed to sleep in the next day some to make up for it, but most students simply slept until the prefects woke them for class. With Hermione in his bed, he knew they weren't getting much sleeping done tonight.

Harry blinked at his own odd thoughts. That sounded really, really wrong, even in his head.

Thankfully, all their classes yesterday and today, including the one-time-only Gryff. Orientation – there were 142 staircases at Hogwarts apparently, who knew – had been very short and very magic free. Herbology, History of Magic, and Charms had been 15 minute introductions to the subject, not full class periods. Just “hello” and “here's a handout.” And no spell casting. Except for, sort of, McGonagall's class.

Transfiguration Wednesday afternoon had been worrying. She just had them jump right into transforming a matchstick. Harry figured he needed to get it right the first time or he might not have enough juice to try again. It worked well enough for him, better than he'd expected; apparently it didn't take as much magic to do a tiny needle as some larger stuff. The key was technique, something he had plenty of from his first time through. He was still weak after and had only managed to get it sort of pointy and a little shiny looking before he started sweating.

As he was working, he could feel the Professor's eyes boring into his skull, waiting for him to waver even a little bit, but he'd gotten that far almost as fast as Hermione had and it was still a lot more than anyone else in class. Hers was much better looking, obviously, and a lot more silver.

She hadn't even bragged, just smiled gently and congratulated him when they both got House points for a job well done. In fact, all that day she'd been treating him like a bit of a cripple, ever since he'd told her (briefly) what had happened with the tests. She'd even used her “being brave” face instead of crying over him like she so obviously wanted to.

But now, back under his covers for another covert meeting, she seemed to be treating him normally again. She'd looked surprised when, on reviewing his day with him, he'd mentioned the Mind Healer visit that afternoon. After he started explaining what they'd talked about, Hermione immediately stopped asking questions and had also ceased acting like he had a death sentence. The change had been almost instantaneous.

Which was odd, but maybe asking questions about someone's mental health hit too close to home what with her own insecurities about her magical accident. He briefly wondered if she'd been taken to muggle therapists because of her accidental magic, but decided to extend the same privacy to her and not ask.

She had seemed pleased that Harry was talking to the Mind Healer, but if she thought it would help he knew she was expecting too much. It wasn't like it was really going to do any good for him – he was just playing along to get the idea more popular with the school and other adults in the hopes that someone who really needed help, like Neville, could someday get the care he obviously needed.

He'd talked to Dr. Tonks (“please, call me Andromeda”) about his day, the medical tests, and how he'd felt about the results. She'd kept the conversation light and seemed to just want to get to know him. He was fine with that. He'd also talked about his friends (pretending to have just met them, of
course) and had tried to mention stuff that might get her thinking about people who'd lost relatives like him (Neville) and those raised outside of the magical world (Hermione) and some of the issues they faced. Maybe the Doctor would take the hint.

Hermione and the issues muggle-raised magical children faced had been on his mind a lot recently. Tom, Hermione, and himself had had a rather bad time of it, maybe Tom worse than them. That kind of damage had to be a regular thing – strange that no one seemed to care. He wouldn't be surprised if the majority of Dark wizards doing world-damaging things over the years had, in fact, been raised in the mundane world.

Not caring about magical society and having been shown from an early age how little it cared for them certainly would explain a bloody rampage or two every few decades. The Witch Queen had fit that profile as well as Tom.

Hermione had clearly seen magical society's issues, but her solutions were desperate and poorly measured. Harry knew he'd do anything he could to help Hermione find solutions that didn't involve millions dying this time, and he believed she could do it some day. But right now, she was bouncing up and down on his bed under the covers, waiting for him to spill the secrets of the future. Great.

“What did you want to know this time, Hermione?” he asked, a little leery of how excited she was.

“Tell me about...myself,” she said, grinning.

“I really shouldn't,” he started.

“I know, I know. I become a real jerk or something, right? No wait, did we date and it didn't work out and now you're my bitter ex and that's why you won't say anything?” she said, teasingly.

“No, Hermione, we never dated. I just...I don't think it is fair to other people. A lot of this is personal, and not just for you. So. How about things that aren't about other people?”

“Okay,” she said quickly, eager to get anything she could, “but you have to tell me everything about what I do, if it doesn't directly involve private things about other people. You can just avoid identifying information about them, I guess.”

“Ahh,” he said, sweat starting to bead on his brow, “I'm not very comfortable...”

“Harry James Potter, you will spill the secrets of the future for me as requested. I demand it,” she said, pouting at him now. Harry blew out a big breath and seemed to lose all strength to resist.

“Fine. Okay. First things first. It isn't a nice story. Let me know if you want me to stop. You see...a lot of people die.” Hermione's grin fades immediately and she looks serious again.

“Harry, I need to know about this stuff if I'm going to be prepared,” she said grimly. “Don't worry about me, I can take it. Important stuff first, not how many kid I have or anything.”

“Okay. Well, first of all, Voldemort basically wins. He takes over the Magical government of Great Britain and from there, the mundane one. The Queen is under mind control from about Spring 2000 onward.

“That is after he destroys Hogwarts, kills a bunch of current and former students, kills a bunch of teachers and adults, destroys the Hogwarts Express, Hogsmeade, and a great deal of magical and mundane London. It gets really bad. We...we spend a lot of time looking for those magical soul items of his but we can't find the last of them. It is just you, me, and another student looking for them after Hogwarts falls. A lot of our friends died defending Hogwarts and...and only a few make it out alive.
It...I really don't want to talk about that.”

Hermione is now holding his hand and squeezing it supportively. He takes a few deep breaths and continues the horror show.

“This is...sort of where it gets personal for you, Hermione. Are you sure...?” he asked, hopeful that she'd been shocked out of wanting to know her future-self's life by what he’d already said. But she just silently nodded her head yes.

“Damn,” he started.

“Language!” she said, scolding him but still holding his hand.

“Err, sorry. Right. Hermione, there are...an underclass of magical beings called ‘House Elves.’ They are bound to magical families to do their housework for them – they are essentially slaves.”

Hermione's face was darkening dangerously fast and he hurried to continue.

“Yes, you hated this immediately, obviously. Any right thinking person would from the mundane world. Slavery is clearly wrong. But this is magically enforced servitude. If the magical bond is broken, the backlash leaves a gaping hole in the elf's soul, their magic leaks out, and...and they die soon after.

“There is no known cure for this except for another magical family to bond with the elf. If someone is unhappy with an elf, they'll 'give them clothes,' the ritual way of breaking the magic linking them with the family. And the elf most often will die because of this. I've seen it happen before. In fact, many of these 'freed' elves end up at Hogwarts, and the castle becomes their family.” Here her eyes blazed with rage as her mind whirred almost audibly.

“Harry, our...our food, our rooms, the way our clothes and bedding are magically cleaned every day. Those aren't just complicated charms, they're...slave labor?” She was rising dangerously loud in volume and Harry tried to hush her.

'Sh, please. You'll wake up my roommates. Yes, it is, and that is bad. But Hogwarts is actually a haven for elves. They aren't mistreated and are allowed all the freedom that this horrible magic allows. Every elf is born into a bond and there is no escape but death. And, possibly worst of all, they are magically compelled to like it. They get aggressive and stubborn if they aren't allowed to cook and clean for people.”

Now Hermione was almost vibrating with rage. He tried to calm her down by stroking her hand where it held his, but it didn't appear to be working. She was almost crushing his fingers now.

He tried again. “I keep telling you, Hermione. I agree with how you felt before and how you're obviously feeling now. It needs to end. But...” here he paused, not wanting to go on. “But you figured out a way, long after you graduated. It...it didn't go well.”

“You mean, it...it hurt the elves, it didn't work?” she asked, fear in her eyes.

“No, no. They were, uhh, after they were fine. But,” he paused again. He didn't want to tell her but he knew he had to, no matter how much it would hurt. It couldn't happen again that way, he would stop her if necessary.

“When the elves were freed,” he explained, “they immediately turned on their old masters. Almost all of them. A few of the remaining newly rich in Great Britain, those who hadn't enslaved their house elves for centuries, and most of older Light families with elves survived. Almost all of the Light families with elves were, at that point, living in France and Germany. Their elves just left, usually
“Those who had mistreated or enslaved them over generations... Hermione, hundreds of families died, most of them not Death Eaters or even Voldemort supporters. Entire households were killed, to the last man, woman, and child, cut down by the beings they’d been abusing for centuries. It was...a slaughter. These elves were already in their houses, keyed to their wards. Even if they didn't have strong enough magic, if they were too old, too young, or too...abused...they still had kitchen knives. Some chose the knives even if they had the power to, to do it magically. It was symbolic to them.

“After that, the elves disappeared for many years and magical Europe was sent reeling. That was when Voldemort attacked the mainland, mostly with younger, single men and the members of poorer Death Eater families, those who hadn't been able to afford the fees related to owning elves of their own. The other part of his army was muggles, mind controlled or commanded by those who were.”

Hermione was shaking her head violently, trying to pull out of his grasp. “No, Hermione,” he said quickly. “It wasn't you who did this. It isn't your fault. The person who made this mistake, the one who cast the spell over the entire world to free all the elves, all at once, with no attempts to help them adjust or remove people from harm's way, she was lost in the Dark and thoughtless and hurting. She just decided to do it anyway and damn the consequences, and she wasn't you. You never need to become that woman who was so wounded and afraid that she made such a dangerous choice. And it was a choice, just as you can choose not to do this. Do you understand?”

Hermione was still shaking, but no longer trying to run from him. She jerked her head up and down and dragged him in for another rib crushing Hermione-hug. He returned it just as eagerly, gently holding her trembling body as they sat there under the blankets. It was so easy to forget that she was still just eleven. She always acted so much older, but there was still a scared little kid in that giant intellect somewhere. And now she was afraid of herself, of what she thought she would become. Why the fuck was he doing this to her?

After a few minutes of straight hugging, she finally calmed down some, breathing deep and slow again. Pulling back, she whispered a thank you, then stared at him again, crouched under the covers with her elbows propped on the bed. Seeing her eyes now almost made him cry.

It was clear she was already working through the implications: how to do it better and with safety in mind, how to avoid mass causalities, how to subdue them first or deprogram them without damaging psychological shock or needing real brainwashing to do it. And all without even knowing the details of how the unbinding had worked. The details weren't important to her, just extra data for her to include once she had it. Her mind was a machine, her machine, and she'd now set it to work on this important problem. She wouldn't give up until it was solved to her satisfaction.

Her brown eyes were now cold and determined, not the happy eyes of an 11-year-old he'd seen earlier that day but those of a much older witch, one who felt responsibility burdening her soul. It almost made him weep. Every sentence he spoke stripped a little more innocence from her and her hated himself for it.

“Harry,” she said quietly. “that can't have been easy to tell me. But I understand. It is wrong to free the oppressed like that, without thought to how to help them live free or who they’ll hurt in the process. Especially if those who end up suffering were not the original oppressors or played only a small part. If I ever...if I try it again, will you help. Please. Please, Harry? Don't let me do something like that again.” She wasn't crying now so much as leaking tears, her voice steady and hard as granite.

“I swear, Hermione. It won't happen again. I won't let it. You'll find another way,” he said firmly, squeezing her hand. She nodded quietly, not paying attention to the tears still dripping down her
“I understand it now, Harry,” she said softly, “why you were afraid of me. Why you reacted the way...the way you did. What I did, that was...you must hate me, or...or at least her.” Not looking at him, she rocked back and forth for a while, thinking.

“All that death...in the end...did you kill me?” she asked suddenly, staring into his eyes.

“Gods no!” he hissed, trying to remember to stay quiet. “I would never...you were still my friend, even if you had made a mistake.”

“Then what...what put that fear in your eyes?” she asked, voice now shaking. “You hurt so much when you saw me on that train platform. You were ready to kill me. What could...oh no, what did I do to you? Someone you loved died in that...mistake?”

At some point, Harry had stopped holding Hermione's hand but he couldn't remember when. She snatched them both up and gripped them almost painfully hard.

“Harry, what else did I do. What happened? You have to tell me,” she commanded. He obeyed robotically.

“In the Dark ritual to send my soul back in time,” he said in a horrible perfectly normal tone of voice, “the details of which were gleaned from countless acts of human experimentation, the power for which she Bargained from the Queen of the Faeries in exchange for her own eyes and the binding of the soul of her own lover and wife – in that ritual my old-future-time's Hermione Granger, the Witch Queen, sacrificed my lover and wife to power the great spell. She killed my love in front of me with a silver knife and fed her life's blood into a ritual basin.” Harry wasn't sure why he couldn't feel. He should be screaming or crying or shouting or something, but he just felt numb.

Oh, he was trying very hard not to freak out, not to frighten Hermione any more but for something like this...it really shouldn't matter. He hadn't mourned a single day for his dead wife and now he was explaining this almost clinically an 11-year-old. It didn't make sense.

Harry was humming and tapping his fingers on the bed, trying to figure out what was wrong with him. But it was all like a dream now. What was he even thinking about and why did he feel he should be in pain? It was Hermione's questions about her future, the ritual, and-

Hermione seemed to suddenly choke and sob and hiccup all at once, her eyes rolled back in her head, and she fainted dead away, falling sideways under the covers.

It had been too much, obviously. But he couldn't just say no when she'd demanded details about what had happened to her, claiming forewarned was forearmed. He'd had to comfort her for almost an hour last night before she seemed to calm down. At least she hadn't asked details about their friends or the final ritual, so she didn't...didn't know-

Sitting in the hospital wing with her now, remembering how poorly last night had gone, Harry rocked Hermione gently in his arms, humming a cheery little tune. “Shh, be careful, Hermione,” he whispered into her ear, “the walls have medical monitoring Charms that might be active.” She instantly froze and seemed to gather herself together through sheer force of will, stuffing all emotions into some magical part of her brain that obeyed her will unerringly.

“Thank you, Harry,” she whispered to him, but not before she wiped her eyes and her nose on his robe. Eww. She knew that he knew that she did that on purpose. Revenge for his reminding her of operational security. Girls were evil, naturally. No Dark rituals required.
“We can talk about it tonight,” he said quietly. “Just keep it together until then and read up on the Silencing Charm. The smaller the area you need to cast it on, the easier it is to get it to work, so you should be able to just use it on a blanket. I know the emotional crash will be bad, but...but I'll help you. I'm not going anywhere, Hermione.”

Taking her hand and looking into her eyes, he said quietly, “I have been and always shall be your friend.”

Hermione’s brown eyes grew wider than he thought possible and she blushed deeply. For a long moment, she simply stared back into his eyes, then she frowned and looked down at the awkward sign he’d forced her hand into along with his, the two of them pressed together with the fingers oddly folded up. Then she collapsed into giggles and snorted more snot onto his robes.

“You prat!” she shouted, pulling away, punching him hard on the arm, and laughing. “Don't quote Star Trek at me! I'm having a serious emotional crisis here!” Harry grinned at her suddenly smiling, if slightly damp and runny, face. Then in an instant his smile was gone.

“Ms. Granger? What is going on over there?” came Pomfrey's loud voice from across the room. Her footsteps clacked on the floor as she came to scold someone within an inch of their life.

“Run Harry, save yourself!” Hermione whispered, smirking at him. He slide past the curtain and ran for the door. He could only pray he made it in time.
Harry Potter and the Witch Queen
by TimeLoopedPowerGamer

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter.

Chapter Six

Everything pointed to his success. The old fool didn't suspect a thing, and even if he did, there was no possibility he had anything as Dark as a soul jewel or a jinn bottle in which to trap him. Oh no, not the Hero of the Light. That would be beneath him. Looking out on the yammering field of students, he could see the all First Years at the tables now. They were all so weak, no threats there. The other teachers were oblivious to his presence. Because really, who would suspect after all this time?

His prize was here now, he was sure of it. With luck and great skill he had been able to escape from Gringotts with this body intact after finding himself too late to steal it from their vaults. Losing his host there would have crippled this next attempt at the Stone of Life, key part of a potion that was capable of returning a bound soul to the mortal plain. Specifically, his soul. Using it, a true resurrection would be an easy thing to accomplish. And then...then they would see. They would all see. He had not yet even begun to show the world his true powers. To be struck down so early. And...by a child. He still didn't understand how.

Yes, there he was now – sorted into Gryffindor, of course, house of the Light and of brave idiots. His servant turned obediently to give him a better view. Look at him sitting there. So small. So fragile. The boy could be broken with a snap of the fingers. But not yet. Not until everyone knew of his return.

See how the little brat is too timid to even look up at the table full of his teachers. See the little mudblood bitch fawning over him, the only one of his year even willing to talk directly to their so-called hero. The Boy-Who-Lived. Ha. As a shade, he could see even from here that the boy's magical aura was almost non-existent, weaker even than the mudblood beside him. Fears that this child might somehow still represent a threat to him were evaporating rapidly.

Rage. It filled his soul and his mind. How dare those muggles, those human scum, worse even than the blood traitors he’d fought in the last war, even touch one of the Blood of Atlantis! At least the dangerous mudbloods had magic in their muggle-tainted veins. It was their emotional and social connections to those in the accursed muggle world that made them his foes, not their magic.

Magic was magic, and that ended the question. Power would out and, after all, pure-blood lines had to come from somewhere. Those who bowed down to him would survive, at least as servants. The best of them would be allowed to serve in all but the most important positions. Their children’s children could be trusted, removed far enough from the muggle poison that none would doubt their blood and dedication, and they would command honor and be as equals to any in his service. Why didn't the muggle-born see this?

Ah, but those magicless muggle scum that so misused the children of Atlantis, those dead bodies still
walking, they and all other muggles were alive only because those with the power, those like him, allowed them continued life! This, this was unspeakably, impossibly wrong. They would pay, and the boy would know why and who had delivered this justice. He would be sure of that.

There had been half-heard whispers, rumors at the teacher's table and before faculty meetings, something about where the Potter boy had been since disappearing after, ha, “defeating” him. He'd ordered his servant to casually corner Professor Sprout, the weakest link in that security chain obviously, and ask her some innocent, stammered questions about the boy. The kind of thing everyone was asking. But it was only to bring the topic to the front of her mind, not because he wanted to hear her babbling replies. When the time was right, he slipped unseen into her thoughts, like a black snake on a moonless night in the deepest woods.

And that was where his mind went blank and his thoughts filled with visions of blood. How he'd avoided killing Sprout, he did not know. But she was still alive and walking away with her mind intact when he regained some small measure of control over himself and his magic again. His host must have finished the conversation on his own but the damage his rage had done to the weakling inside whom he hid was...not miniscule. It could be repaired. He already had some ideas on that front, starting with powerful potions and proceeding to unicorn blood and the eventual Potion of Resurrection.

But gods, the information gained was...was horrible. That this half-blood had been his foe for a short, short time was irrelevant. They were as one blood, brothers in all but fact, compared to those vile walking shit piles who squatted in their magicless hovels and thought themselves masters of this world. And the boy's magic – that it could have been damaged because of their actions...no punishment was severe enough. His almost limitless imagination for torture and cruelty was failing him for the first time ever.

Maybe...maybe the boy could become an ally. He could find whether the lad had any sympathy for the thrice-cursed muggles (and really, how could he by now?). If possible, he would offer the boy a place by his side. Yes. Seeing their young hero join him would crush the last pathetic resistance from the so-called Followers of the Light. And if the lad did have some strange power, best it be used in his service rather than against him. Curing the boy of whatever magical disability he now suffered from would be a way to show good will. And really, how much danger could there be even if the boy rejected his offers afterward? In that case, the Boy-Who-Lived would simply die, like all his other foes.

So it was decided. He would find out what could reduce even one of the Blood to a near muggle-tainted squib, he would groom the boy to become his most loyal servant, and he would find the elements of his own inevitable resurrection and return to the world once again, to rule as their leader forever. The Boy-Who-Lived would be offered a cure for his strange affection and Lord Voldemort would rise again.

Their first Defense Against the Dark Arts class Thursday afternoon had started out perfectly normal. The stuttering Professor Quirrell slash Host of Voldemort called roll and only briefly glanced at Harry when his name came up. Then things got weird. He went on a 15 minute rant about the threats that muggles presented to the wizarding world and how they were truly the most dangerous of all creatures, Dark or otherwise. The Professor seemed to be talking directly at Harry the whole time. That was new.

“A-and you s-see, children, t-that those raised outside a c-culture t-that appreciates m-magic and all of its b-beauty, d-driven naturally to j-j-jealousy and violence against t-those who w-wield it, are to b-be watched closely, least t-they turn on us,” here Quirrell suddenly glared at Hermione, who
shrank back into her seat. Harry was getting more confused by the minute. Had Voldemort told Quirrell to change his lecture? Where was this coming from, and why was he suddenly targeting mundane-born (as Hermione preferred to be called) in his class? Was Hermione now in danger from the shade or Quirrell?

Following that, the Professor simply handed out the class syllabus and told them what to read before the next class. A standard, short first class, other than the mad screed. But then Quirrell told Harry to stay after as everyone else was filing out. Hermione had instantly locked gazes with Harry, knowing as well as he did how stupid it would be to be alone with, essentially, Voldemort. She was obviously suggesting she stay behind as backup.

Nodding to her, he moved to the teachers desk and waited, pointedly not making eye contact with either the Professor or the back of his head. Hermione had ducked down behind the desks and was making a show of quietly shuffling her books around in her satchel. Quirrell didn't seem to notice or, if he did, he didn't care.

“M-m-mister P-P-Potter, t-thank you f-f-for your t-time,” said the spiritually compromised teacher. “I just w-w-wanted to say h-how much I am l-looking f-forward to t-t-teaching you in t-the coming y-year. P-p-please know that m-my d-door is open if y-you ever n-n-need to t-talk. A-and...beware of t-those who m-m-might pretend to b-be your allies, or e-even your f-f-family, y-yet are in secret p-planning your people's servitude a-and d-d-doom.” He gave Harry a knowing look, as if they were sharing some personal experience the two had in common.

Harry had no idea how to respond to that. “Thank you, Professor. Uhh, I will certainly keep that in mind. Uhh. I'll just be going now, sir, if that is all...”

“Y-yes, h-h-have a g-good day M-Mister P-P-Potter,” Quirrell said, smiling a horrible smile at him.

Almost running from the classroom, Harry saw Hermione had also chosen that moment to make her escape. They moved quickly together toward the castle doors, both quietly terrified of the idea of Voldemort taking Harry under his wing. A little sunshine and outdoors would be good after that.

“H-Harry,” Hermione said shakily, “this isn’t...it isn’t really p-proper. Maybe we...AH, ah...we should stop.” She was twitching, barely able to sit still. “I m-mean, under my robes and everything? AH! No, no, I t-think we should s-stop this experiment now.”

After the massively strange DADA class, Harry and Hermione had decided to go out and get some sun. Thinking this was a good chance to show Hermione some of his hard-earned knowledge about his special skills, he’d suggested a walk by the edge of the Forbidden Forest. She agreed after he reassured her that they would stay out of anything even approaching Forbidden levels of wooded areas. They wandered over into some high grass and bushes, just behind but still in sight of Hagrid's hut. There, mostly hidden from view, Harry started to show off his magical tongue.

“I m-mean, ack!” Hermione tried to continue, before squawking loudly and twitching violently. “Ah, yes. It isn't like I-I-I don't appreciate this s-s-sort of sharing. Normally, this would, eeee! Be, uhh, very interesting!” Her back arched and she scrabbled in the grass, grabbing it by the handful in an attempt to steady herself. “But please, Harry! I c-can't take much more!” she panted briefly, than practically screamed.

“EEP, get these snakes out of my robes! Now Mr. Potter!”

Looking increasingly sheepish, Harry was whispering frantically in little hisses, trying to figure out why all the snakes he'd whistled up were trying to burrow as deep into his good friend Hermione's
clothing as possible. The only responses he got were stuff like, “thisss one iss warm, sssspeaker” and “we do not wisssh to leave your littermate'sss presssence.” This information did not seem to be reassuring Hermione, who was squirming as numerous grass snakes and, most worryingly, one magical adder crawled around inside her robes.

Getting snakes to show up was easy enough: just be a Parseltongue and whistle loudly while thinking firmly of snakes. The first time Luna saw him speak in Parseltongue up close, she'd asked about how he did it. Then she followed up by asking if it worked if he sang, whistled, hummed, or played a musical instrument while thinking about snakes. In classic Luna style, next came experimentation. Tests showed that though singing and using any kind of reedless wind instrument (things like flutes and recorders) worked, he was much, much better at just whistling and could keep it up longer as well.

Walking in the tall grass on a warm day and whistling up snakes at first brought squeals of joy from his bushy-haired friend. They'd sat down to talk to the playful snakes after several had joined them. Unfortunately, this was soon followed by squeals of horror as all the snakes headed straight for where Hermione sitting. After being warned not to squirm too much to avoid hurting them, she'd tried to stay extremely still. This only seemed to make her more scared and the snakes more friendly.

“It doesn't make any sense, Hermione,” Harry said desperately. “They've never done this before. I'm not sure why they are now. They just keep saying you are 'warm' and that they like you and don't want to leave.”


“Little onesss,” he said to the snakes, holding the image of one in his mind to activate the magic, “pleassse come out, my littermate is growing ssscared. We can talk while you ssstay clossse to her. Jussst leave her sssecond ssskinsss for now.” Some sliding noises from the snakes, a few muffled sounds of annoyed huffing from Hermione, and a minute later five snakes were calmly curled up in Hermione's lap.

“Thank you Harry,” she said primly, much calmer now. “And please thank our new snake friends as well.” Harry did, and all four grass snakes and the adder lifted their heads and nodded to Hermione, much to her surprise.

“We need to figure this out now,” she said. “I can't imagine what it is about me that so attracts their attention.”

“Agreed,” Harry replied. He turned to the largest snake, the silver and black adder. “Proud ssssnake, I would asssk you a quessstion,” he entreated. The large, healthy looking viper raised his sleek head and tasted the air, then nodded quickly. “Of coursssse, sssspeaker. Pleasssse asssk what you will and I will ssstrive to anssswer to the fullessst.”

“Why do you ssseek out sssuch closssse contact with my littermate?” he asked. The adder seemed to squirm closer to Hermione as he lay coiled loosely in her lap.

“Ssshe hasss...that power which keepsss usss aware of our ssselvesss and of thisss tongue,” the snake replied.

“Oh,” Harry said in English again. “Uh, Hermione, he said whatever keeps them smart and able to talk is what they're cuddling up to you for.”

“Ah, so residual magic from my core or perhaps my magical aura?” she suggested.
“Sounds like,” Harry replied. “Let me check.” Switching again to the adder, he asked the question. “I do not mean to be rude, but isss it sssomething that I do not have enough of that you need from my littermate?”

“That iss correct, ssspeaker,” the adder replied. “Her power warmss out mindsss like your body heat warmss our coilss. I asssk your forgivenesss, ssspeaker, but you are not nearly warm enough for usss to sssurvive assss we are, were we in your presssence alone.”

“Well,” Harry said to Hermione, “that is interesting. It seems like it is in fact either ambient magic produced by your core naturally or your magical aura that they need to stay sentient. That is a little worrying. My magical presence in general is, of course, very, very weak right now. Far too little power to maintain the Parseltongue magic for the snakes at this new level of intelligence, it would appear.

“But it also explains why I'm able to use it at all in my current condition, let alone on five snakes at once. If it merely calls on the Old Magic to activate greater intelligence, it might be powered solely by ambient magical fields.” Harry looked worried now.

“They also very much want to remain self-aware. This has never happened to me before, either them being that smart or asking to remain under the spell. Very strange. Maybe,” here Harry glanced at Hermione, who also appeared concerned. “Maybe it is only your larger magical aura that is giving them this much intelligence. Or perhaps your own, ah, personal magical issues. It is mind magic, so your extra magical mental layers might be changing how the spell works when powered through you.”

“Well, the only moral answer is clear,” Hermione immediately replied, her mouth firmly set. She had been stroking the snakes gently while they talked and now moved to encircle them with her arms. “I will need to find a way to maintain their newly found personhood. Any rationale for abandoning them that does not involve needing to save myself or someone else from a situation of immediate and serious personal injury is clearly incorrect and immoral. I currently see no such situation. Thus, I accept this responsibility and will take all of them with me into the castle in secret. Perhaps the greater ambient magical field there will be enough to sustain them on its own. It is a magical castle, after all. If so, I'll arrange some way to keep them inside. If not, I'll...I'll figure something out.”

Harry was stunned. Hermione was suggesting smuggling what was technically wildlife into Hogwarts. That had to be against the rules. But her argument was clearly correct and she hadn't even hesitated or complained. Maybe knowing about the horrible decisions her other, alternate-future self had made was causing her to spend more time thinking about the moral issues involved in tough choices. Harry hoped that wouldn't backfire somehow. There were some people in the magical world who genuinely needed to be put down, and put down hard.

He quickly nodded and started talking to the snakes again. Thankfully, they immediately agreed to go with Hermione, still leaving them with three unresolved issues where previously they only had two: how to get the snakes into the castle, why DADA had been so strange earlier that day, and what they were going to do about potions tomorrow with the Slytherins.

“Maybe he senses I'm weak and is trying something?” Harry said, making another suggestion as they returned from their slightly disastrous walk.

“Hmm,” Hermione said, mincing carefully back toward the castle, as one does with all one's pockets, sleeves, and even blouse full of snakes.

“Well, potions should be a breeze after today, eh?” Harry said, smiling. “I don't need to use very
much magic at all for these super-easy early potions, so no problems there, and so long as I don't look Snape in the eyes, well...you know.”

“Uh huh,” Hermione replied, cradling her arms unnaturally in front of her.

“I am so glad for that schedule you worked up with Flitwick and McGonagall, otherwise I'd be really worried about being able to do all the in-class material for Charms and Transfiguration this year. Thanks so much for that.”

“Mmm, welcome,” she said absentmindedly.

“Hermione, uhh...what's up?” he asked carefully.

“Well, I am covered in snakes still, though I guess you should really have known that part already,” she said dry and sarcastically, frowning at him, “and also...uhh...they are still in my aura and I can feel my magic in them. So. Uhh. I'm not sure what that means.” Harry continued to walk along, blinking slowly at this latest development.

“Huh. Try something for me?” he asked.

“Of course, Harry,” she quickly answered, “you know how much I like scientific experimentation on magical phenomena that generally and sometimes very, very specifically and perversely, resist scientific measurement.”

“Err, okay. Well. Try thinking about how they are feeling, sort of.”


“Okay. I think they, I mean. It could just be the Parsel-magic you're helping them with. Or you might be supplying them with magic for something else, like a Familiar Link. That is, err, what I think I'm starting to get with Hedwig and what you get later in life with some of your magical companions.”

“You are suggesting,” she hissed at him, but in normal, angry-girl English, not Parseltongue, “that a rare and highly sought-after Familiar relationship, like our headmaster has with a Phoenix, has triggered for me with not one, but five snakes, and all at once?”

“Uhhh,” Harry said, trying to figure out how to make sense of his own suggestion. “Yes?” he tried, hopefully. Hermione huffed loudly, then made some hushing noises at her upper-left arm.

“Sorry about that dearie, I'm just a little put out with Harry right now and oh wow I'm talking to a snake because I felt it was uncomfortable and now it isn't and it can feel my emotions too – what on Earth have you done, Potter?” she said all in one go. She then turned a steely gaze on him, clearly suggesting that this was all his fault somehow. Which, to be fair, he guessed it was.

“Uh. Sorry?” he tried, eternally optimistic that that would work someday with his female friends.

“Humf. Well. That's settled then. I can't feel the others so they must just be normal snakes. That little spark in them could be because I'm still personally providing their magic to stay smart though the Parsel-magic, not the environmental background magic. Hmm. But this silver and black adder, yes I'm talking about you dearie, I can clearly feel it. Must be a magical one, like is used in some potions-NO, never dear one,” she suddenly said to her sleeve.

“I'm talking about other snakes, ones I've not personally been involved in magically imbuing with sentience and then formed a rare and powerful Familiar relationship with and whom I now have a close and growing friendship. Never you, dear little fang.” She paused and suddenly relaxed, her
face growing very mellow, then she seemed to return from some far off inner space to glare at Harry again.

“Oh my, it seems to understand my moods quite clearly. That is progress. Oh, Right. Mr. Adder is a ‘he’, by the way, not an ‘it’. I feel horrible about that, Mr. Adder, I really do. Most sorry. Anyhow, if not my words, he at least gets my emotions and feelings, specifically about things like goals and objectives, sort of like how post owls work.

“Oh, and thank you for not pretending that your Hedwig is a normal owl, Harry – I know she’s well on her way to becoming your Familiar based on this experience. In retrospect, it is sort of obvious after watching you two together. You should really try to help that relationship along.” She looked at Harry as if he was being impossibly foolish.

“It is silly to try and hide it,” she continued. “You aren’t half as sneaky and subtle as you think you are, so you might as well take advantage of her friendship and offer to become your Familiar. It feels...quite nice, really. I think you’d like it.” Hermione's left sleeve was pulled down over her hand still, but Harry thought he could see her stroking something with her thumb in her palm, something the size of a snake's head.

“Strange that knowledge of some concepts would be transmitted but not words,” she said thoughtfully. “I can tell what his emotions in general are, but also how he is feeling about me, my robes, you, and the possibility of living in the castle. Guess it makes it more useful for the pair. So, that makes sense if Familiar Links were designed and not just a kind of magical mutation – designed sort of like post owls, I mean. By magicals. I wonder if the ability to form them is genetic...there is a whole field to be explored, magical genetics. No, later. Right. So. In any case, the communication seems to be two way over a direct, narrow-band magical connection. Not sure what the range on that is, yet. How extraordinary.” She gathered herself and picked up her pace, more confident now that no snakes would take exception to the ride.

“Well, now that it has happened, I'm glad it did. You'll have to relay with Parseltongue if I need to get my exact words to my new friend Mr. Adder, but the others will need your skills to get anywhere at all, communication-wise. Or...maybe Mr. Adder can give them some hints in some sort of cross-species snake language? No, that seems too complicated. No reason in the wild for them to need that and the intelligence required...no. But, hmm, Parseltongue is a magical language anyway...okay, might as well try.”

By this point, Harry was mostly trying to avoid being blamed for anything else, but he was also terribly interested in Hermione's exploration of yet another rare magical phenomenon. He decided to just keep quiet unless she required either future knowledge or a vic-t err, lab assistant.

Hermione had almost crossed her eyes in concentration and was veering close to the edge of the walkway as they approached the castle once again. Harry gently grabbed her right arm and got a half-a-handful of snake as well as girl-arm. He was careful not to apply too much pressure but just hung on, barely touching them both.

“Mr. Adder,” Hermione suddenly spoke up, “could you ask the grass snake on my right arm if he is still alright? I'm a little worried about him.”

“My new mistressss and mate of the ssspeaker feelsss concerned and wondersss if you are well, sssnake of the green grassss on her right arm,” the adder said loudly in Parseltongue.

“Yesss, I am quite well. Pleasssse relay ssuch to the mate of the ssspeaker, he of sssharpesssst fang on her left arm. And congratulationssss on your finding a human to be your Familiar,” one of the other snakes replied.
“Much thanksss,” the adder said. “I can sssee now her heart belongsss to the ssspeaker and thusss, the way I sssense it issss with humansss, we will both be with him forever. It issss good.” Hermione started, then suddenly gave a little giggle.

“Oh wow. Snakes feel funny, that's what I just thought. They feel, you see Harry, the ground and other objects with their entire body all the time, instead of with hands and feet, because their bodies are like their hands and feet. Which is strange. And also, they are scaly and dry and strong, wrapped around my arm.” Harry just stared at her blankly, still a little panicked from yet another odd thing happening to him and a little freaked-out by what he had just overheard the snakes say.

She rolled her eyes at his apparent lack of humor and explained her actual revelation. “So, I formulated a question to Mr. Adder about another snake, that was the assigned conceptual object, and it seems they don't need you to translate between them for simple concepts. At least, I assume the one on my right arm feels okay. That's what I got back – a calm sort of completeness to my question and soothing of my minor worry about the object I'd asked about.”

“Oh, yes. That was basically what they said, Hermione,” Harry stumblingly replied.

“Good, thank you Harry. Now I'll have to see if it works when you're not around, obviously, but this could mean that any magically intelligent snake could communicate with others and with me, but only through emotions and directed feelings about objects. Not optimal, but enough to get them to know when I'm trying to hide them or move them around without having to ask you to talk to them.”

Seeing Harry's continued blank looks, she sighed and patted him on the arm. “This is a good thing, Harry, and I'm not mad at you or anything. I like strange magical things happening to me, remember? Things like meeting you? Please cheer up.” Harry was glad to hear that and it helped make his slightly strained smile look more genuine. Hermione giggled softly again.

“Before leaving for school, my mother warned me about wandering off alone with strange, temporally entangled boys, Mr. Potter,” she said, mock-seriousness in her voice, “Said I'd come back magically attuned to snakes. At least, I think she might have said that. I wasn't really paying attention.” Her sudden smile lit up her face as they walked through the castle's large double doors, then went off to hide her new friends in her room before dinner.

Harry was still really worried as he waited for her in their common room. What had he gotten Hermione into this time? What the hell did the snakes mean about his bushy-haired friend and him being something more than friends? And what in the name of all that was holy was he going to do about Snape and potions class tomorrow if Hermione still needed to be covered in snakes?
Potion master Severus Snape, youngest Potions master in a century, the Head of Slytherin House at Hogwarts (the greatest magical school in all of the United Kingdom) leaned against the inside of his office door and tried not to throw up.

It wasn't the last five nights of drinking, followed by pepper-up potions and his own personal hangover cure every morning, that was doing this to him. Those were perfect and left no negative aftereffects, other than a persistent lightly pine-flavored mouth.

No, it was because this was the day he'd have to face Lily's child and his green eyes. Not James' hellspawn, as he had expected this year; the boy who was raised rich and spoiled, almost definitely dangerously violent, certainly a bully, and surely having already gathered with similar closed-minded Gryffindor friends to help him in his bullying ways. He had expected Albus to place the Potterling with at least a moderately wealthy wizarding household, a Light one for sure, but someone able to care for the young scion as his politically popular and well-connected parents would have.

Until last month's horrible revelation, Snape had been chewing on the thought for almost five years that this, this would be the year that he'd see his hated childhood foe's hideous larva. He had plans, oh yes, Snape had many plans on how to put the arrogant little brat in his place.

But that wasn't to be. Instead, he'd be seeing dearest Lily's poor little boy. Raised without magic. Clothed in rags until a month ago. Abused by muggles in that home where the bearded idiot had sent him. Scum that Albus had spent not even a day looking into. Vile people he'd trusted because, obviously (but only to Albus' mind), no parents would ever hurt a child, let alone one of their own blood. Idiot.

He could have set Albus straight there. Snape's youth had been that of a low-born half-blood. His family home, a virtual shack. His education, a charity scholarship. His father, a muggle who was drunk and violent. His summers, boredom and suffering. But there had also been Lily, dear Lily and her green eyes.

Later, Snape knew that his youth hadn't been some deep, epic tragedy (as he'd thought of it at the time), but just a normal, everyday one. Most muggle-born had it worse, even those rich enough to get invited to Hogwarts – they had two muggle parents after all, and most muggles hated magics instinctively. Parental emotional bonds only went so far toward countering that natural prejudice. His stomach heaved a little as he tried to clear his mind of emotion once again.

Worst of all, he could have prevented this as easily as Albus or Minerva, who had both failed their own personal tests in this matter. If he could have just checked on the boy, once. If he could have even briefly seen what was happening in that home. Snape knew what would have worked, if only he'd known the child was placed with...muggles: a simple ruse, like asking to test a new magical disguise potion against the wards – that would have shown Snape the kinds of people those muggles were. He should have insisted on knowing where the boy was being kept, instead of relishing his
jealous fantasies and remaining intentionally ignorant.

Albus had thought the boy safe. Someone in a warded wizard home couldn’t be hurt by muggles because the standard Muggle Repelling wards would keep them out. Everything a wizard would try to do to break in was blocked by the same magical wards the boy’s so-called relatives house surely had. And for some reason, he thought there was something extra, some special protection to be gained by having the boy with...Petunia. Snape spat the word out even in his own thoughts.

A normal muggle house, however, could never be simply warded against all muggles, for obvious reasons. The fool had missed that gaping hole – muggles can hurt muggles in their own homes. The fact that, statistically speaking, violence against muggle children almost always came from relatives would have been interesting additional information that might have swayed the old fool – he was merely idealistic, not dirt-stupid. Knowing that extra fact, or at least being reminded of it, Albus would surely have warded Harry to be safe from muggle hands and...all would have been prevented.

Finally successfully emptying his mind of emotions once again, Snape snapped up his magically-supported false personality. He shuddered as guilt and pain sloughed off him, like a snake shedding its old skin. The slick new veneer slid over the rest of his thoughts and covered the front of his mind, that part most easily accessed by Legilimency.

A sneer immediately twisted his face, his head tilted back, and his eyes started looking down his long nose at everything. He was now danger and death, instant violence and sneering power, standing above all and cursing in his thoughts those muggle-born who polluted these halls. The muggle-spawned crotch maggots would soon scurry to class – pathetic, stammering, scared, yet amazed by the magic of this place, this ancient center of learning. Their shining faces would be so like sweat Lily’s had been as- No. He was ice and simmering rage and hatred of those...unpure mudbloods.

He combed some fireproofing gel into his hair, arranged his robes once more, and went to do battle with that ever-regenerating, multi-headed beast: eleven-year-old children's ignorance.

He coldly hoped no one lost a finger or an eye this time. The paperwork was horrible when that happened. Pomfrey still sent him death threats on Christmas, written inside those cheery-looking magical holiday cards of hers, all because of his second year at Hogwarts teaching the little brats Potions. He didn’t know why she still held such a grudge. They’d found and reattached all of the idiot First Year Ravenclaw class’s toes. Eventually.

Hermione had returned for a quick chat Thursday night, leaving the magically sentient grass snakes hidden in her rooms in things the house elves wouldn’t try to clean up, like her spare book bag (“What if my primary is lost or damaged? How will I carry all my books?”), behind the clothes hampers, and under stacks of notepaper on her trunk. It was a great relief when she determined that they would be fine without her so long as they stayed inside the castle. She had raced down to the common room to tell him that in a whispered rush and then explained in more detail after everyone had gone to bed and she was able to sneak off to talk to Harry in his room.

“If anything,” she said, “they are too energetic now. They won't stop crawling all over the place and I was worried they were going to be found out by my roommates. Then Mr. Adder talked to them in Parseltongue and they finally calmed down. That was when I was able to finally escape my room. But by then it was already late and I decided we could just talk later. So here we are. I hope you have a great topic for tonight?”

“Absolutely. We're going to work on Occlumency,” Harry said.

“Oh, that's the thought shielding magic, one of the wandless things we can practice over the Hols
“And Summer break,” Hermione said brightly, snuggling into the blankets around her under the covers. Her face was lit from below by her wand, her smile inches from his own.

“That’s right,” Harry said. “It’s one of the best ways to keep your thoughts your own, even in the face of aggressive telepathic spells like those used in Legilimency. Most people don’t learn it until they are older, but we need to work on it now because even your surface thoughts could expose some of our secrets.”

“Ah,” she said, “and tomorrow is the first Potions class, run by the maybe-ex-Death Eater, Professor Snape.”

“Right again,” Harry said. Hermione smiled wider and wiggled in joy at solving even that simple logical puzzle.

“The very best defense is still not to meet his eyes,” he said. “He’d have to verbally cast a stronger spell if you aren’t looking him in the eyes. This will also be something you can keep running all the time, even when you are asleep or surprised.”

He ran her through the basic meditation and mind clearing exercises, the two of them sitting up and forming a sort of tent under the blankets. They sat quietly in the dark with their backs straight and attempted to clear their minds of thoughts and emotions. After five minutes, Hermione quietly said, “Done.”

“Err, what?” Harry said quizzically, losing his focus immediately.

“Hmm? Oh, my mind. It is clear now,” she said softly, lighting her wand with a wave and a whispered word. He saw she still had her eyes closed and looked completely relaxed, even the hand holding her wand.

“Err...okay,” Harry replied, unsure what she meant. It had taken him months to even briefly achieve the kind of clarity and focus required for Occlumency. He had no idea if she’d really done it, but knowing Hermione that was entirely possible.

“So, uh, the next part is to open your eyes and imagine a wall between your mind, just behind your eyes, and the outside world. Feel your magic fill your head. Pour your magic into the design in your mind and see it solidify into a solid magical wall.” Hermione opened her eyes and continued to sit quietly, still powering her lit wand and now staring through Harry. He was about to suggest she keep practicing later and call it a night when she spoke up again.

“Okay, got it,” she said, her voice sort of distant.

“Uh. Hermione? It’s been ten minutes.”

“Oh!” she said, her eyes widening suddenly. “I’m sorry for taking so long. You must want to get to sleep now. Sorry!” She was obviously contrite and bit her lip nervously while looking at him apologetically.

“So. Cute,” he thought, trying to focus.

“Hermione,” he said, finally recovering from the cuteness coma, “the initial meditation exercises took me months to figure out. It was a year before I finally got the active shields down. If this is working already for you, that would be...amazing. I knew you would most likely have some natural shielding already, but...”

He grinned quickly, then said, “But I also already knew that you’re amazing...” Hermione poked him
hard in the arm, but she was smiling now.

“Well, how do we test it?” she asked. That was something Harry had spent a lot of time thinking about over the last week.

Harry's mind was not well suited to even basic mental magic. The subtle art of mind reading and Legilimency was virtually impossible for him, even when he'd been a magically healthy adult. However, he had found a very useful, slightly Dark-ish book on Occlumency in Knockturn Alley last month that should help solve his current problem.

It was a translation of the original Old English tome _Gebolstrodu Hordlocan_ – roughly, _Guarded Thoughts_ – an older guide for learning Occlumency that included spells for testing one's own abilities without requiring skill in Legilimency or a partner. Hermione had recommended it to him in the future as it was one that wasn't on the Ministry Banned Books List and thus was more easily found in Europe after the fall – but only because they had forgotten about it as it was an American translation of an obscure title.

The British Ministry didn't like people learning to resist mental scans and truth potions, which explained the general book ban. He realized that Hermione would burn things to cinders with just the power of her mind when she found out about that bit of official magical government censorship, so he decided to delay telling her about that little detail until she was out of his bed.

And at least a county or two away.

And he was talking to her over the telephone.

From a bunker.

In any case, Harry had originally picked it up in Knockturn Alley for some self-study before he knew he'd be telling an eleven-year-old Hermione basically everything. He was sure she'd love to get a chance to read it.

“Ah, that's a problem,” he told her. “Legilimency is the usual way to test Occlumency shields. It is a very, very hard skill to learn, borderline illegal, and requires a fairly large amount of power to cast. It also means someone has to try to use it to read your mind, over and over again while you attempt to get your Occlumency shields to work.

“I'm not comfortable with that, really, and learning that way never worked for me – it seems wrong to read someone's mind even to help them learn. I also don't have the talent for it at all and currently not even enough magic to use it even if I did. So I decided that this would be the best way for you to work on your Occlumency.” Harry pulled out the small book and handed it to her. She let out a sound like a squirrel being slowly crushed by a pile of tasty acorns – sort of a muffled series of excited, near orgasmic squeaks – as she snatched it out of his hands, opening it and starting to read already.

“That book has some spells you can cast on yourself to tell if your shields are up and working. It also has a section about creating a layer to your shields to protect the existence of your Occlumency itself.”

“Thanks so much Harry! I'll read this right away,” she said, doing so already.

“Make sure to get some sleep tonight, Hermione,” Harry reminded her.

“Yeah, sure,” she said vaguely, still reading as she slid out from under the covers. Book still in hand, she canceled the silencing spells with the other and then quietly left the room, still reading.
Waking early Friday morning, Harry decided to wait for her in the common room. Meeting Snape for the first time, again, worried him. At least Hermione didn't have to bring all her snakes to class. The cute little things should be happy to spend the morning soaking up the magical ambiance of the ancient enchanted castle, which solved at least one of their issues. He was sure she'd bring Mr. Adder with her, but that wasn't as big a deal. He was easy enough to hide and could take direct instructions from over their growing Familiar Link if they needed to hide him better for some reason.

Hermione came drifting down the stairs, finally having dragged herself out of bed. Hermione never had been a morning person – she had a bad habit of staying up reading instead of sleeping, and had developed a severe coffee addiction as an adult. He greeted her with the false cheer he knew she hated this early.

“Good morning, Hermione!” he said with a grin on his face. She scowled at him and covered her yawn with one hand, the other trying to get her book bag onto her shoulder. She was always on time to classes in the morning but that didn't mean she liked it.

“Will you join me for breakfast in the Great Hall?” he said, still grinning like a sugar-crazed house elf. Her frown distressingly morphed into a large smile of her own, then she looked thoughtful.

“I don't know, Harry,” she said, making a pantomime of thinking, even putting a finger to her chin.

“I...I mean, is there even the slightest chance that I will become covered in snakes along the way?” she queried cheekily, her head tilted to one side.

“No,” he sighed, rolling his eyes. She immediately smiled again and bounced over to him, indicating her desire to leave immediately with the subtle body language of dragging him out of the room by the hand.

“Oh, by the way Harry,” she said as they wallked down the corridor, “I finished that book last night. I wanted your opinion on the results.” She grabbed his robes and pulled him into a nearby empty classroom, then waved her wand at her head in a complicated pattern.

“Specto Mens,” she chanted clearly and distinctly. Her head glowed a bright lime green color. Harry sighed with amused resignation.

“Not sure why I'm surprised,” Harry said. “Bright green. You shields are up and working and quite strong. It would only take a skilled adult a few minutes to hammer through that with brute force but they'd have to practically have you tied down to do that. At your current strength, you won't leak anything to a casual or passive attempt. If you feel someone try harder, just run. It is really easy to notice, a feeling of pressure on the back of your eyes. Getting out of range is the best way to prevent them from breaking your shields. Also, if they tried to do it too quickly or aggressively there would likely be some feedback with shields that strong, which would give them a nasty headache.”

“That's great news, Harry. Thanks,” Hermione said. She then grinned and dragged him the rest of the way to breakfast.

While they ate, they both watched the owls arrive. A few students received letters from their parents and Malfoy received the usual, near-daily care package from his mom. Harry was surprised to receive a letter himself, then finally remembered it happening last time.

“Hermione,” he said absentmindedly while rereading the note, “did you want visit Hagrid after lunch?” The brief snicker should have alerted him, but he simply wasn't paying that much attention – so much for constant vigilance.
“Well Harry,” she said. He still didn’t see it coming as she leaned over, her lips almost brushing his ear. “I know it is unlikely…but do…do you think I will somehow become covered in snakes there?” she asked in a worried whisper. “I hear that they are most common around that area.” Harry sagged, his face falling into his hands. He shook his head no, not daring to look into her undoubtedly amused face.

“Then of course, Harry!” she chirped happily at him, “I’d be glad to meet him. Being so well acquainted with the Hogwarts grounds, I’m sure he has many interesting things to say about magical animals in the area and such. Animals like snakes.” He groaned into his hands, then got some parchment out and wrote Hagrid a similar response to last time, simply saying he’d be there that afternoon. Looking at some of the students starting to file out of the Great Hall, he realized they should leave soon to get the best (farthest from Snape) seats.

“Look, very funny and all, but we need to get moving soon to make it to Potions early enough to get a good place to sit.” he said, starting to double-check his bag.

“Hmm...” Hermione hummed. Harry immediately sensed danger this time. “I guess...” she said slowly, considering, “but...do you think there is any chance-”

“Okay, okay,” he quickly said, holding up his hands. He leaned over and stared deep into her dancing brown eyes, locking his hands together in front of himself, as if in prayer.

“I, Harry James Potter,” he said quietly, just loud enough for her to hear, “swear that I will warn intelligent young witches first before demonstrating strange and rare magical abilities or spells around them and will ask for their advice before continuing with any experiments.”

Hermione smirked and patted his hands with one of hers. Her other hand went to his shoulder and squeezed gently. “I accept your oath, Harry James Potter. There, was that so hard?” Harry rolled his eyes and then twitched as Mr. Adder poked his head out of Hermione’s sleeve and tickled his neck with flicks of his snaky tongue.

“Oh, that reminds me Harry: I’ve decided on a name for our beautiful new friend,” Hermione said as they stood up from their meal.

“Oh?”

“Yep, we agreed his name is Salazar. I thought it was a good, historic name. Like Hedwig’s. Also, our Salazar...he was, well, you know, by your you know what. Which is part of the reason this all happened. And his namesake is famous for you know what, after all. Thought it was appropriate. Anyway, ‘Sal’ for short.” She was grinning again.

“That’s, uh...a great name guys. Congratulations,” Harry said. He was a little worried about what people would think when she had to make her new Familiar public knowledge. Her smirk as she grabbed her bag suggested she knew what he was thinking and didn't care.

They quickly got their stuff together and headed straight to Potions. As they walked, he ran her through the exercises for the False Persona Occlumency technique she’d read about last night. Hermione might already have been partially shielded because of her magical mental abilities, helping her get more organized Occlumency shields faster, but she also needed to become a person who didn’t have mental shields or weird mind magic issues. At least for the next few years until she could be seen reading the right books in the library and asking the correct questions of Professor Flitwick on mental charms and protections.
“Try again,” Harry whispered softly into her ear as they walked slowly down the corridor, keeping a keen eye out for any potentially eavesdropping portraits on the walls. “Imagine the person you need to be for the situation. Hold that in your mind.” Hermione pressed herself into his side and listened, wrapping her arms around his and holding his hand in her small, yet very freezing cold ones. He ignored her frosty digits stoically.

“Then begin to cleanse yourself of emotions,” he continued. “Let them drift away like seed heads to the ground. They are not real, only existing in your mind so long as you tend them as a gardener would. So release them, let them grow wild and unnoticed in the greenhouse of your deeper thoughts. Free your conscious mind for other things.

“Next, let the personality of that unreal individual you've constructed rule your every thought and emotion. Pull it over you like a soft blanket and live under it, only peeking out at the world occasionally. You have to be consumed by this other person, ready to act instinctively the same way they would; you will both look at the world in a similar way, you will both know some of the same things, but to that imagined person, there is no other 'you,' just 'I.'”

Harry's second Occlumency teacher had been an adult Hermione, and she'd taken an approach that was naturally a mix of the best that books had to offer, advanced muggle psychology, far-east mysticism, and unique, carefully worked out exercises based on personal experience. Combined with that book last night, it seemed to be working almost flawlessly for young Hermione.

It helped that she already had an alternate personality of sorts planned out, the Perfect Little Professor. So stern, so studious, so nearly immune to loneliness and scorn. She almost had the basics of down after less than a day's study, which was frankly silly speeds for an eleven-year-old.

He had concerns about people finding out he had working Occlumency shields but had decided it wasn't a big deal before he'd even gotten on the train. He was the Boy-Who-Lived, so strange magical stuff was expected of him. Which was good, because actively hiding that ability was basically impossible for him, even when he was healthy and an adult. He knew the theory of False Persona Occlumency by heart, having had it drilled into him by Hermione over and over again in an attempt to get it to work correctly for him, but it never had. He really wasn't good at the mental arts.

Adult Hermione, on the other hand, had never had any issues. Her shields were reported to have been like steel plates and he didn't know if anyone had ever successfully read her mind. As for Legilimency: after the Fall, he'd seen her cut through a trained Auror's Occlumency shields, in combat. The spell had been silent-cast, without eye contact, and at almost twenty yards. She had then freed him from an active Imperious Curse (another feat of Mental Magic that was previously considered impossible) before he could fire on her operations team. It was scary. But then, so was how fast Hermione was picking it up now.

He was a little worried that maybe she actually did have another personality to help obscure her defenses, but maybe she was just very mentally flexible when she applied herself. Which was what she was best at, after all. Of course, as a child with a large reserve of magic only compared to other kids, neither the shields nor the illusory personality would stand long against the full force of an adult's attack. Anything casual should be fooled for long enough, however. And who tried to mind rape a kid just at random, especially one that didn't even have mental shields?

“Keep practicing and try to maintain it through the entire class if you can,” Harry said. Looking sideways at her, he frowned slightly. “And don't snuggle up to me in the corridors unless your False Persona personality construct would. I don't care if you're cold. You can't leave your mind vulnerable to invasion by a potential murder and former Death Eater just because you want to use me as your own personal Warming Charm.”
“Fah,” Hermione grumbled in reply, sticking out her tongue at him but moving to a more normal walking distance. Shivering in her robes, she buried her hands inside her sleeves. “These dungeons are awful. There should be plenty of magic available to heat them. Seems lazy not to, really, given the level of—"

“Hermione,” Harry interrupted gently, undoubtedly saving himself a five minute rant on magical utilities, “this second part of Occlumency is important if you don't want your shields to be instantly discovered. That is the best way to fail in disguising who you are and what you can do.

“If Snape tests your mind and runs into a brick wall instead of a nice, soft, flowery, squishy little-girl mind,” Hermione's eyebrows scrunched together and she glared at him balefully for that one, “then you're found out. We can't have that.”

She snarled silently at him but then stopped in the middle of the corridor and took a deep breath. Getting a slightly glazed look in her eyes, she seemed to become a different person in front of him. Her back straightened, she squared her shoulders, her lips tightened just a bit, and she now had a slightly worried look on her face, like someone was about to run a pop-quiz and she had just realized she hadn't studied for it properly. In other words, almost exactly like the timid little girl Harry had rescued from a Troll a month and a half from now, in a strange temporal direction. He nodded to her and she looked back with a raised eyebrow and slightly-disapproving frown. Not waiting for him, she started walking again toward class.

Now well on their way to the first real world test of their shields, Harry suddenly wanted to check his own. Stopping again, this time in a quiet alcove, he motioned Hermione over. He then carefully waved his wand through the complicated Specto Mens movements and gently, ever so gently, pushed his magic into the spell. He leaned heavily against the wall as the lights seemed to dim around him and he grew extremely dizzy, but he thought he had been able to run the spell successfully for about a second.

“Well, it was green,” Hermione said, wincing. “Not good, though. Sort of a dim, sickly green. Sorry Harry.”

“Don't be,” Harry said, squeezing her hand. That brought a blush to her face but she quickly pulled her hand away again — no public displays of affection for the Little Professor, no matter how innocent.

“I was expecting that,” he said. “At least I've got something working. I don't have much magic to fuel it right now, so that is about what I was thinking it would be.” He continued walking toward class again, still a little unstable on his feet. Hermione hurried after him, a worried look on her face.

Sighing to himself as they entered the Potions classroom, Harry claimed a table way in the back for himself and Perfect Little Professor Hermione, one as far away from the Slytherin section as possible. He set up his class equipment textbook-perfect though long experience (Hermione did the same, but that was because she'd memorized the textbook). Looking around and seeing all his old classmates, Harry had a strange moment of déjà vu. He knew almost all of these people rather well and had seen several of them die horribly, but they only knew him as the Boy-Who-Lived now, with all the nonsense associated with that title. He snapped out of it and waved to Ron as the redhead sleepily entered the classroom with Neville. Ron waved back with a smile but Neville was too nervous to do anything but stagger to the seat next to Ron.

Harry, afraid he'd screwed up and ruined things, had talked to the young Weasley boy after the panicked disaster yesterday morning. His new-again friend had taken it strangely well. Nothing about being press-ganged into his crazy rescue scheme seemed to have fazed Ron. Harry had apologized and explained it had all been a false alarm and Hermione was actually fine. Ron had
simply said it was lots of fun and then asked to be included in any more adventures.

At lunch Thursday, Ron had made the mistake of saying that he didn't actually know any noise-making charms. Unfortunately, this was in Fred and George's hearing. Apparently they'd heard the whole story already, as they first thanked Harry for the “teachable moment” and then suggested Harry see them first if he ever wanted to try to “elope from the castle with a cute young witch” again. The last part was said while wiggling their eyebrows salaciously. Hermione had instantly blushed bright red, then started a spluttering explanation of why they were wrong. This then segued into a Weasley bonding moment, with the twins dragging their brother off for what they called “remedial jokes class.” What a strange family.

The Potions classroom was now full of muttering students as the start time for the class was rapidly approaching and Professor Snape still hadn't arrived. Harry couldn't remember how close he had cut it last time – mostly his first Potions class was all a blur of anger and shame. Just then, he noticed a dark, shadowy shape quietly drift through the doorway, closing the door behind itself. Still almost totally silent, the tall, thin, dark-robed figure ghosted over to the teacher's desk.

It hurt his eyes a little to look directly at the form, then he realized only he and Hermione seemed to notice it was even there. Whoever it was must have cast a Notice-Me-Not charm of some sort and the less disciplined and alert minds of the other students were apparently fooled. Harry tensed. It might be Snape, but this was different from last time, making him nervous about something that had once again changed.

Lifting a book above the teacher's desk, the dark figure's spell dropped and Snape appeared clearly to his sight just as the textbook fell and slammed into the desk with a resounding thud.

“Quiet,” Snape said in a loud growl. The room instantly fell silent, except for a few tiny, terrified shrieks which were quickly stifled. Starting roll call without another word, he monotoned his way down the list until he finally hit Harry's name. And then kept going after Harry's tight, quiet “here, sir” rang out. Some of the class was staring at Harry, Draco with a sneer, but otherwise nothing had happened.

“There is both art and science in potion making,” Snape started, his voice ringing loud in the silent classroom. “Being a Potioneer requires subtlety, raw skill, and exacting, unbending adherence to certain necessities. Learning Potions will require your full attention and your best creative instincts. Some may not even consider this to be magic at all, as you will not be using your wands for any silly spells in this classroom. They are fools.

“If you are one of the few to master this greatest of all magical studies, you can be assured that vast wealth, great wisdom, eternal fame, limitless power, and internal fortitude and strength unbendable by the ages can be yours.” Snape paused, arms folded, then continued in a dangerous, droning voice.

“If there is any idle spell casting in this class, points will be taken. If such irresponsible actions result in damage to my classroom, detentions will be the best result you can hope for. I would gladly see anyone fooling around in this class expelled. That will be my immediate response to any dangerous infractions of discipline.” He paused and glared at every single one of the students in his class. Harry carefully avoided his gaze and stared at his left ear. He hoped Hermione was doing the same, but didn't dare check.

“In the first three chapters of your textbook are the instructions for correct Potions station set up and basic safety procedures,” Snape continued. “Prepare your cauldron and other equipment based on those instructions. If you are not ready in exactly ten minutes, you will be staying after class for additional instruction.” No one moved.
“What are you waiting for?” he snarled. The sound of flipping pages filled the room. Harry and Hermione had already set up their stations, but after sharing a look they shrugged and reviewed the safety chapter again. A few minutes later, a looming shadow appeared as if by magic behind their stools.

“One point from Gryffindor for unnecessary flammables being kept on your station, Granger,” a sickly sweet voice said behind them. Whipping his head around, Harry saw Snape glaring at the textbook Hermione was reading on the table. She hadn't even turned on her flame yet so there was obviously no safety concerns. Snape was clearly picking on her for some reason.

The greasy-haired man shifted his glare to Harry's side of the table. Harry had already stopped reviewing the information he knew by heart, so though his station was set up exactly the same as Hermione’s, he had already put his textbook away. Harry winced and waited for Snape to make up something that he had done wrong so Gryffindor could lose even more points.

“And one point to Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, for the first correctly set up station. It seems some kinds of people can both read a book and understand the contents enough to follow simple instructions.”

Several Slytherins chuckled quietly from the front of the class. Harry's mouth fell open and his growing anger at Hermione's unjust treatment stalled in his shocked mind. Had Snape just...given him House Points?

“Did you have something to say, Mr. Potter?” Snape asked in a syrupy voice.

“Uh, no. Sir,” Harry answered hesitantly. Snape sniffed, then moved away to harass someone else. Neville had somehow managed to lose his stirrer and only Ron's help was preventing him from lighting his robe on fire from the magical flame that was currently, for some reason, turned all the way up on their desk. Snape was not impressed and started taking points immediately.

Looking to Hermione, Harry saw her putting the textbook back in her bag with shaking hands. She then sat perfectly still with her hands clutched tightly in her lap, not looking at him. After the ten minutes were up, Snape found several students with grossly improperly set up cauldrons which he had to correct, guaranteeing those poor students extra time in the dungeon that afternoon. He then had the class start on a boils cure potion in pairs, the same as Harry's original first Potions class.

“Granger!” Snape said suddenly. Hermione jumped an inch in her seat, but didn't look up.

“As his station was arranged correctly and safely, you will assist Mr. Potter at his cauldron for this exercise,” he continued in a drawl. Hermione again didn't say anything or even look up from the table as she started putting away her brewing equipment in her bag, leaving the prep-materials like her mortar and ingredient bins out. Waiting until she was finished, Snape spoke up once again.

“One point for dismantling your station before the end of class, Granger,” he oozed in his audibly smirking voice. Hermione flinched violently, but simply quietly sat down again with her hands in her lap. Harry could hear a soft, angry hissing from her left sleeve, but she didn't say a word herself.

Once they started the potion, she continued to keep her head down while quickly and perfectly crushing, measuring, and prepping the ingredients according to the instructions Snape had put up on the blackboard. She silently added the necessary magical power to the mixture at the correct times for Harry with silent waves of her wand. Her eyes didn't raise higher than the small cauldron on their table. She didn't look at him while handing over the prepped ingredients at exactly the correct times to add them to the potion and simply quietly watched the cauldron as he stirred it.

This time, perhaps due to Ron's help (his mother did brew her own potions, Harry remembered), Neville didn't melt anything or get hurt. But his and Ron's resulting...slime was glaring at angrily by
Snape. Vanishing the contents of the cauldron, Snape started taking points away for every mistake he said they'd made in what he called an “extremely disappointing” potion.

Harry knew his and Hermione's potion was (of course) perfect, but he waited for Snape's review nervously. Hermione was once again sitting with her head bowed, her hands clutched in her lap, and her shoulders tense and pulled in. Harry couldn't take it any longer and snaked his hand over to gently squeeze one of hers under the table. She twitched at his touch, but then tightly gripped his hand before slowly pushing it away again. She seemed less tense now but was still withdrawn and didn't look around or chat quietly like some of the other students.

Snape took one look at their potion and then vanished it. “One point to Gryffindor for a correctly brewed first potion, Mr. Potter. Once again proving that at least someone in your House can follow simple directions. Which brings me to your partner.” Snape speared Hermione with his eyes, but she didn’t look up.

“One point from Gryffindor for goldbricking, Granger. Next time, actively participate in the brewing of the potion in a pair exercise or I will see you in detention. I watched this entire class and you did not so much as stir the cauldron once. Luckily for you, Mr. Potter is somehow capable of brewing the simplest of potions by himself. Mr. Potter will receive full marks for a correctly brewed boil cure potion but you will receive a zero for this exercise, as you contributed nothing of value.” Hermione nodded her head jerkily, eyes still lowered, then Snape moved on. She started cleaning and putting away her equipment without a word.

As soon as Snape dismissed the them (at least those who weren't being held after), Hermione ducked her head, grabbed her bag, and almost ran out of the classroom. Harry swore silently and hurried to finish putting his stuff away so he could follow her. Rushing into the corridor, he was surprised to see her slumped against the wall just outside the door.

“Hermione,” he started, but she shook her head at him and held up a hand. “Please, don't,” she said in a shaky voice. “I'll, I'll meet you at lunch and we can go to Hagrid's after. I just. I don't.” She shook her head violently again and fled down the corridor. Harry was left staring after her, too shocked to follow.

He spent the next hour doing his small amount of remaining homework from Charms and Herbology in the library, with a stack of advanced books open around him as part of his cover for knowing too much. If he kept this up, hopefully everyone would look back and remember how that Potter boy was always reading beyond his Year, so of course he'd know all kinds of things from higher level classes. But he was just doing his homework today, not refreshing his memory on advanced Transfigurations or whatever. He was too distracted by Hermione and the aftermath of Potions to concentrate and didn't get anything done.

Returning to the Great Hall for lunch, he spotted Hermione at the Gryffindor table and immediately went to sit beside her. She noticed him approaching and turned, smiling brightly. A tightness in his chest he hadn't realized was even there suddenly loosened.

“Are you...are you okay, Hermione?” he asked quietly.

“Of course, Harry,” she sternly answered, looking down her nose at him. This effect was softened somewhat by the grin still on her face. “Professor Snape just really made me angry and I needed some time alone.”

“Uhh,” he started, before she started giggling at him. “Seriously, Harry, I was just mad at him. I needed to go let off some aggression, so I, uhh, went and found a girl's bathroom in the dungeons.
That's where the Slytherin dorms are, according to *Hogwarts, A History*, and I figured it would annoy Professor Snape the most to mess with one there.

“I locked the door, turned all the toilets bright pink, and then shot this Bluebell fire spell I found Wednesday night into all the sinks. It won't hurt anyone unless they intentionally hold their hands over it for a long time, but until the flames are dispelled anyone turning on the sinks will get a face full of hot steam. And, err, the toilets are pink until someone changes them back.”

She looked up to see all the nearby Gryffindors staring at her open-mouthed. Fred and George, sitting on both sides of Ron, were the first to respond.

“Ms. Granger, this is very unexpected,” one of them said, accusatively.

“Such behavior-” said the other.

“Is most-”

“Awesome,” they both said at once. “Not a bad prank,” added the second twin. They both gave her a thumbs up, grinning from ear to ear. “We have the same reaction to Snape,” said the first.

“So. Feel better now?” Harry asked, eyebrow raised.

“Yep!” Hermione chirped cheerfully. They finished lunch in peace, with Fred and George shooting Hermione occasional measuring glances.

Harry thought that was the last of it until they left together to visit Hagrid. Hermione continued to talk animatedly about next week's classes as they walked out of the castle, but as soon as they were out of sight of the main walkway she collapsed shakily against Harry. Burying her face in his robes, she then started sobbing.

“Hermione! What's wrong?” Harry asked, shocked and worried.

“I-I'm s-s-sorry. I just, I can't hold it in any longer.”

“I don't understand, Hermione. What's happened?”

“Snape,” she hissed. “He was so unfair and biased and hurtful in class! It reminded me, it...” she pulled in a deep breath. “It reminded me of some of my teachers in school, from before. I thought things would be different and even though you warned me I still thought it couldn't be that bad, so I expected him to be mean and strict and maybe angry at you because of your dad like you said, but he ignored you and I couldn't do anything right and I sort of hate you because it wasn't you who was getting picked on but me and that is stupid and I just shoved it all away and now it's spilling out again and I hate myself for being like this and always crying on you.” She was gasping now, having run out of breath, her mind obviously still running at full speed in circles.

Harry hugged her close and gently rubbed her back. “It's okay. I understand. Snape is an awful person. That isn't your fault. I'm sorry Snape is picking on you for some reason and I don't mind if you resent me for it.”

“Oh Harry,” she muttered into his chest, “That isn't the problem. I resented you not getting picked on instead of me for about 30 seconds, but I still hate Snape.”

“Not 'Professor' Snape?” Harry gently chided her. She glared at him murderously.

“Sorry, Hermione,” he immediately said.
“Harry, I really, really hate him. I was holding it together during class, trying to suppress my emotions, but they just kept building and building and it felt like I was going to explode and I...” she pulled her head off his shoulder and looked at him with her tear filled eyes, but she was also smiling now. “For some reason, I wanted to bite him and then wait and watch until the poison killed him. Still do, sort of. I could barely hold it in during class.”

Hmm, her happy grin had a lot more teeth in it than Harry was really comfortable with, now that he thought about it. She shook herself and seemed to regain her composure some.

“I almost completely failed to keep my False Persona in place and my Occlumency was a mess, I could tell. I'm sure that odd revenge fantasy was just my new snaky friend gently 'suggesting' ways to deal with my anger. That's why I went and magically blew-up all over the Slytherin's bathroom. I didn't tell the others, but that silly little prank was after I accidentally turned a blowtorch on one of the toilets and melted it to slag on the ground.”

“Umm,” Harry said, “I don't remember a spell like that...”

“Oh, well, it was really just an Incendio, but...it seemed really, really overpowered. I wanted to destroy something and I was angry but I just meant to cast it into the toilet water, a safe way to let out my anger, and instead the flame came out all blue and super-hot and then the water exploded and the metal bowl started melting...I panicked and tried to fix it but it wouldn't react to the only repair charm I knew. So I changed the rest of them pink and set it up to make it look like part of the prank that went wrong. I'm really worried something is wrong with my magic, but I'm afraid of what they'll find if I go to the Hospital Wing. I've got Sal as a Familiar now and...that other thing I'm afraid they'll find.”

“It'll be okay, Hermione,” Harry said, patting her on the back. “Look, we'll do some testing over the weekend and figure out what's going on.” She nodded and pushed herself back on her own feet, then smoothed out her slightly crumpled robes.

“Let's go see Hagrid and ask him some pointed questions about snakes, eh?” he suggested, drawing a playful grin from Hermione once again. She immediately grabbed his hand and started dragging him down the path to the Gamekeeper's hut.

“Oh, aye, ther' are some nasty besties in tha Forbid'n Forest. Snakes? Oh, lots a snakes. Any in specifics like?” The huge, friendly man peered at Harry in interest. Hermione squirmed in the background, trying to keep Fang from sniffing and pawing at the snake hidden under her sleeve.

“Ah, yes. Well, I was by the edge of the forest in some tall grass – not in the Forest itself, it mind you, I know that is dangerous – and thought I saw a snake that looked a little different. A common adder, if the field guide I read is correct, but it seemed...I don't know, more snake-like than normal? Special somehow? So I figured it was magical. And I heard you liked magical creatures...” Harry knew this puzzle would hook the jolly outdoorsmen.

“OH! How interest'n! Well, let me see. Could 'ave been an Ashwinder', I guess. What color 'n size?” Hagrid really did look interested, rubbing his beard in thought.

“Large,” Harry said, “over three feet long, silver and black colors, big around. Didn't have glowing eyes, so not an Ashwinder, I think.”

“No, no, yer right there Harry ma' lad. Coulda been a young Basilisk, may'e, but those 'ave been extinct, or ah' least illegal, for 'undreds ah years. Well, let me see. Tha' is whats known as an enchan'd forest, you see, so it could be jus' about anythin'. Maybe somethin' left over from a magical
experimen'. Or a miss'n pet. Some things livin' in ther' can also absorb magic when the'r young. Might just be somethin' like tha'."

Hermione was getting steadily more nervous about Fang, so Harry decided their visit was about over. He didn't need any information about the break in at Gringotts, for obvious reasons, and they'd already had their tea with inedible rock cakes, so they said their goodbyes and returned to the castle. It was good to see Hagrid again, but he just didn't have much he could safely talk to the fellow about and Hermione had been too nervous about the whole situation to say much.

The rest of their quiet weekend was spent in endless library study and careful magical experimentation. Harry and Hermione left the stacks Saturday only for meals, cramming advanced magical knowledge into the smartest witch of the age from the school collection, his own personal library of advanced textbooks, and the Gray and borderline Dark books he'd purchased from Knockturn Alley. Hermione loved every moment of it, of course.

Harry was a little worried about how little time he was spending with Ron compared to last time, but it was early days yet. Ron and his new friend Neville (the two seemed to have bonded over hating Snape after their first Potions class) weren't really into that much constant studying, getting bored and leaving after only two hours of doing homework. They spent some of their time that weekend poking around the greenhouses and gardens but most of it playing games in the Gryffindor common room.

Sunday they went outside and ran some tests on Hermione's spell power. He'd told her about the Room of Requirement but also managed to convince her they should use it sparingly for now, in case someone caught them entering or leaving. Maybe after getting his hands on the Marauder's Map again they could risk it, as that would help them tell if anyone was lurking around the corridor. But for today's science experiments, he found a lonely bit of rocky shore by Black Lake that looked like it could take some moderate scorching.

Something strange was going on but they couldn't nail it down. Most of the time, she cast the Incendio spell and it would just light something on fire as usual. But a few times it would burn with a bright blue flame, brighter than the Bluebell spell fire and much, much hotter, and things were instantly turn to ash. Hermione felt very winded and usually had to sit down for a few minutes when those happened, so it obviously took more magical power, whatever it was.

After a few frustrating hours spent mostly as amateur pyromaniacs, Harry decided the mystery wasn't going to be solved quickly or easily and Hermione started complaining about experimental controls, so they went back to learning the theory of obscure jinxes, counter-jinxes, and anti-jinxes in the school library.

Classes starting up again Monday was a kick in the teeth. More exhausting spell practice was required in DADA Monday morning, but Quirrell seemed strangely understanding when Harry could only dimly light his wand once before he had to stop and try not to heave all over his desk. Quirrell then gave Harry full grades and a House Point for “g-g-great effort, which s-b-be rewarded.” Creepy.

Then Hermione had a House point deducted and was told to stop casting the spell and sit quietly for the rest of the class for “intentionally trying to blind” her classmates with her first attempt at the spell. It was bright, sure, but that was sort of the point of the spell. Quirrell definitely had something against her and Harry was worried about how she was taking a second professor being on her case.

With both of them left reading the textbook for the rest of the class (which they both knew cover to cover already), Harry watched Hermione go from shocked to angry to totally blank-faced. She sat staring at a single page of the book the rest of the class, her hands clutched in her lap. She wouldn't talk to Harry afterward but did walk with him to the Great Hall, where she seemed to recover, even
chatting a little about classes with Percy during lunch.

Their Theory of Magic class that followed was a lot more boring than he remembered. But then again, he had so much practical experience at this point that he likely could have taught the simple lecture-based class himself. Hermione obviously knew the material already but still loved class lectures, so at least she was having a good time. Their assigned homework was extremely simple and would be done in minutes unless Hermione went mad and wrote three feet for an eight-inch essay assignment. And what were the chances of that.

Once again, Harry managed the afternoon Transfiguration class exercise the first time but took a long time doing so. No one other than Hermione and him had actually succeeded last time (and his attempt reverted to a matchstick after only a few seconds), but this time several other students had modest successes also. Both he and his bushy-haired friend got a point for Gryffindor for being awesome then Harry was told to take a rest.

Professor McGonagall watched him like a hawk as he sat and carefully didn't try to do any more magic. He felt okay, just a little faint, but he didn't want to draw the Professor's ire by pushing it, so he watched Hermione's tutorial with his other friends with vague interest.

Neville's match was sort of rolling around on his desk looking a little shinier and Ron's had several spiky wooden bits coming out of it, but they didn't seem to be making much progress. In full tiny-professor mode, Hermione huffed at their efforts and quickly started in lecturing them about concentration, focus, and not scraping their wands across the desk while attempting the spell. Both were getting something vaguely pointed on the correct ends after a few minutes of that, possibly more from fear of additional lecturing than the content of her tutoring. Hermione went back to trying increasingly more difficult versions of the matchstick to needle exercise at her desk.

“Professor,” Harry said, surprising the older woman and making her jump a little, “Please, do you have a moment?” She had been watching Hermione as she continued to practice the spell with a confused look on her face which cleared when she turned to look at Harry.

“Yes Mr. Potter, what did you need?” she said sharply, but not unkindly.

“Uh, Professor, I was wondering...are there more exercises I could do? I've already sort of got the matchstick down. I mean, maybe I can't do it very much, but I think I understand the theory. I just need more...” Harry waved his hand vaguely. McGonagall winced a little, then her face was sternly frowning again.

“Your interest and dedication to your classwork does your House proud, Mr. Potter;” she said, almost smiling, “but I can not honestly allow you to continue to more...strenuous exercises until you have more magical stamina.” Seeing Harry's face drop, she quickly added.

“Do not look so down, Mr. Potter. I have seen you improve greatly already. Just give it time.” She sighed, then continued. “The next level is working the spell and the reversal as many times as you can without errors. After that is multiple matchsticks at the same time as...Ms. Granger is...attempting.” Harry followed her gaze and saw Hermione with an entire matchbox worth of matches spread out on her desk. With a couple of waves of her wand, she changed all of them to silver, pointy needles and back again. Doing it once more seemed to make her a little dizzy, but after a few seconds of rest she was able to repeat the process again perfectly.

“Uh,” Professor McGonagall said, clearly distracted by Hermione's demonstration. She then returned her attention to Harry. “Right. Mr. Potter, here is the next homework assignment. You may work on this for the rest of the class period. If you finish it early, you may turn it in at the end of class.” She handed him an assignment sheet and then returned to her desk, shaking her head a little.
Harry returned to reading the textbook to double-check the points he needed to cover on the homework essay, but he also tried to covertly get Hermione's attention. The bushy-haired girl was totally absorbed in her work, though, and didn't react to his gentle coughs and stares. Harry was worried that she was overdoing it a bit and it might draw too much attention. Hopefully it wouldn't cause any issues. In yet another change, most of the teachers by now must be suspecting how much power Hermione had.

In his previous timeline, she was a good student but hadn't dared to go much beyond perfecting the basic classwork, unless it was for what she later called a “Harry Crisis.” Now, her friendship with him seemed to have fueled an interest in excelling far beyond anything taught in the classroom, and instead of spending all her time on writing (and over-writing) her homework assignments, she now pestered Harry to help her work on advanced Charms and obscure jinxes.

Hermione already had intermediate Switching down in Transfigurations, as well as most of the rest of the First Year classwork, but all only in theory. She was already well into the Third Year books but wouldn't try anything outside of class because it was slightly dangerous. Harry knew if McGonagall found out they were fooling around with advanced work she'd have kittens, so they planned to simply keep up with class spells in Transfiguration. Hermione had worked out a schedule to practice advanced Charms and the DADA combat and utility spells in their spare time over the next few weeks.

Harry getting started on the rather simple homework assignment but was still distracted by Hermione’s work. By this point, Professor McGonagall had wandered back over to Hermione's desk again and was watching her continue to practice the impressive transfiguration.

“I believe that is enough, Ms. Granger,” she said in a slightly strangled voice. “Umm, five points to Gryffindor for a most impressive mastery of this exercise. Please take a rest now. Class is almost over for today but you can work on the next homework assigned with Mr. Potter until the end of class.” Hermione looked a little tired but her smile at the Professor's praise brightened the room even better than her Lumos spell. McGonagall actually cracked a small smile herself as she handed over an assignment sheet to the happily exhausted girl.

Hermione loved the class, but Charms was very, very awkward for Harry. Every class practical was nothing but the repetition of the same simple spells, over and over again. Hermione was, of course, constantly getting House Points awarded for the speed and strength of her spells. But Professor Flitwick took a very understanding position with Harry, and simply required him to practice the wand movements and pronunciation without forcing himself to actually use the power required to complete the spells.

Intent to use magic being a primary component in spells meant you couldn't accidentally do something if you instead meant to do nothing, not that you couldn't screw up a spell you were trying to cast spectacularly. Ducking a bright orange spark flying over his head, Harry made a mental note to remember to get Neville and Ron new, fitted wands somehow, and soon.

Professor Flitwick would take Harry aside at the end of class for a single, focused attempt at as many spells as Harry could manage, calling off the sessions before Harry felt too weak to continue. Even the simple First Year spells left Harry exhausted after only a few tries, though, and he couldn't even do that much on Thursdays because he still had to attend DADA afterward. At least the spells he got out were almost perfect.

Flitwick always dismissed Harry's apologies with a sad little smile, simply telling him he should continue doing his best. It was embarrassing for Harry, but so far none of his classmates had said anything about his special...problems. Thank gods they didn't have any classes but Potions with
Slytherin this year.

Harry was glad to see how much Hermione enjoyed Transfigurations and Charms, as every interaction with McGonagall and Flitwick seemed to repair the emotional damage done by the abuse from her two worst teachers, the Death Eater and Voldemort's meat-puppet. Over the next two days, Hermione slowly relaxed again. Nightly conversations continued in the boy's dorm, now with Hermione setting up strong Silencing charms on the door, the closed curtains, and the stack of blankets themselves. They tried to stay with safer topics than future horrors – mostly advanced magical topics and which book Hermione would borrow from him next.

Hanging out with her Wednesday until their late, late night trip to the Astronomy tower brought to mind his next challenge: what to do about Hermione's birthday on the 19th. It was nine day away and he hadn't planned for Hermione knowing about his status as a time traveler. Sure, he'd picked up generic Birthday and Christmas gifts for her and his dorm mates during his second (secret) trip to Diagon Alley, but now he felt Hermione deserved something more...personal, more special. He racked his brain for hours for ideas but actually slapped himself in the head when he figured it out – obvious really, in retrospect.

The rest of the week was quiet as classes gradually became routine, with an exhausting and minimally participatory Charms and another strange DADA on Thursday. The non-spell-casting classes were a breeze, as most of them were either all theory (which he knew) or manual labor (which he could put up with).

Since that weekend, everyone had been very excited about the announcement of Flying Lessons. They were to be held Thursday afternoon after the rest of classes. Harry was less excited than most, but at least he'd be allowed to fly at school after taking it, something he hadn't realized until Fifth Year last time. It hadn't been a conspiracy or anything, it was just that he was already on the school team and no one bothered to tell him. Harry had originally joined the House Quidditch team because he didn't have any idea what it was or even how to say no, and anyway Ron was really into it so why not?

Of course in retrospect it made sense: Ron would have exploded if he had to go almost the entire ten months of the school year without flying, so of course you could do it at school outside of being on a Quidditch team. That must have been what he was doing some weekends when Harry was studying with Hermione or something that didn't involve the redhead. He simply didn't do it while Harry was around when at school, until he tried out for the team.

But this time around, he'd just fly on his own or with his friends. He wasn't allowed a personal broom at school yet, but flying with school brooms was allowed during the weekends for First Years so long as a teacher or prefect was supervising. Second year on, he could just fly whenever he wanted.

That was currently Harry's plan, as playing on the team took far too much time – time he needed to kill a Dark Lord and work out how to save his friends. Anyway, it would hardly be fair, given he'd ended up with more experience than anyone else at school could possibly have at this point. It wasn't like it was a professional team and he had no intention of playing pro anyway, so he had nothing to prove. Ron might be disappointed, but they would both just have to deal. There was zero change he'd trying anything stupid to get on the team, like...watching Neville fall and break his wrist then pull crazy stunts. Shit, he'd forgotten about that.

Having finally remembered from the future both Neville's disastrous fall and Hermione's utter terror until she was twenty of anything higher than a tall stool, Harry had decided to organize a study group Wednesday afternoon to get those who grew up without booms a little confidence and experience
with the theory. Hermione brought books, cold logic, and a crippling fear of heights, Ron brought his magical upbringing, limitless enthusiasm, and an appetite, he brought snacks a cynical outlook on the magical world's educational system. As nice a person as Ms. Hooch was, she didn't seem to understand either the fear of flying or how anyone couldn't love it at first sight. She also forgot, of course, that anyone raised outside the magical would never have had a chance to see it at all (let alone fall in love with it) and therefore wouldn't have any examples to try and imitate.

Still, the idea seemed to have worked and instead of worrying herself into a twitching pile of tears at lunch that day, Hermione had cornered Ron between Neville on one side, Harry on the other, and some stewed meats on the table and was interrogating the poor boy relentlessly about safety measures and the specifics of possibly using a Cushioning charm while in a free-fall — you'd need to be fast as a snake and at least three stories up, she concluded, vowing to keep her wand in hand somehow.

The class that afternoon went off without a hitch, with Harry scoring maximum possible points for the practice course and Neville and Hermione actually being able to get off the ground without incident. Malfoy made a constant stream of foul comments when the teacher was far enough away not to hear, but because Hermione was too frightened by the broom riding to actually hex Malfoy into a greasy stain on the grass when he called her a “useless mudblood” for the seventh time, everyone escaped without a trip to the Hospital Wing. And any day without a visit to the Hospital wing was, to Harry, a good day.

And then Friday and Potions rolled around again. Hermione was quiet and terse all morning and seemed to disappear into her introverted, Perfect Little Professor persona before breakfast was over. Walking from the Great Hall to the dungeons with her was hard for Harry to handle. He kept wanting to tell her it was okay or at least it would be okay soon, or maybe give her a hug, but she needed to stay inside the fake personality to keep her mental shields both up and hidden.

Harry was somehow able to clench his teeth and keep quiet all throughout the class, while Hermione was forced to redo a potion twice, still got a low score for it even though it was perfect, and was ignored every time she tried to raise her hand to answer a question. Snape even took points for “excessive hand waving” and “being too eager.” By the end, she was once again sitting slumped staring at the table with her hands in her lap.

Harry's potion was, of course, almost perfect, as were a couple of other students', but Snape only commented on Malfoy's and his, giving them each points. Somehow, he made Harry's praise seem like only “keeping it fair” instead of something deserved because of skill, while Malfoy was put forward as the truly gifted student. It didn't bug him anywhere near as much as Hermione's treatment, though, and it broke his heart to see her shuffle out of the classroom again.

Catching up with Hermione in the corridor, he couldn't think of anything to say. She seemed to still be in character but he wasn't sure, she just marched forward with her head bowed and her frizzy brown hair covering her eyes. After walking up a couple of flights of stairs, she firmly reached out and grabbed Harry's arm.

“What's wrong, Harry?” she asked, still worrying at her uniform tie.
“Uh, I-I don't, umm,” Harry stammered, frantically glancing around the room for something to help him explain how wrong this was to her and unlock his brain. Looking around the room herself, Hermione seemed to realize something was off.

“Oh, sorry Harry. You are quite right. This is not suitable at all.” She sighed and looked at all the dusty furniture. “I got all stirred up and wasn't thinking. We could get in trouble for doing it here. Yes, we wouldn't want someone to walk in or the furniture to get broken in all the excitement. Seventh floor, corridor on the left, strange troll painting, right?”

She draped her robe and tie over her arm to hide Sal but left her shirt collar unbuttoned. Her long black skirt swished as she pulled Harry away from the door then she dragged him out of the classroom, down the corridors, and up the stairs until they were outside the Room of Requirement. Dipping briefly to the floor, she released Sal, who slithered rapidly down the corridor in the direction they hadn't come from. Hermione took a long look down the other way, then nodded her head and walked up to the blank wall. Pacing quickly back and forth, she opened the door that appeared and dragged him inside, waiting only a second for Sal to slither into the room behind her.

Instead of the Madam-Puddifoot-esque bedroom nightmare that the small, non-screaming corner of Harry's mind was expecting, he saw a mostly empty stone room with a series of things like dressmaker's dummies lined up in the middle, as if for a firing squad. They each had a simple, cartoonish cardboard face attached to them that looked suspiciously like Snape's ugly mug. The nose was unmistakable.

“Quite nice,” Hermione said as she smartly closed the door behind them. She freed Harry from her clutches, dropped her discarded robe on a table by the entrance, pulled her wand out of her skirt pocket, and then dropped her wand arm to the floor to allow Sal to wrap around it again, all in quick succession. Sal was now wrapping around her right arm, from just above her elbow to just behind her wrist.

“I-I don't understand, Hermione. W-what did you...need me for?” Harry asked, his terror finally starting to disappear.

“Hmm?” she said, turning to look at him. “Oh, safety of course. I could fall or hurt myself or something, doing this.”

Aiming downrange, almost seeming to sight down her Familiar, Hermione started firing off Banishing charms one after another, knocking the dummies across the rest of the room and into the walls. Pieces of them piled broken against the wall as Hermione kept casting, firing the spell over and over again at the line of dummies in front of her until they were all knocked down.

Her path clear now, she kept Banishing the broken bits again and again against the wall as she walked slowly forward. The wooden pile was now more splinters than recognizable parts. Once she reached the other side of the room, she whipped her wand around wildly and almost screamed "Incendio!" A large, blue flame licked out of her wand and scorched the stone floor and wall. Moving it in a brief wave, she burned the broken wooden bits to ash in a few seconds, then canceled the spell and stared at the smoking remains.

“Ah, that's better,” she said, wiping her forehead with her non-wand-and-snake hand. “Think I figured out the strange power variance, too. But mostly, I just needed to break something again. Now I feel much better. I must say, this room really is something. Anyway, magic: I've got much better strength on my spells when Sal helps. Not totally sure what he's doing, but he really seems to like the fire ones and they have the most change from his help. Maybe you can talk to him about it later.

“Oh, and I don't think we'll get in any trouble Harry. I sent Sal out to scout around just in case
before. I'm not planning on spending any more time here today so he can check for us again when we leave in a few minutes. Maybe I can figure out something else in the future, but I really, really felt like doing something violent after how today's class went. I hope you don't mind.”

“I, uh, no,” Harry said, greatly relieved. “I think your precautions are fine for now. Maybe...hmm, maybe you could cast at Black Lake? Or we could find a rocky wall somewhere?”

“Both good ideas, Harry,” she said, smiling once again as she put her tie and robe back on. A quick look around by Sal and it was safe to make their way to the Great Hall.

After lunch, they scouted out some more remote locations for spell practice, one surprisingly enough near the Quidditch pitch. Harry was sure no one would care if they tried to light rocks on fire or banished branches around the grassy fields, but the remote location of the sports field was even better. It wasn't used much off-season and was usually deserted during the week as practices were mainly on the weekends and mornings (unless Wood went practice crazy again). They spent the rest of the day studying new spells they would try out later that weekend. Behind a pile of books in the library or in an open field where anyone could be hiding as a bug were not the best places to talk in secret, so they continued to met in his room for private and sensitive conversations.

This time, Hermione brought up using the same tunnels Harry had said the giant Basilisk used in Harry's odd past-future for her grass snakes, suggesting that they could scout out stuff for them until Harry got the Map. Harry wasn't sure that was such a good idea, but he could see the obvious advantages. Maybe it was just too much like something Voldemort would do – secrets and snakes and spying on people, but he really didn't like it. He told Hermione he'd think about it, but that they should still try to avoid using the Room of Requirement unless it was critical. Hermione frowned (obviously thinking of all the awesome things she could do with the room) but agreed that caution was the best plan for now.

Harry had some trouble sleeping that night, with strange disconnected fragments of images haunting his sleep. Waking up at way-too-early o'clock in the morning, he stumbled out of bed and headed to the bathroom, physically locking it behind him from long habit. He had just finished washing his hands and was just about to open the bathroom door when he heard a loud “pop” from behind and something struck him in the back of the knees. He fell forward and his head slammed into the doorknob, then he slumped to the floor in mind-searing pain, clutching his head.

The lights suddenly went out in the room, the magical, fake-oil lamps flicking off like a switch had been thrown (which didn't exist – they were magic, not electricity), then was a loud, wrenching crash rang out followed by the sound of spraying water, as if a sink had just exploded.

A muffled, high-pitched voice rasped menacingly from just above where he lay, still writhing in pain. “Stay away from her if you know what's good for you, Potter. We won't let you interfere with our plans.” Harry tried to go for his wand, then something hard and metal connected with his head and everything was blackness.
Chapter Eight

Harry woke as fire licked at one side of his head – but he was unburned. He was conscious of being conscious, but just barely. Everything hurt and he couldn't seem to get his eyes open. It hurt to try. It hurt to be conscious. It hurt to be. Harry knew he was in bad shape – abstract concepts didn't usually ache like that. No, that didn't make any sense. Shit, he was loopy. Concussion for sure. He tried to move but nothing would respond correctly. He involuntarily let out a soft moan of pain and frustration. The arm on his uninjured side flopped a little.

“Harry!” a deep, frantic voice yelled. He could smell lemons and fire and old wooden furniture. A presence, maybe two that were really one, violently filled the room from corner to corner, pouring in like from a dam suddenly breaking. He Felt Peril for Evil, Protection for the Weak, and Hope that Burned as Bright in the Last Hour as the First. He felt small.

He must really be in bad shape if he was sensing magic like this again. That only happened when his magic was trying to keep his brain awake and functioning. Or if he had a bad head injury and it was trying to prevent him from rapidly losing IQ points. Or maybe if he was fighting especially hard against Voldemort trying to take over his mind.

Maybe that was all that was keeping him alive now, his magic. Most of the time, he couldn't get readings from people passively, but with increased levels of magic in his brain he had a much better sense for things. But he didn't think further about that. It was going to be okay now that...whoever that was was here. They wouldn't let him die. Letting out a shuttering breath, he started to relax a little. It hurt to breathe, but everything would be okay now for some reason. He wasn't thinking clearly.

There was the sound of hurried footsteps and kicked porcelain rattling wetly across the floor. Someone knelt by his side and gently touched his shattered face with a shaking hand. Pain. He would have screamed if he could have. Instead, he only felt himself groan softly again. “Oh no, Harry. What has happened to you now? Who would do this?” the voice said shakily.

“Fawkes,” it said to its other self, commanding and clear now, “take him to a bed in the hospital wing then return for me so I can alert Madam Pomfrey to his condition. Hurry!”

A pair of large talons gripped his arm, then he was on fire but did not burn, then he was in another place and falling. He dropped about a half a foot, landing on something soft with a thud that made him lose whatever meager grip on consciousness he had before. His body was a solid mass of pain that drove all thoughts from his mind, bringing blackness once again.

“Harry,” a soft female voice cooed above him. His magical senses returned to him and he Felt the enormous, smothering sense of a Dragon's Unstoppable Flame, the Death of Hope, and the oily Darkness of the Shadows of the Forest. At a distance was the roiling caldron of Burning Desire, a Chained Soul, and Despair of the Heart. He opened his eyes and saw...shit, Her. Everything rushed
back at once. His wife, dead. Him, captured and about to be forced into a ritual of Dark magic by a madwoman, Her overwhelming magic now affecting his perceptions.

He'd fainted. He wasn't too macho to admit that. The Witch Queen had started giving him an odd lecture on how to scout out his destination after a successful time travel trip, his wife bleeding out in the background. He had been too stunned to react until a few minutes in, then he lost it. The Thorn Witch, Ginny Granger, had silenced him with a casually cast spell after he'd started screaming. Then they'd simply continued setting up the room for what was to come as he silently sobbed and thrashed in his chains, watching his wife slowly die in front of him.

Then he passed out. Now he was awake again and could see nothing much had changed. Ginny was still inscribing something around the stone altar in a wide circle with a dark piece of coal. Hermione was writing something on a long piece of parchment, the hovering quill moving on its own while She silently read some ancient looking book with a suspiciously odd looking leathery cover. He had to stop himself from thinking about the source of the skin. He had to stop this ritual somehow. There was no way this would work, She had to know that.

He avoided turning his head to look at the corner of the room where his wife's lifeless body still hung on an inverted cross, but he couldn't avoid seeing the large glass bottles lined up on a table next to him, filled with what was obviously Luna's blood. There were so many of them. He felt faint with grief and wanted to throw up. How could he go on now that she was dead. A part of his heart seemed to be missing.

A buzzing in his head deafened him for a moment, a distant, whispered tune ran through his thoughts like a ghost, then his mind was clear again. He was upset about something, but right now he needed to focus on his current situation. Gather information. React quickly if he got an opportunity to escape. He could work on whatever it was later. The most dangerous witch in the world was about to do something horrible to him. Had already done something horrible, but that wasn't important now. He needed to focus.

“Good, you're back with us.” Hermione Granger, Witch Queen of the Isles, stared down at him with a gentle look and black pits for eyes. “It is time to finish your markings.”

She waved a hand at him, silently casting. He tried to say something in reply but realized he couldn't move at all, his limbs frozen and his muscles locked in place in the chains. A casual ly cast silent wandless Freezing Charm. That was so Hermione. She put the book down and picked up Her silver ritual knife and a shallow bowl. Placing the items next to him, She sliced deeply into Her own wrist without hesitation or flinching. The blood dripped rapidly into the bowl. She seemed unconcerned and started lecturing to him.

“Interesting thing to note,” She said as She seemed to pluck Her wand from midair. Her current wand, that was – She'd lost at least half a dozen in battles over the years. Always seemed to end up with dragon heartstring, though. This one looked like Her original wand in make – a vinewood base and (undoubtedly) a dragon heartstring core. That didn't surprise him; there was more than a little of the Dragon in Her.

Fire spells were Her favorites, She had always had a frighteningly powerful magical core, and She had a temper that was stunning to witness. Fiercely intelligent, She had slumbered nearly Her entire childhood at Hogwarts, curled up in the dark library stacks, resting on the piles of carefully horded knowledge. When young, Hermione Granger had been a quiet, studious girl, only occasionally joining in Harry's dangerous antics, and only as a last resort when Her friends were in danger. No one had suspected what the loss of Her favorite place on the planet, along with the young man She'd loved, would do to Her.
“Harry,” She said sharply, peering down at him again, “do pay attention. We have some time until
the ritual is ready. You might as well learn something. Who knows when it will help you in the past?
As I was saying, the last component gave me pause at first. When I was working out the Arithmancy
of the ritual, I came across the requirement of the ‘Blood of a Virgin’ as a strong binding element. As
you may know, that always requires a magical virgin, a witch or wizard. In this case, the power
requirements were thankfully for an adult, not a child. Which was good, because Dark rituals
usually mean sacrificing the virgin; you know my opinion on killing children.

“Usually, that kind of requirement is troublesome with an adult magical, though. Do you have any
idea how few magics make it to so-called magical adulthood at seventeen (a magical number)
without having sex? Not. Many. Even in stuffy, stuck-up Hogwarts, the kids copulated like rabbits.
Sexually repressed magical teenagers are even worse about accidental magic than pre-Hogwarts-
age children and they are also between twice and four times as strong on average, so most of the
time parents and teachers just look the other way and let them work off their frustrations so long as
they do it safely and consensually.” She chuckled quietly, then smirked.

“It was actually a joke, you know? Among the Fourth Year girls at Hogwarts. ‘Less likely than a
Virgin Puff Prefect.’ Crude, but one of the Ravenclaw girls actually did a series of interviews of Fifth
through Seventh year Puffs. She confirmed that the last seven years of Puff prefects' pre-Fifth-Year
sexual activities supported that joke. The Puffs were rather proud of it, actually, and fully supported
the student study, posting the results on the House bulletin board. Good for them – a little happiness
in a bleak world.” She looked a little lost and stared out into the darkened room for a moment, then
returned to Her lecture mode.

“Anyway, specifics: it is the act of making love to someone that does it – removing the state of
magical virginity, I mean. Mystically speaking, it is not any specific sexual act, but it does have to
directly involve physical contact with someone of the opposite sex with magical abilities and
stimulation to climax.” She blinked twice and visibly got sidetracked again.

“Did you know there was a section of the Department of Mysteries in the old British Ministry of
Magic that studied, and I quote, ‘Love’? Yeah, not love. Corrupt, closed-minded plutocrats, the
Unspeakables, but brilliant at getting funding. The stuffy fogies (and the rare batty old biddies)
thought it was romantic to fund research on Love – the old wives adored the appropriations bills for
it – but they’d never have agreed to pay for sex research by name. The Unspeakables assigned to
that sub-department studied the effect of sex, affection, marriage, and various levels of emotional
closeness between magicals. I stole their secret encoded and warded research notes after the
Ministry was destroyed.

“Love potions, Veela auras, married couples, the stability and attributes of all mathematically
possible multiple partner relationships, straight-up orgies – behind those closed doors, they studied it
all. Such a loss to the world. It was detailed, exhausting research.” She snorted at Her own
wording, “but those brave, perverted Unspeakables tried it all. Not even the French Ministry of
Magic had anything to match it. Something to be said for corrupt, bloated government departments
with no oversight.”

Hermione was coolly cynical about it now, but Harry knew how much She had hated the Ministry
and their incompetence before its destruction. She’d always been interested in the Department of
Mysteries, though, and he thought She might have ended up a high-ranking Unspeakable researcher
if Voldemort hadn’t taken over. And maybe if, as she had suggested in an hour-long lecture, the
Unspeakable’s binding magical oaths weren’t so detrimental to academic freedoms.

“Well, the point is that such consensual sexual contact with the opposite sex spoils the blood for this
kind of sacrifice. Interesting that those rituals using virgin blood are almost universally Dark, but
Dark rituals don’t typically use Pure or Light components at all – nothing spoils a Dark ritual quite like spilling salt over it or touching it with a unicorn hair. When they do use such items, they are almost always heavily and ritually corrupted first. Not virgin blood, though. That’s almost always used as-is.

“That very strongly empirically suggests that it isn’t a loss of Purity or Brightness for a magical to have intimate relations with the opposite sex (this is ignoring mundanes and same-sex relationships for now, as we can’t prove anything with magic there). Rather, it seems the very essence of both the Male and Female elements of the Light itself – Love, Joy, and Life Triumphant – is infused into one’s physical form for the rest of its days. It is my theory that this sharing of the nature of their Power fills some weakness that Dark magic exploits for rituals.

“I am not sure exactly what solo or same-gendered interactions do to witches and wizards. I would assume it works toward balancing the Light natures of those involved, bringing the Dimmest up to some state closer to that of the Brightest participant. Maybe dragging the other down, but Light rituals don’t usually work like that. And it is clear that making love is a powerful Ritual of the Light. Didn’t look into rape and its effects. I am simply not interested in ways to drag anyone into the Darkness, so I returned to my research, attempting to narrow down the requirements more.

“Imagine my additional relief when it turned out that it wasn’t actually a life sacrifice that was required but just a bloodletting. Knowing that, I didn’t need to go any further. I triple checked my calculations, confirmed the results, and realized that I had a ready solution. Namely, my own blood.” She noticed Harry’s minor facial muscle changes (the limit of what he could do, plus breathing), indicating his surprise. She waved Her wand and instantly healed the cut, the bowl now full of Her dark red blood.

“That’s right, Harry. Never. I think you know why. Had to be mine, though. Ginny's blood wouldn't work. We're rapidly nearing two decades too late for that.” Hermione pursed Her lips in minor disapproval, then Her face cleared again. Harry ran the numbers and got...maybe Second or Third Year? Wow.

“Her continued...enthusiasm for life is an inspiration to me every day,” Hermione said, glancing over at Ginny. Harry could move his eyes to see where the redhead was currently bending over at the waist, checking some runic pattern on the floor against a piece of parchment she was holding. On hearing her Dark Mistress’ comments, she bent lower to ride her tiny skirt further up her legs. She paused, then reached back with her free hand and flipped it up all the way, showing off her entire rear and tiny bright green panties. Then she wiggled her ass back and forth several times at them. He wasn’t sure why Ginny wore the illusion of panties with her illusory clothing, but it was a convincing glamour. Hermione rolled Her eyes (or appeared to roll them – She didn’t actually have eyes) and turned back to Harry. She dipped Her wand into the bowl of Her blood and started inscribing runes on his chest.

“Once this is done,” She said, “we finish the focusing matrix in...the other blood and run final imbuing with the temporal tether to your wand. We’ve already got your curse scar soul fragment reverse-bonded to the timeless representation of Voldemort's Horcrux array. Good thing we never destroyed any more or there wouldn’t be enough of his soul left in this point in space-time to anchor things. If this doesn't work, I'll keep trying to destroy them, of course. But I'm almost sure it will. Work, that is.” Hermione finished Her rune work, floated the bowl of blood over to a table behind Her without looking, and cleaned Her wand with a glance. She then appeared to shove it straight into Her chest like a mundane stage magician's trick, the wand disappearing completely in a second.

“Oh!” She exclaimed, leaning over him to cup his chin in one hand. “Just one more thing. You need to accept your part in this ritual. It only works on willing participants.” Harry's stony glare
obviously displeased Her. “Harry, if you don’t do this, Luna’s sacrifice will be pointless! Look, I’ll help you.” Threading Her other hand into his hair, She once again pulled Her wand from nowhere. She slowly waved it over his head, then put Her wand away in midair and cupped his face in both hands. She stared deep into his eyes and a soft pressure covered his senses. There was a buzzing in his mind again and he felt faint.

“Harry, you will obey me,” She whispered. The ebony holes in Her face stared into his green eyes. He continued to glare at Her, not sure what this was.

“Obey,” She stated simply. This was pointless, he wasn’t going to allow Her to get away with this. Then the soft push became a vise, crushing his resistance. He suddenly realized his mental shields were being undermined and Hermione was already inside them. Her magic filled him. It burned, an acid in his brain.

“Obey,” She commanded for the magical third time. Harry’s eyes flew wide open and he stopped breathing for almost a minute, staring straight ahead. He couldn’t feel anything and his mind was empty.

“Harry,” She said, and the world bent under Her words, “I can’t make you do this, but I can remove all other desires and focus your attention. I know a part of you wants to do this. I want, I need you to want to complete this ritual. Please, my old friend. Do this for me.” Of course he would, Harry thought. Otherwise...someone's sacrifice...it was blurry. He couldn’t remember the reasons. But maybe he’d get a chance to escape if he just played along. Hermione saw something in his eyes that seemed to please Her and with a wave of Her hand he could move once again.

“Good, Harry. Doesn’t that feel better?” She asked softly, stroking his cheeks. He closed his eyes and refused to look at her. “What do you care?” he asked in a growl, his voice still raw from screaming. Why had he been screaming? Was he forgetting something? He wished She’d just get on with it. When the ritual inevitably failed, She’d be distracted and weak and then he could try to escape. She’d already said there would be a magical pulse that would cancel out charmed lights. Maybe it would weaken or destroy the Anti-Disapparition wards. That was his hope at least.

“It is almost the end. Give me one last kiss.” Hermione said suddenly, ignoring his question. Harry's eyes snapped open wide as She took off Her thick robes with a single regal gesture, handing them to one side as if to an invisible assistant. The clothing disappeared before it hit the floor. “Now,” She commanded. Of course he would. It was still Hermione asking; even after everything, he still cared for Her. He still...

His eyes were drawn to her now-visible white blouse, billowing out slightly where it outlined Her modest breasts. Subtle magic, not a brassiere, supported them. As She brought Her lips inches from his, he returned his gaze to her face, seeing her waiting expectantly for him. His eyes locked with the sad black pits in her face, then he craned his neck a little and gently met Her lips with his own. Her eyelids drooped as She pressed down a little harder, leaning over him and carefully avoiding smearing the blood runes on his chest. Her firm breasts nudged against his arm where it was chained to the altar. He was overwhelmed by her presence above him, soft and warm and enormously powerful, a deity in human form. He worshiped her eagerly, straining against his bonds.

Her mouth opened slowly but hungrily over his and she groaned softly as he touched Her lips with his tongue, Her breath catching as he boldly pressed deeper, searching for more ways to please Her. Shifting slightly, she began to repeatedly rub Her nipples against him – they were as hard as stone, obvious through her thin blouse. After he briefly dueled Her tongue with his own, a battle which She won of course, She moaned then pulled back slowly while gently biting his lower lip. Hermione stared into his eyes for a moment then leaned in again, brushing Her cheek against his,
nuzzling his neck.

Harry was shocked speechless, trying to process what had just happened. That kiss had been...amazing, but something had felt wrong. Her lips had tasted bitter-sweat, a Darker Feeling than that first time, so long ago in the ruins of England. There was something else, something he was forgetting. Hermione didn't seem to notice anything wrong, though. He needed time to think about what that meant, but now he Felt as well as heard the ritual wards starting to power up, a subsonic hum that shook his bones.

“T-that was nice, Harry,” She whispered shakily in his ear. “Thank you.”

She took a deep breath, tickling his ear, then continued. “We're sending you back soon and you need to remember what is important: Kill Voldemort. Protect your friends. Seek out my younger self for help, and help her, me, if you can – you remember my...issues. And never, ever forget – I've always loved you and I'll be yours throughout all time, for all eternally, even if you don't realize it. Even if yet again I can't...if we will never be together, I will still fight by your side.” He felt her shiver a little, her soft chest still pressed against his arm, then She continued, “I could...I could make you love her, the young me back then – but I won't. I am capable of much, but I would never do that, not to you. What is important is that she will love you again all on her own. I am sure of this, because you are who you are and my love is forever, from the first moment I saw you.” She leaned back and looked into his eyes again.

“That day, the day we became Three, I wasn’t crying because of what Ronald had said. I wouldn't cry all afternoon because of that. I had had worse said about me, worse done to me, as you well know. It was you: what you didn’t say, that you never stopped him, that you didn’t seem to even notice me. I didn’t know your own pain. I'm sorry. Please, this time...tell me. She can help you as much as you help her. Let her in, let me in.”

She pressed Her cheek to his again and...no, it couldn't be. He would swear he felt Her tears wetly touch his cheek. But that was impossible – She didn't have tear ducts anymore. As the hum grew louder, he could barely hear Her whispered words. “Now save us all one more time, Harry. My hero. My Love.” Hermione softly kissed his cheek and moved away, stepping carefully over the completed runes. As he thought, Her face looked dry.

Ginny was just finishing up pouring the outer blood seals, channels dug into the stone floor filling with the red liquid, the now-empty glass containers lining a wall to one side. A few candles still surrounded them, providing the only light in the room. His wand was on a pedestal near his feet, surrounded by more runes and painted with more blood. He could still feel Her lips on his, Her body pressed against him. His head was spinning and he felt faint.

She was turned away now and Her wife was hugging Her close. Hermione was shaking silently with Her head pressed into Her wife's shoulder. Ginny's hands softly caressed Hermione's back, her cat-like eyes closed, her narrow face filled with pain. She seemed to be whispering something to Hermione. Was She...was The Witch Queen crying? It didn't...he couldn't seem to think straight.

They stayed like that for several silent minutes, then Hermione straightened up and seemed to collect Herself. With a wave of Her wand, both of their outfits, real and illusion, were gone. They separated and took their places at each of his sides. The two immensely Powerful and beautiful witches stood naked in shallow pools of blood, chanting something he couldn't hear over the room-shaking noise while waving their wands in involved patterns, mad painters with sparkling brushes. Runes gradually appeared on their naked bodies, covering them in intricate patterns. Things seemed to be graying out in his vision and the buzzing in his ears wouldn't go away. He couldn't remember why he was here, what was happening, but he wasn't fighting it anymore. He just wanted it to work and
for everything to be over. Blackness started to fall over his eyes. He felt like he was going to-

Then there was nothing but infinite darkness, forever.

Harry woke once more, gasping into sudden awareness. There had been another dream but his scar was, once again, the only thing not hurting. So not Voldemort. Probably. Most likely. Also, this time he remembered a dream about the Witch Queen. There had been memories about that macabre lecture on blood and virgins, rants about sex and magic, vaguely remembered details about...the end. There had been something else as well, something...beautiful lost. But now, after the nightmare was over, there just a vague sense of confusion and sadness.

Everything was quiet except for a distant murmuring. One of his eyes was able to open to a slit, enough to see the blurry curtains around him. The smells, the cot...hospital wing. Right. Then the sound of running feet, louder than anything else. There were sudden protests, cut off by hurried words he couldn't hear, then a fuzzy brown blur was hovering over him.

Harry felt Her presence flow over him, but not as he remembered it from so long ago – She was now a flickering warmth, a Candle where there had once been a Raging Inferno. The rest was obscured because She was shouting magic, the cries echoing louder than who She was. He Felt a Fire Burning Bravely in a Cold Draft, Fear of Mortality, and Anguish of the Soul.

“Harry! O-OH GOD HARRY, what happened?!” She said in a panic, Her blurry hands, so small, were clutched in front of Her face. Harry tried to say something but his lips were numb and his jaw wouldn't move right. Didn't hurt as much as it should; must be medical numbing charms.

“No, d-don't try and (ohgodyourface), d-don't s-say anything! You're so, j-just don't...oh Harry, why did this happen? How could...in the dorms.” She was babbling randomly now, Her blurry hands shaking as they reached out toward him. She barely touched his chest, then turned away, Her face in Her hands.

“It isn't possible. I don't have the- But I have to...I-I-I'm sorry, Harry I c-can't, I j-just can't!”

Then She ran out of the hospital wing, Her feet echoing on the floor. Harry still couldn't focus, didn't know what She was saying. It didn't seem worth holding onto...not worth staying-

“Harry,” a deep voice said, bringing him awake once again. It felt like his body was totally disconnected but he was able to breathe and successfully swallow a couple of times without passing out from pain, so that seemed like a good sign.

“Harry, we need to ask you a few questions. I am sorry to have to wake you, but time could be important.”

He opened his eyes. No, eye, the other was still swollen shut. Still, good progress. Blurry Dumbledore was standing by his side, filling up the room as usual. Blurry McGonagall was just behind him – or at least something that looked female, tall, blurry, and Felt Stern and Upright, a Wall of Order. He was still passively Feeling magic. That wasn't a good sign.

“Profe'rr,” he rasped out. He coughed a few times, then tried again. “Professors. What happened?”

“That is what we were hoping to ask you, Mr. Potter,” the Blurry Headmaster said. “Did you see who attacked you?”

Harry started to shake his head then gasped in pain. Right, head injury. “No, Professor. I was
Harry woke with a start. He was automatically reaching for his wand and glasses before the crushing pain in his head brought him to his senses. Right. hospital wing, head trauma. One of these days he'd remember before doing that. He heard the click-clack of Madam Pomfrey's shoes on the floor and then she appeared with a blurry pile of clothes in her arms and a blurry potion on a tray. Goodie. She
put everything down on a side table then waved her blurry wand over him and clucked her tongue.

“Mr. Potter, you are perfectly healthy now,” she said briskly, clearly displeased to see him under her care again. “Congratulations. Take this potion now and then leave my ward and don't come back for at least a month.” She shoved the blurry potion into his hand as Harry found his glasses and put them on. After he took what he recognized from long, horrible taste experience as a pain relief potion under her watchful eye, she left him with the curtains drawn closed while he dressed. His wand and makeshift wand holster (which he slept wearing, slightly loosened) was with his outer school robe, but he didn't have anything to wear under it but his current hospital tunic and loose fitting generic hospital pants. His pajamas must have been covered in blood and cut off of him. Standard emergency procedure. His oversized, second-hand pajamas were most likely a lost cause. Nothing of value lost, he didn't care.

He saw there was no one else in the empty hospital ward when he pulled the curtain back from his bed. As he was moving to leave, Madam Pomfrey stopped him at her desk near the exit arch and handed him a wooden box with 22 potions in it, two different types.

“Take one of each type, blue and green, after every meal for the next four days, Mr. Potter – that excludes the breakfast you missed this morning,” she said, not looking up from her desk. “Do not skip any meals or potions. Try to relax for the rest of the day. No running around or casting spells. Professor McGonagall is scheduling a visit with Doctor Tonks later today – she said she will give you the details personally when she has them. Now get out of here.” As he was about to step through the door, she stopped him again with a quick wave.

“Oh, and Mr. Potter: a Ms. Granger stopped by several times while you were asleep. A few of your other classmates also showed up to visit, but she was especially insistent that you talk to her once you were better.” Madam Pomfrey looked down her nose at him sternly. “She seemed very worried about you. You should talk to the poor girl. She was practically in tears every time I saw her. She haunted the hospital wing throughout the day Saturday and even showed up once today before breakfast.”

“Ah, yes ma'am,” Harry said quickly, still intimidated by the proud healer even after knowing her for years in the future. “I was already planning on finding Hermione for a chat. So...what time is it? And, err...what day?”

“Late Sunday morning on the 15th, Mr. Potter, almost lunch. Do not skip lunch. Get on with you.” She was glaring at him impatiently and he quickly left.

Walking down the cold, empty corridors, Harry felt disconnected. He was also feeling very twitchy. He had his wand again but all the potions had left him weak and shaky. He only had so much magical reserves as it was and many magical healing potions used the body's own power to repair things. He had been in very bad shape Saturday morning, and it had apparently taken all of Saturday and much of today to fix him up. At least nothing had to be vanished and regrown this time, but he wasn't in good fighting shape right now, even by his current pathetic standards. He had to lean against a wall for a minute before tackling the stairs.

Someone had ambushed him inside a locked room and apparently hadn't been caught. Not a good sign. Voldemort's shade and Slytherins were his first two suspects, but it didn't feel right. The voice could have been disguised but it hadn't sounded like a normal adult. Given magic, though, literally perfect disguises were entirely possible. He needed to talk to Hermione. Maybe she had more information. Hell, maybe she had solved it already.

When he reached the Gryffindor common room, Harry realized that something was very, very wrong. As he walked through the portrait hole entrance, he suddenly stopped, frozen in his tracks.
Several older students were studying, or at least trying to. They seemed jittery and kept flipping through the reference books in front of them and fiddling with their quills. No younger students were present, which was a little unusual, and the room was almost empty (very unusual, based on Harry's odd, impossibly long school experience). The NEWT students (who else would be studying this hard) all had bits of fluff stuck in their ears and kept glancing nervously at the stairs to the boys' dorm where faint violin music was drifting out.

A vague sense of unease was starting to creep into his mind. He walked slowly toward his dorm room, the music growing louder along with the itchy feeling of something intruding on his mind. By the time he was at the door to the First Year boys' room, he was looking over his shoulder almost every step and feeling jumpy and unsettled.

The violin continued to swoop gently in a simple, searching, disturbing tune. He couldn't place it but he had never been much of a music buff. Something like this, magical and emotional and piercing, could change his mind about that. He'd heard of music magic before, hell he'd sung in a Ritual Circle with three French Hit Wizards once during a long stakeout near Bern. Wand magic would have been detected as they were inside the inner wards of the target, as would an easily spotted normal fire, so they used a much older Power and sat inside a runic circle to keep warm.

The simple folk tune was magically burned into his mind still, along with the phonetically repeated French words. If he ever needed to use it again, the repetition and continuous outpouring of magic had ensured that he'd remember it like it was yesterday. One of the drawbacks of that type of Power was, you magically couldn't forget the experience of the ritual. Ever. But they hadn't frozen to death, so even given the drawbacks the technique got a ringing endorsement from him. The thing he was confused about was, who was playing and what was the spell?

The sound of the violin was definitely coming from the First Year's room, the one he shared with four other boys. None of whom played an instrument, he was almost certain. He had known all of them for...well, most of their tragically short lives. Only Ron had escaped the Fall of Hogwarts by simply not being there. But none of them had ever mentioned music as even a passing hobby.

Inching his head around the doorway, he saw the room empty of young wizards but full to the brim with the smartest magical of this era (and possibly all time). It was like looking into an oven. She inhabited the entire room, stretching from corner to corner, filling it full and overfull with music and Power. It spilled out into the hall, practically a physical wall hitting him in the face. Harry took a step into the room and slumped against the wall to avoid the near material force of it simply driving him out of the room.

Standing in front of the tempest he felt stripped naked. Foreign emotions buffeted him, strange and smelling of dusty shelves and lonesomeness. Thoughts of Power, the feeling of a book full of secrets and hidden knowledge just in front of him, and endless and crushing impatience and worry pressed down on him. And something...half remembered, something that reminded him of Dumbledore, something that was eternal, something that burned. The source of all of it was the oddly intense girl with the bushy hair.

Hermione was playing a slightly dinged-up violin at the foot his bed, swaying slightly to the music. Her arm pumped vigorously as the bow snapped from one simple but perfect note to another. It wasn't a complicated tune, but she seemed to be putting everything she had into it. The instrument thrummed with the magical power being relentlessly thrown into the music. The idea that it was something by Bach entered his head, but that might just have been the fact that he knew two classical composers, both began with "B", and that one was alphabetically first.

He jumped as she suddenly stopped playing, her bow pausing in midair, her eyes now locked onto
him. The incomplete musical thought, the missing chord she hadn't played, almost physically hurt him, a ghostly aching in his thoughts. Then a magical wave that seemed to be sounding the next note all on its own flowed over him and soothed his mind. The room was still full of power, but it waited now, crouched low and tense. He briefly hoped this wasn't some complicated accidental magic about to combust the room with arcane fire, then Hermione took a deep breath and the pressure eased to the usual, merely worrying levels around her.

“Harry. It's...ever so good to see you,” she said softly, blinking slowly, not seeming entirely there. She tucked her bow onto her left hand pinky and kept the violin at her shoulder as she shook her wand from her sleeve with one quick motion. She brought it up and waited, pointing it vaguely in Harry's direction. He stood frozen and speechless.

“The door please, Harry,” she commanded evenly, her eyebrows drawing together slightly in impatience. He reached out and closed it softly, then moved out of the way as she started casting silencing spells on the doors, every fixture in the room, all of the beds and trunks, the walls and the windows. Hedwig had to duck from where she was sitting on the windowsill to avoid being hit by her spell. Flexing her fingers on the wand, she nodded to Harry and said, “Take a seat, please. We need to talk and it can't wait.”

Harry went over to his bed and sat facing her as she continued to stand slightly stiffly in front of him. He noticed all five of her snakes gathering on his bed behind him, all staring intently at him. Hedwig had turned to watch as well. Hermione waved her wand in a small circle that included Hedwig, Harry, and the snakes on the bed, then pointed it at herself, firmly saying “Muffliato.” She put the wand back on a table.

They'd gone over that one last week, him recalling and teaching her the strange spells from that odd inventor and author – Harry never had found out who had been writing the rather Dark spells in the used Potions textbook he'd borrowed. The identity of the Half-Blood Prince was another mystery he'd need to solve someday, but this time's Hermione had taken to them as easily as in his original timeline.

As if she'd already been in a long discussion with him on the topic, Hermione jumped right into a conversation, already in progress. “This violin was what I found as an emotional outlet. I knew I was having...issues after I saw you, you...a-and I couldn't just bottle them up any longer. I didn't want to blow off steam by simply blowing things up without someone else there to make it safer, and I really find violence distasteful and brutish, and so...I went to the Room of Requirement and asked for a way to safely let me release magical and emotional stress.” She fidgeted a little and wouldn't look at Harry, instead staring at the ground.

“There was a small music studio inside, with some dusty sheet music, empty shelves, and this violin and bow on a small table. I wrapped them up in a dust sheet I found – so I wouldn't touch them obviously. Of course, I then took them to Professor McGonagall to make sure they weren't cursed or anything. She took them to Professor Flitwick, and, well, long story short, both items are perfectly safe, worth a small fortune, and attuned magically as if they were made for me. After they heard me play, they uh...” Hermione frowned and toed the ground.

“I was very upset so I'm sure I didn't play very well, it was just a recital piece I remembered from a few years ago, but they said the original Hogwarts music program, which according to Hogwarts, A History, was discontinued in 1917 for some reason they really don't clearly explain, was an optional set of classes covered by standard tuition along with the instrument to be played, if a personal instrument was assigned, so they decided to use this as a loophole and declared me an independent student of the musical arts at Hogwarts. The only one, in fact. I will have to give at least two private recitals to the Deputy Headmistress and some other teachers every year, but otherwise the violin is
mine to keep and I can take it home on holiday.” Winding down again, Hermione sighed then took several deep breaths and squared her shoulders again, tucking the violin in tighter.

Taking her bow in hand again, she licked her lips then continued. “I don't know if, well, if you knew this before, but I took lessons for several years. My...my parents thought it would help me to have a hobby other than books. It didn't go well. The music teachers didn't like me much, we tried several, and, and they all said my work was technically correct but lacked...emotion. They weren't very...nice, especially the last one. He was dropped from the program were he was studying for his Masters when the police charged him for striking me during one horrible lesson. I...I did some accidental magic, broke a window out, and he instantly flew into, into a rage and knocked me down. That was when another teacher found us and dragged him away from me. My...my parents gave up on music lessons after that.”

She smirked bitterly and glared at the ground. “Wish they could hear me now. It is a magical violin, you know,” she said, nodding her head at the instrument still tucked into her shoulder. “Not enchanted, mind you, but made of magical materials. Like a wand. Very much like a wand in fact. Dragongut strings, treated and dried for 99 days, then stretched, wound, and wrapped in dwarven silver threads to give the correct pitch. The body of the violin and the bow are two different and rare varieties of wand quality vinewood. It is essentially my wand, made in a different shape, with Unicorn hair for the bow.” She shook her head as if to clear it then glanced up at Harry and saw his confused expression. Looking away quickly, she blushed in embarrassment.

“But enough about me and my, my silly hobby. It worked and I feel much better. No problems with near accidents with my magic and I'm not suppressing my emotions to such an extreme right now, or at least I wasn't until you entered the room, and I just...I want you to know-” her face twisted in pain.

“I saw you that morning. Hedwig woke me at what felt like the middle of the night, tapping on the window. I instantly knew you'd be in the hospital – I remembered what you told me from before, when she told you about me. I went and, and I saw...your face was all crushed and your jaw...you were so pale- I thought, I mean, I heard you had a fractured skull, but I didn't know what magical healing could do.” She sadly hung her head.

“I-I ran away. I'm so sorry. I should have been braver, but that...that could have been a lifelong...and I didn't know there was natural magical protection from brain damage...and now you're all...and healthy and...” she drifted off, then closed her eyes and brought her bow slowly back to position. She started quietly noodling some notes, almost a tune Harry could recognize. They seemed to be slowly building to something he felt he should remember.

“I want to play something for you,” she said, still not looking at him. “What I've been holding back since I saw you walk into the room. This is how I feel now, seeing you fine again,” she said quietly, continuing to play softly. Hermione then looked him straight in the eyes, brought the bow down in a crashingly triumphant sound, and the sun seemed to rise from behind her.

Yes, he knew this one. This was something by the other “B”. Hermione smiled brightly and tears fell from her eyes as she pulled from the small violin a short and simple solo arrangement of Beethoven's most well known work, the main theme of his 9th Symphony's famous fourth movement; it was a piece even musically stunted Harry instantly recognized, as most of the world did, as Beethoven's Ode to Joy.

Harry would have fallen to his knees if he hadn't been sitting on his bed. Instead he gripped the blankets in his hands as she drove relentlessly on, waves of relief and happiness crashing over him. It was a thousand cheering charms all hitting him at once, an endless, perfect rejoicing. Everything in
that moment was right and good again. He felt Sal crawl into his lap and curl up and Hedwig seemed to be smiling at him. As Hermione finished the last singing notes, Harry finally found his tongue again.

“Th-that was amazing, Hermione,” he said, still stunned and reeling from the music. “I've...I mean, I've never heard something like that before.”

“I'd imagine not,” she said brightly, grinning as she put the violin down on a nearby table. “I don't play very well, and that wasn't a very skillful arrangement, nor was it a very refined choice. I had to come up with it on the fly and everything. I wasn’t planning on playing for you. I was just waiting here so I'd catch you when you got out. Sorry.”

“Hermione, you,” Harry started, then stopped and tried again. “That was incredible and beautiful and perfect. Thank you for sharing with me. Who do I have to kill to get an invitation to this 'private recital’?" he asked with a smile. “Please say it isn't another Dark Lord?” She rolled her eyes at him and moved Sal up off his lap, placing him gently on the ground under the table now holding her violin and wand, which she snatched up deftly. She returned to stand in front of him with her hands on her hips, her wand in hand tapping against her leg a couple of times.

“I think the Boy-Who-Lived might be able to pull some strings,” she said, seemingly unable to stop grinning. “I hear he knows the soloist.” She looked him over, her eyes searching for something. She seemed to reach a decision and nodded to herself.

“Take off your robe, Harry,” she commanded evenly, happiness still in her eyes but her face serious.

“W-what?” he said intelligently. She frowned slightly and started pulling it off him anyway, ignoring his stammering attempts at objections. After gently wrestling it away, she tugged at his hospital tunic and unsettlingly quickly had him bare-chested. The struggle had ended with his clothes wadded up on the bed and her straddling his lower chest while he lay with his hands still above his head, caught in the sleeves of his ignobly removed top.

“Hermione, this isn't—” he tried to explain.

“Hush,” she demanded softly. One of her hands reached out and traced over the recently healed ribs, the skin still slightly red and tender there. Harry realized with embarrassment how skinny he was at this point, his ribs clearly sticking out. He also noted some of his eleven-year-old body's almost-faded scars from his long-ago in some odd temporal direction abuse at his aunt and uncle's house. So did Hermione, and she ran a finger gently over the most prominent pale lines.

Those healing potions sure had worked wonders last time. He likely wouldn't have any left at all by the time he graduated, except for curse and magical creature damage scars of course. None of those yet this time, but the year was young. So was Hermione, but her mind was that of a veteran police detective who was also a neurosurgeon.

She was breathing quickly but deeply, fueling her superhuman mind as it worked overtime. He was sure she was mentally cataloging every missed meal, every time he ate scraps instead of a full plate of food. Maybe she could even work out which scars were from his uncle's belt and which from the rose brambles his cousin had stomped him into while he was gardening. Which were from the half-bricks thrown at him and which the scalding hot water he'd accidentally knocked off the stove at age eight. No use trying to hide any of that now. Her face was blank, her eyes no longer dancing, her body language tense and dangerous. She suddenly looked into his eyes and leaned over to cup his cheek.

Staring deep into his eyes with her chocolate brown ones, looking for any hint of pain or discomfort,
she slowly ran her hand over his jaw, so recently broken, feeling every muscle on the side of his face. He could almost hear her reciting the names of the bones and muscles under her breath. She traced the entire boney structure then moved to the side of his head and pressed with gentle fingers to feel under the skin. She lightly touched his temple, then ran her hand through his hair over the spot where Madam Pomfrey said his skull had been cracked. Her other hand ran over his eye on the other side, the socket of which had had a hairline fracture, also healed with a potion. She brushed dancing fingertips over his brow and down under his lower eyelid.

She cupped his face in both hands and continued to stare into his eyes for another moment, then her whole body shuttered and she looked away. All his repaired injuries carefully checked, his malnutrition noted, his hideous scars inventoried, she moved her hands away, probably in disgust, then slowly folded into herself, her arms wrapping around and her hands clutching her body in a spasmodic motion. She wasn't looking at him now, staring to one side with her brow furrowed, frowning. Hermione was still sitting straddling his chest, but seemed to have forgotten her initial gleeful, playful attitude.

“Harry, may I give you a hug?” she asked in a small, shaky voice. “I'm sorry about your clothes, I mean, I-I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I'm so sorry, I, I shouldn't...”

“Of course, Hermione,” Harry said, his hands long ago freed from the shirt. He reached out to her with both arms. “You didn't know, and it...it's fine if it is you. Remember, it was long ago for me – it doesn't matter now.”

She crumpled into him, arms tightening around between him and the bed, nearly crushing what she now knew were completely healed ribs. If she was less devastating in her grip than normal it was only because she was awkwardly wrapped around him and also crying onto his bare chest.

“I-I'm doing it again!” she sobbed wetly. “And it should matter and it isn't fair and w-why can't I stop crying around you!” Harry was trying to move her into a less embarrassingly compromising position while also gently rubbing her back. It wasn't easy, as Hermione was genetically part locking pliers and mostly consisted right now of areas he wasn't really comfortable touching and boney knees and elbows.

“T-this decides it then,” she said, snorting the dripping snot back into her nose in a way that shouldn't be cute but was. Sitting up and freeing him to breathe, she stared deep into his eyes again. “Harry, I want your permission to put a health tracking charm on you. I can deduce that the Headmaster already has one on you, most likely based on your blood as you have no residual magical marks or tattoos, other than, well, obviously,” she gestured to his scarred forehead, which she's carefully avoided touching, “or you would have noticed and he would be unlikely to mark himself that way as an alternative, even for a very important student like yourself.”

Harry blinked dimly at her, only recently having received enough oxygen to run his brain again and now feeling quite emotionally drained. “What?” he asked cleverly.

“Do you object to me placing a spell on you, such that I can sense when and where you are hurt?” she said, rolling her eyes at the need to repeat and simplify.

“Oh,” he said, shaking his head slightly. “Uh, that would be fine if you really want. If you can, I mean, I don't know any spells like that so I didn't teach you...”

“Really, Harry,” Hermione said, reaching into her robe to pull out a scrap of parchment with what he assumed was the spell on it. She leaned on his chest with her sharp elbows. “I've read more of your books than you have. This is the ritual of The Asklepiad of the Mother, a spell to track the health of a child even at a distance. It was in one of the Gray housekeeping spell books you lent me, remember.
The one with the nasty punishment jinxes and 'purity' testing charms?"

Harry shrugged weakly, and tried to subtly move out from under some of the bonier parts Hermione was currently jamming into various of his parts. She casually handled him like a tiny wrestling pro and somehow ended up gripping his chest between her bony knees again.

“Stop wiggling, Harry. You're only making this harder.” She looked around briefly, then lunged over the edge of his bed. She was back, trapping him in place again before he could react, now in possession of a large sentient poisonous snake – in other words, her familiar Salazar. Harry glanced over at where Hedwig was sitting. She look back with pity in her eyes but no signs of imminent rescue, then she shook her head, turned around, and apparently washed her...wings of the whole thing.

“Now I assume most people would consider this at least a little Dark,” she said, talking faster and faster as she reviewed the spell, “as it involves blood, but it is meant to protect a child from danger by alerting a mother to injuries, so really, how can that be bad? Anyway, it only uses the blood in tracking, not as part of any binding, empowering, or sacrificial component, so it is at worst what should be classified as little Gray. Harry! Stop struggling like that. This will take less time if you just relax. Now, no talking until I am done.”

Picking her wand off the bed, she ritually cleansed the ritual area with several swipes over herself, Harry, and the bed. Sal sat on her shoulder and quietly watched. Hermione said several near-nonsense Latin words softly then drew her wand down the inside of her left arm. She winced slightly and carefully examined the red mark that was starting to form, then placed her wand to one side.

Taking a deep breath, she leaned over to bump her forehead to Harry's, staring directly into his eyes. Her beautiful brown eyes seemed huge and damp and bored into his own.

“One I love and care for with all my heart,” she said in a ritual chat, causing Harry's heart to skip a beat and his eyes to widen, “Your tears fall, so shall mine.” She then blinked and a single tear fell from each of her eyes into his own. He blinked rapidly in response to the sudden wetness, a question in his eyes, but she was already raising herself up again for the next step.

“Your soul cries out, it reaches my ears,” she continued, her hand briefly stroking his lips. She then quickly dipped a finger into his mouth, pushed the digit over his tongue, and pulled it out again covered in his saliva, all in one motion. She dragged the finger down her raw looking left arm mark, leaving a damp trail.

“Your blood spills, mine echoes with the hurt,” she said, then looked apologetically at him and without any warning sliced his arm with a knife she'd hidden in her sleeve. He shouted something rude which she ignored. Putting the unsheathed knife to one side, she quickly dipped her wand in the tiny cut and smeared the blood from it over the same spot as before.

She waved her wand over his cut arm and muttered a quick and very minor healing spell, then started a much longer droning chant with a complicated series of wand motions, ending in a long, slow drag over her left arm and the red mark. Harry stayed still to avoid ruining the ritual and causing her to have to start all over again, but he was growing a little chilled from having no shirt and being in a freezing Scottish castle.

Sitting back and sighing, Hermione wiped damp sweaty hair out of her eyes with her right hand while looking closely at her left forearm and it's new magical mark. It was a series of thin, dark red lines forming a single twisting snake curving around a stylized wooden staff. She turned to look a question at Sal, who nodded back at her.
“Well, that’s that Harry,” she said with a small, exhausted smile. “Success. Let me check it, though.” She brought the knife around for another go at him and he was too slow and stupid to see it coming. Once again, he was cut.

“Ow!” he said, almost at the same time Hermione did. She checked his injury and saw another small cut on his arm. What surprised Harry was that she now had a small, slightly-red mark on her own upper arm, just about where his was nicked. It wasn't a cut or bleeding, but it looked irritated.

“Oh good!” Hermione said, smiling even wider. “It’s working even better than the book described. That was a tiny injury and I still felt it. I was worried we’d have to wait until you inevitably got hurt again to test it.” She glared at him, but he couldn’t argue; it didn’t take a super genius (though he had one here anyway) to see Harry would be giving it a better test sooner rather than later.

“The symbol is interesting,” she said, turning her arm so he could see better, still hugging his chest with her knees. “A large number of medical organizations around the world use a symbol with snakes, usually two of them, around a staff or rod called the Caduceus. It’s really funny, my mum points out, as that symbol, unlike mine, is the one of the Roman god of knaves and merchants. Basically, of ripping people off for profit. This one, however, is representative of some of the oldest healing magic around, that of the staff and the snake. I looked it up in the library yesterday while I was researching the safety of the ritual and found a book on the topic. Really a very interesting read. Seems that Parselmouths were fundamental to early medicine, as their healing spells worked better against magical curses and even some mundane diseases.”

“That’s great, but...I’m sorry, Hermione,” Harry said, slightly bemused, still more than slightly uncomfortable, “I’m still a little out of it. Uh. Could I get up now?”

“Oh!” she said, eyes wide, “Sorry!” She climbed off Harry and sat down on the bed next to him, idly rubbing the new ritual mark on her left arm. Harry sat up beside her and tried to get his shirt back on.

A minute of awkward silence stretched out as Hermione seemed lost in her own thoughts and Harry seemed to be having trouble restarting his own.

“Am I a lesbian?” Hermione ask out of nowhere, still staring off into the distance. Harry fell off the bed, knocking a knee violently against the floor. “Ow!” he echoed with Hermione. Harry could swear he could hear several snakes laughing. She was rubbing her knee, the same one he’d injured.

“Harry, please stop getting hurt,” she said, glaring at him. “I thought it was a perfectly straight forward question. No reason to act so surprised.”

“B-but,” he said, dragging himself off the floor. “No, Hermione this is not a conversation I’m having with you now.”

“That’s hardly fair,” she said, almost pouting. “You told me that I had a wife when...when we talked about the future that one time. So I think it is a logical question. I wasn't transformed magically into a man or something strange like that, I assume?”

“You know I don't want to talk about other people's futures, Hermione. It isn't fair to them. Not when it isn't critical to keeping people alive.”

“Yes, yes, I know. I think that is a little silly, but I'm fine with that. I'm not asking who she is, just some more information about the why?”

Realizing he'd been trapped by her steel vise of logic, Harry relaxed into the familiar situation of being outsmarted by Hermione. “Okay, fine,” he said, licking his lips and humming a few bars of a tune that was running through his head.
“Well, we certainly never, I mean,” he ground to a halt again, then glanced at her and saw how she was simply sitting there politely waiting for his answer.

“As far as I am aware,” he tried again, “though you never, I mean you hadn't...with a man...” This was harder than he thought. She was still looking attentively at him and nodded slightly when she saw he was looking at her again. “You dated some boys during school, but you were very serious about your studies and I don't think you...went very...far? There was young man, though, one who died when Hogwarts...I think you had gotten very close, romantically, and you were really broken up about that for years.”

“I see,” she said, still nodding. “That's very sad, but it sounds like me.”

“And then after the Fall of Hogwarts, well,” Harry sighed, then steeled himself to continue. “She was the sister of someone who died...who died fighting with you, later. Her brother died in your arms. She came after you, wanting revenge or resolution, or for you to kill her, or something. You were still hurting and she was too and you just sort of, sort of fell together. I wasn't...you were in France most of the time, and I was in Norway when you got married. We weren't talking and I wasn't invited to the wedding. I'm not sure if there even was one.

“I was married myself at the time and things were...tough. You filed the muggle and magical paperwork in the Netherlands in 2004. Five years later, you were practicing the Darkest of magic together and using the results against Voldemort, the corrupt British Ministry of Magic, the rapidly corrupting French Ministry of Magic, and Dark wizards everywhere. That was the beginning of the end.”

Hermione reached over and gently took his hand, gazing into his eyes when he looked up. Her eyes were wet but she seemed determined not to cry again. “I'm so sorry, Harry. I promise, it won't happen again.” She looked confused for a second, then tried again, “I mean, I might marry a woman again, I'm not prejudiced against...though I've never...I just...I won't go Dark again, I swear, no matter what happens. I'm sorry I brought it up, I was just confused by some feelings I've had, is all.”

“Confused why?” Harry asked, his mouth working faster than his brain, and not for the first time. Then it hit him. “Oh! Oh. Err.” He looked down at his hand with great discomfort where she still held it in her own soft hand. She squeezed it again, then slowly put it back on the bed. Patting it gently, she smiled at him.

“Don't worry,” she said, reassuringly. “I have no plans to attempt to have sex with the famous Harry Potter in the First Year boys' dorm room in the middle of the day at age eleven.” He felt minor relief for less then a second, when he realized who he was talking to and how literally interpreting her words would work out, if taken proscriptively. His face must have shown that as she suddenly snorted quietly. He heard a whispered snake conversation behind him, then the laughing hisses again. Odd that he could so clearly tell the snake's laughter from the human sound.

“Harry,” she said, drawing his eyes to hers again and leaning forward earnestly. “Seriously. We are both eleven. I was just wondering about little feelings I had. There are things my mother has already clearly explained to me, along with psychological consequences of being pushed into certain behaviors occurring too early in one's mental and physical development – though one major issue, accidental pregnancy, is virtually impossible for witches; 'a witch's body is her own' as Professor McGonagall said in what was truly a very informative if impromptu lecture when my parents asked about the topic, though she did seem a little rattled to be giving it in front of me, or maybe it was my follow-up questions – and in any case, it is quite clear to me that I'm simply not ready for such things right now; in fact, I've read on the subject, the non-magical approach that my mom gave in her version of The Talk that is, and read books on it at the university level, though I never did get a
chance to audit—never mind. The point is, I just found conflicting data from your future knowledge of myself and simply wanted to resolve that with additional information.” Harry was hurrying to try and parse what she’d said, but she wasn’t slowing down for him.

Hermione held up a finger. “When, not if—I am realistic about such things as are my parents—several years from now, I decide to explore that part of myself, it will be calmly considered, planned ahead of time, carried out safely in a secure environment, and certainly not forced on any party involved.” She smiled at him again, as if this were the most reassuring thing in the world. Harry started to wonder if this were the worst, most awkward conversation he’d ever been a part of. There was that one time, in the graveyard...with Voldemort. The snakes were still laughing at him in the background. Hermione frowned a little and scrunched up her face.

“So, Harry, what I mean is: I want to hug you and be close to you, therefore I need to know if you feel too uncomfortable with that behavior to allow it to continue.”

Hermione,” he said slowly, mind racing. “I want to be your friend as long as you’ll have me.” He could hear her happy little noise of pleasure but didn't turn to look at her yet. “I...I'm not really
comfortable talking about...well, basically any of the rest of that. But I will never, ever have any
problems with your hugs. I hope you—” he trailed off slowly, having noticed a strange hissing noise
that wasn't (for once during the conversation) being translated automatically in his head as Snake
laughter. The edges of the dorm door were also now glowing slightly. A gasp from beside him
suggested Hermione had seen it as well.

The door suddenly blew open violently in a loud explosion of light and magic and shadowy figures
rushed into the room.
Chapter 9

Harry Potter and the Witch Queen
by TimeLoopedPowerGamer

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter.

Chapter Nine

Minerva waited with the Headmaster in his incredibly noisy office. Somehow, the old prankster had managed to arrange all of the loudest and most annoying tweeting and clicking instruments to play a clearly recognizable version of, if she remembered correctly, Pachelbel's Canon in D major.

It also appeared to be stuck in some kind of fractal repeat, with blooping and humming magical items entering and exiting the tune at seemingly random but musically acceptable intervals. The old idiot was grinning at her through his beard, his hands folded on his desk. He was obviously waiting for her to ask how or why he'd done it. After the last two days, she was not in the mood for his games.

“The doctor floo'd earlier to say she would be a few minutes late to the meeting,” Albus said, obviously trying to pull her into making some comment that would allow him to play his little scene out.

“Ah, so,” she muttered grumpily at him. Her eyebrow arched. His lips twitched.

“And how is...Ms. Granger, was it?” he asked, obviously in some round-about plan to get her to ask why his office sounded like a concert in an insane asylum. This was a bit of a sore point for her, but she decided to play along.

“She is as well as can be expected, given that her best friend in all the world is currently lying in the hospital wing recovering from severe head trauma,” she snapped, immediately regretting her words the moment they left her mouth. Albus flinched as if struck. Ms. Granger was only the latest in a long line of strange things in the last two days but possibly the most...mysterious.

First, one of her most...delicate young Lions had been savagely attacked in his own dorms by some unknown entity, a thing that should have been impossible. Oh yes, the young bucks often clashed, especially in Gryffindor. Boys were like that. Honestly, the Gryffindor girls were like that as well, but it usually didn't result in bloody knuckles and black eyes. Usually. But according to the headmaster, none of the students had been out of bed except for Harry and he'd been attacked while the small in-suite bathroom door had been locked from the inside. Thankfully, the Headmaster had some complicated health monitoring Charms on the boy and had arrived seconds after the assailant had apparently disappeared into the stones without a trace. The whole thing was obviously deeply affecting Albus. She hurried to add something, anything, cursing her temper.

“She is...much better now that some time as passed, Albus, as are the rest of the students under my care. This has been...trying for us all,” Minerva added curtly with a growing frown.

Despite the Headmaster's conclusion that it couldn't have been a child, she'd checked the wands of all the students in Gryffindor anyway and talked to the entrance portrait. The pump, painted woman had had nothing to report and nothing unusual was found on the students' wands, except for a few older girls with embarrassing contraceptive spells recently cast – but that wasn't so unusual really. She'd simply given them stern looks and they'd wilted and fled, hopefully to be more cautious and
circumspect in the future. There had certainly been nothing that would have aided in the assault or the subsequent disappearance of the attacker.

And then, to add to everything else, one of her best young students who was also the poor boy’s best (and, whispered her heart soul-wrenchingly, most likely first and only) friend, had apparently gone at least part-way around the bend. Ms. Granger had found out though unknown means about the attack mere minutes after it had happened and had broken into the hospital wing, literally. She’d somehow slipped through a door that should have been magically and physically locked without apparently casting any spells, then knocked Madam Pomfrey and herself aside when they’d tried to stop her – a quite frankly frighteningly strong bit of accidental magic. The young girl spent only a few short moments crying over Harry and had then fled the hospital wing, guilt and fear torturing her tiny face into a painful grimace. Then there had been the violin incident.

“And how are her, ah, musical studies progressing?” Albus asked, his eyes regaining some of their previous twinkle.

“Quite well, thank you,” she replied shortly. The thing with the violin had been another worrying and strange event; a lot more than she had really wanted to deal at this time with but with a happy ending for once.

Ms. Granger had disappeared for hours after the emotional display in the hospital wing. When McGonagall had finally seen the poor child again after breakfast that horrible morning, she’d been clutching a rare, expensive, and seemingly custom-fit violin wrapped in a dusty sheet, asking oddly advanced questions about curse breaking and whether or not she could borrow the instrument. After consulting with Filius and clearing the wooden work of art for safe use, she and her fellow professor had been treated to the most literally-enchanting musical recital in her memory. Even that famous Italian magical string quartet she’d heard in ’76 paled in comparison. They’d been more skilled, sure, but the tiny girl’s single instrument had stolen the professors’ hearts and brought a tear to their eyes. It was as if the odd little found violin had been made for her by a master craftsman, tuned to her very soul.

Obviously she had had to work out a way to let Ms. Granger keep it. Going through the standard channels for a newly discovered artifact and letting the Board of Governors know about it was the best way to have the Ministry confiscate the magical item in question. Those thieves and scoundrels would then sell it at auction to the highest bidder, to line their own pockets with the profits, so she had quickly searched her long memory for a way out of this bind.

She had then remembered that the existing school guidelines said a student might be assigned an instrument if studying music at Hogwarts. The rules didn't say what the actual parameters of that arrangement were, and there hadn't actually been a music program at Hogwarts for decades, but it was clear that the item was unowned and inside Hogwarts, so the Deputy Headmistress’ con was water-tight. By accepting the extra work of an independent course of study in the field of music at Hogwarts, and by agreeing to a few recitals (which no one had done at the school in Minerva didn't know how long), whether she knew it or not Ms. Granger had acquired a magical artifact of which most Noble, Ancient, and rich wizarding families would be jealous. Minerva thought it couldn't have happened to a nicer little girl. At least it had seemed to calm her down and distract her from her best friend being unconscious in a hospital bed.

Saturday's far-too-early in the morning threats to lock everyone in their dorms had driven the students, who'd been awakened by Ms. Granger's panicked running down the halls, back to bed (if, Minerva suspected, not back to sleep). After finding her musical prize that morning, the dear girl had continued to haunt the hospital wing off and on all Saturday, but had spent the rest of the time
practicing in an abandoned classroom near the Gryffindor dorms. Not having the time to supervise her directly, Minerva had been content to let the girl be on her own to work through things. The few times she’d looked in on her, the look of concentration on her face and the haunting music from the violin had shook her once again. Ms. Granger was apparently full of hidden talents but was also full of stormy emotions, emotions which leaked out into the magic of her music.

“She visited the hospital wing again today and learned Mr. Potter will likely be released this morning from Poppy’s tender care,” she continued, frowning at Albus. “She seemed quite excited when she came to tell me about it and was smiling brightly. It was good to see – she had been most unhappy all yesterday.”

“Ah, good, good,” Albus said, a frown also briefly clouding his face as he was once again reminded of Harry's injuries. Minerva cursed under her breath and wished the mind healer would arrive to break this gloomy mood. She was always such a strong, peaceful woman, able to bring solace to even the most emotionally trying situation. A gift, that was what the woman had. Such a difference from her wild daughter who’d graduated this last spring. But then that poor lass had had her own issues, ones that might have broken the spirit of someone with less supportive parents. Maybe she could get the doctor to have a brief talk with Ms. Granger. The brilliant young girl had arrived at Hogwarts attached to Mr. Potter's arm and had barely been out of his presence in the last two weeks. Not having Harry around seemed to have broken something inside her. The girl had had a trembling, lost-little-kitten look at breakfast that morning and seemed unaware of her surroundings. Hopefully seeing Harry later today would help.

Just then, the floo buzzed. With a wave of his hand, Albus accepted the connection and cleared request through the security protocols. A light-brown-haired young woman stepped through the glowing green fire. Briefly and smoothly brandishing a wand, she brushed herself off with a quick wave of a spell at the same time as her feet settled on the stone floor of the Headmaster's office.

Walking forward to the Headmaster's desk, she made a small curtsy, intentionally mimicking, if Minerva guessed correctly, the way a well-bred muggle schoolchild at a prestigious public school would formally greet a normal schoolmaster who wasn't the most famous and powerful wizard in the world. Most magical children and some adults, even the Pure-bloods, simply stared open-mouthed or shook in place on meeting him. Albus was a very intimidating man, even at the best of times, which was why he usually wore strange, funny-looking clothing to amuse himself and the children and kept a kind twinkle in his eyes to put others at ease. Andy was obviously playing her own game from the other side of the coin.

“Andromeda, it is so good to see you again,” Albus said, almost purring with delight, his eyes twinkling like stars.

“Professor Dumbledore, I feel the same,” she replied. The skilled mind healer smiled at him brightly. She then noticed the odd musical background clatter and paused, but quickly took it in stride and nodded to Albus. She wasn't about to get sidetracked by asking about the noise either, Minerva noted with satisfaction.

Turning her radiant smile on Minerva, the woman's pale face crinkled with good humor right around her clear brown eyes – the temporary laugh lines the only ones on her otherwise smooth face.

“Professor McGonagall, a pleasure to see you.” Andy quirked an eyebrow at the older witch. “You look...well?”

Huffing in exasperation and rolling her eyes, Minerva pulled out her wand and silently waved it in front of her face, canceling the Aging Glamour that most professionals used, especially when dealing with the muggle-raised. Minerva now appeared as she naturally did – a forty-something professional
woman with her long, dark red hair in a bun and an unfortunate and apparently permanent frown on her face – instead of a woman in her advanced 70s (her actual age) with dusty-gray hair and, of course, the same frown. The proud older witch smirked at the relatively-young doctor, who was herself not actually in her 20s, as she appeared. She had a daughter almost that old. The Headmaster, who didn't use one but he looked a lot younger without his beard, looked on with amusement. He was more than century old and had lived a hard, dangerous life, and so deserved the few wrinkles he had.

“I swear Andy, I do not understand your dislike of Glamour Charms,” she said grumpily at the still grinning, not-so-young woman.

“It is a way of lying to ourselves and others, Minnie, no matter how well meaning,” Andy responded, her usual argument. “In my line of work, I can not afford those kinds of lies. The more intelligent of my patients understand this and it is at least subconsciously helpful in gaining their trust. It also helps to lower emotional barriers for me to appear younger than my years. I seem more...trusting, less judgmental when appearing this young.” She stepped gracefully over to the free chair placed in front of the large desk, continuing her little speech.

“There are things programmed into people through genetics and upbringing that cause them to respond better to someone young and a little pretty.” Andy smiled apologetically at her bit of self-praise, but it wasn't as if anyone who'd ever meet the stunning, classically beautiful woman could possibly disagree. “You will notice that I still use hygiene and beauty Charms freely, so it isn't as if I'm some wild and unkempt creature, unable to function in polite society.

Andromeda Tonks had the usual fine-boned Black family face, but softened by a smile, wavy brown hair, and dancing dark brown eyes. Her body was also, like most in the wizarding world who half-tried, simply amazing, even without...enhancing Charms and Glamours (which she also refused to use, of course). But it was the way she carried herself and her kind, open demeanor that made her special, cementing even the briefest encounter with her in one's mind. So much unlike her insane sister, now residing in Azkaban, or the cold, distant sister who was now Mrs. Malfoy, but just as striking in her own way.

“Very interesting,” Albus managed to say entirely truthfully, somehow. Minerva was thinking “tedious and self-absorbed,” but she actually liked the woman and was able to keep her mouth firmly shut. “We should get down to the reason for this meeting: Mr. Potter.” Instantly everyone in the room tensed. Andy wasn't smiling any longer.

“I read the letter you sent yesterday, requesting this meeting and an emergency session with Mr. Potter,” Andy said, shifting in her chair uncomfortably. “I had hoped to wait until the end of the month before sharing any of my thoughts on my newest patient. This whole process has been very unusual, but I have, in principle, no issues discussing this now. I will make some statements that have flimsy support and will ask that you not hold me to them. Also, I am required to remind you of your oaths as educators and the Ministry privacy laws relating to the personal medical information of one of your students.” Albus nodded and Minerva clenched her hands tightly in her lap, her younger-looking face still pruned up in a disapproving scowl. This wasn't going to be pleasant, she knew, bracing herself for the worst.

And Andy sighed and pulled a leather folder from her robes, obviously stored in a spacial charm of some kind. Flipping it open, she scanned a few pages, then slapped it shut again and held it in her lap under clinched hands.

“Mr. Potter,” she started, her voice now smooth, her face unsmiling, and her poise professional, “based on my sessions with him up to this point, appears to be in surprisingly good shape –
especially considering his background.” Minerva let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Albus blinked.

Glancing briefly at a page in the folder, she continued. “He is a pleasant and carefully skilled conversationalist, once he gets over his initial caution and shyness. That isn't unusual for a child his age, but the extreme nature of his eloquence suggests a mature and extremely bright young mind. This is quite odd when compared to his near-crippling levels of shyness and caution in relating to adults. You may have noticed he barely meets your eye, even after getting reasonably comfortable with you in a safe environment. His body language is open and unguarded at most times, but he almost always has his gaze somewhere else. Observing him at meals at the castle, he does not appear to have this issue with other children. The reasons for this should be obvious, given his history.” Andy worked her clenched jaw, barely avoiding grinding her teeth, then the professional face dropped down again.

“Another odd thing to note: his emotional control is actually a little frightening. He seems capable of visibly turning his emotions on and off like a switch. I agree with Albus' conclusion that he is a natural Occlumens, most likely out of necessity, but I have obviously not tested this, nor should either of you. I hope the reasons for this are also obvious – if the boy does have any skill in that field, he would easily be able to detect such intrusions. It would be a huge mistake and a great breach of his trust, even if it is technically legal for you to do so with students under your care given sufficient cause.” Minerva's eyebrows shot up – she wasn't aware they had discussed him having mental defenses at such a young age. The boy had been quiet and controlled in class, that was true, but she hadn't thought it anything other than him being shy.

“He seems to have problems with both adults and crowds,” the doctor continued, “which is unsurprising as he has had...bad experiences with the first and almost none with the latter. Groups of children don't seem to be an issue for him, or at least not as much of one. Based on things he's said, it seems he had a panic attack on first reaching the train station for the Hogwarts Express. I strongly suggest having an adult he trusts with him any time he is in a public place – for both his personal security and his peace of mind.

“Most likely because of his extreme shyness and the interference of his violent cousin, he has apparently only made one friend...in his entire life.” No one could look anyone else in the eyes, all staring at their laps. During the awkward silence, Albus frowned briefly and reached into his pocket, checking an old pocket watch. After a moment, he blinked and shook his head, returning his attention to the rest of the room with a grim look.

“There are several boys in his House that he mentioned being friendly with,” Andy started again after a quiet cough, “but he seems to have a hard time relating to them and other children, though he seems very focused on how the post-war environment has affected their home lives. As you know, most students in the past few years have lost at least some of their close relatives to violence. This is a cause of some worry to him, one of the few things he directly told me was bothering him. Despite this concern, he hasn't made any real attempts to befriend the boys in his year. He doesn't come out and say such, but he might consider them immature and maybe a little silly or boring. Mr. Potter is very mature for his age, so that might be a fair evaluation given his perspective. Normally, this could result in him being a complete outcast in his age group. Here, Mr. Potter seems to have had a very lucky break.

“He met a young girl in his year on the train to Hogwarts, muggle-raised like himself. A Ms. Hermione Granger.” Both Minerva and Albus nodded quietly at that.

“They struck up a friendship, sharing books and talking about advanced class topics. Both had read their entire selection of textbooks before the first day of class.” Minerva smirked at that, having
suspected as much from her two brightest First Years.

“Mr. Potter suggests she has mastered all First Year spells already, is now reading Fourth Year class books, and is magically very powerful. Given what I have been told independently of Mr. Potter’s own not-insignificant knowledge and scholarship, this is quite a complement.”

“All in all, Harry describes her as a veritable magical Einstein,” Andy noted. Minerva vaguely got the reference to some smart, famous muggle, but Albus raised both eyebrows and leaned forward with great interest.

“I cannot freely discuss details of student medical history,” Albus said carefully, “but it would not surprise me if Ms. Granger eventually had a mastery and power over the magical realm that rivaled or even surpassed my own. She has that...potential.” Minerva blinked in shock, not having realized exactly what she had been dealing with. Good gods, Ms. Granger might be another Merlin in training!

“I, uh,” Minerva spoke up hesitantly, realizing that she'd said something only after she'd begun speaking. Andy and Albus both turned to look at her with interest.

“I have never seen Ms. Granger cast a weakened or failed spell in class. She masters the transfigurations as quickly as Mr. Potter and then immediately asks for advanced versions of the exercises. I have had to...restrain her from what seems to me like overwork in class. Her magic runs as deep right now as many Seventh Years and adult witches I've known. All she lacks to be one of the most impressive students I've ever had the pleasure to teach is the magical stability and practiced skills that a more mature witch would have. I have no reason to believe that she will stop at merely competent levels of mastery in any endeavor she pursues.” Andy's eyebrows rose in surprise, but she simply nodded and made a few notes in the back of her folder, the quill appearing from her sleeve as if by magic – which it most likely was, of course.

“This brings me to my last point,” Andy said with a deep sigh. “Possibly because of what he's been through, Mr. Potter is very anxious about his magical weakness. He is very attached to his abilities as a wizard and seems to be concerned that he will be permanently unable to use it like others his age. Rather than a feeling of shame from being different, this seems to be linked to his paranoia and security obsessions.

“You might have noticed that he scans a room as if for threats every time he cautiously enters. He also visually evaluates adults in a way that reminds me nothing so much as a veteran Auror looking for hidden weapons or threats. I clearly remember that look from the last war. Old 'Mad-Eye' springs to mind. His retirement, I'll remind you, was long overdue as he was virtually unable to work with his coworkers because of his worries about hidden enemies.

“Harry carries his wand in a makeshift arm sleeve, with a strap keeping it from being dropped or lost. It more than casually resembles, at least in function, the professional device used by Hit Wizards and Aurors, but he appears to have designed it all on his own from spare parts. He is intelligent, new to the magical world, and has a history that makes him understandably worried about his own safety.” Andy once again shifted on her chair, her hands gripping her knees, knuckles turning white from the pressure.

“I do not have an answer for how to resolve the serious issue of his security obsessions, but it is important that events like those this Saturday morning do not occur ever again.” Andy was glaring at Albus now, drilling a hole in him with her eyes.

“A tiny amount of stability and security, a few adults he can depend on, and the chance to learn where he fits into this new world we've thrown him into, and Mr. Potter has a very good chance of
leading a healthy, normal life. I won't pretend that he'll be anything like a normally well-adjusted boy anytime soon, but with some assistance he'll be able to deal with the issues that come up.

“He'll have nightmares and panic attacks. He'll have issues with trust and security. Despite his emotional control, he will have issues dealing with anger and aggression. Many of these problems will likely be for life.” The room was grimly silent for a few moments, then Andy leaned forward in her seat and stoically raised a new topic.

“So, I am interested in this Hermione Granger,” she said, still unsmiling but a little less tense. “Harry talks more about her than the other acquaintances of his put together. Looking into her public records, I have learned she is a muggle-born.” Both the professors nodded. Andy stopped for a second, then proceeded with renewed courage.

“There were some...hints, from things Harry said, that she, well,” Andy stumbled, searching for the correct words. “Do the two of you know about the psychological effects of magical children on mundane children? Specifically what is commonly known as 'manaphobia' – a strange American term based on research in south-east Asia following the muggle 'World War Two'? ” Minerva grimly pressed a hand to her forehead and nodded. Albus quietly affirmed that he did as well.

“Well, it appears Ms. Granger displayed strong and early accidental magic, but even before then had a magical aura detectable by mundanes that adversely affected her relationships with non-magical children. Harry didn't go into details, but that the two of them were even aware of what is usually a minor effect is...worrying. For Harry, this effect might have been pivotal in his relative's mistreatment of him.” At their looks, she interrupted their unvoiced question by raising a hand.

“Do not misunderstand – this magic-induced fear does not excuse their behavior. As adults, they should have been largely unaffected. Even if they were extremely susceptible to it, violent acts are not the usual response. Cold distrust and dislike are the most that could have been excused. They reacted violently and allowed their child to act on his violent impulses because of a great flaw in their character: they believed Harry was less than human, someone that could be freely abused without moral consideration. They might even have thought it was their job to...fix the flaw of his accidental magical expressions. And for that, they should be held accountable. I do not agree with your...hesitation on this issue.” Albus' eyes were twinkle-less now.

“Let us discuss that at another time,” Albus rumbled softly, avoiding her gaze. “There are deeper issues at play. Trust me when I say that they will be brought to justice as soon as doing so does not risk Harry's safety further. You know the methods I've employed to defend Harry from his relatives – I welcome any additional input on that issue.” Andy stared at him for several moments, then shook her head.

“As for Hermione,” she continued, clearly unhappy with Albus, “for it to be this strong so soon could mean even her biological parents might be affected over time, which would be simply awful for her. Usually, parents and close relatives are almost immune to the irrational fear and hatred of the induced phobia disorder, even when they are sensitive to the effect. But given how strong she is now, by Fifth Year there could be significant emotional effects in her parents after only a few days of constant exposure.”

Loudly clearing his throat, Albus spoke up again. “What do you suggest we do, Andy? The situation by itself is bad, but having Harry's only friend in the world experience anything like his own horrible home situation would be devastating to both of them. Do we...do we need to enact a solution similar to Harry's relative's magical constraints for the Grangers? Or must we consider the unpleasant measure of fostering her with a magical family?”

Andy immediately shook her head. “No, there should be some ways to work around this, given how
early we caught it. But I would like to speak to Ms. Granger sometime soon, and her parents as well – perhaps at the Christmas break. That Harry is aware of the issue and worried about Ms. Granger means I will suggest to them that he be informed of the work we are doing on this. If the Grangers agree to share the information, that is. I hope they do. Harry could use some adult support from someone he can trust, and seeing another child learning to deal with the magical world could help Ms. Granger's parents in dealing with the changes in their daughter's life.”

Everything had seemed to happen all at once. There had been a loud “bang,” the door flew open, and he was pushed violently into the bed. Now Hermione was sitting on top of him, putting herself between him and the doorway, her back to him and her wand in hand pointing straight at the door.

All of the snakes except for Sal had gone into hiding in an instant, but Sal had wrapped himself around her wand arm and was also facing the door with fangs bared. The two red-headed blurs that had jumped through the smoking doorway just barely dodged a loud barrage of multicolor spells that nearly took their heads off.

“Woah, crikey!” one of the Twins yelled.

“Cease fire!” shouted the other.

“Friendlies!

“Merlin's crystal balls!” the second exclaimed, looking around wildly.

“What the bloody hell was that?” the first finished, looking frantically around as well.

The end of Hermione's wand was pointed generally away-ish from the Twins now and was actually *smoking* from the sudden release of magic, as was the scorched wall in the hallway. Her wand hand looked a little unsteady and she was slumped sort of sideways – she must have put too much power into that barrage, especially after the ritual and privacy charms. The spell chain she’d used had been extremely rapid fire, but it was apparently even more impressive than at first glance. Fully half of her spells must have been non-visible hexes that had simply dispersed their power into the wall, explaining the dozen burn marks that hadn't had visible trails or effects.

“Sorry about that,” Hermione said apologetically, still sitting sort of crouched on top of Harry. The two boys simultaneously said, “What?!” and held a hand to their ears dramatically.

Hermione blushed and canceled the Muffliato privacy spell. “I'm so sorry, boys!” she said again. “Harry was attacked just a day ago and they haven't found who did it yet and I was a little wound up and I had this *great* dueling combination I read about...”

“Quite all right, young lady” said (Harry decided arbitrarily) *Fred*. 

“You protection of our national hero was most...” George said, losing the thread and trailing off.

“Robust!” suggested Fred.

“Quite!” George agreed.

“But what is this?” Fred asked, peering closer at Harry's bed.

“Looks to me like our little Hit Witch in training has, shall we say-”

“A *personal* interest in her bodyguarding.”
“Specifically, an interest in young Harry's body?” crowed George, his eyebrows wiggling up and down aggressively. Harry realized that phrases like “Boy-Who-Lived caught in compromising position” and “Harry Potter expelled” would immediately suggest themselves as elements of bylines in any Daily Prophet story about the situation he currently found himself in.

He gently pushed Hermione to one side, causing the sputtering girl to squeak cutely as she landed on her side. This brought raucous laughter from the Twins as she sat up again. But what they didn't see was that she was still clutching her wand and had landed with her arm free and still pointed in the general direction of the Twins.

“What was all that?” Harry asked the Twins in general (as one would answer depending on some silent arrangement anyway) while pointing at the door. “I thought Hermione had locked it. Magically. And not just a Colloportus, but some weird, obscure stuff. Should have been proof against an Alohomora.”

“Quite right you are young Harry-” George started.

“You amazing cad you!” interjected Fred.

“Yes,” George agreed immediately, “even brave men would have quailed at the thought of arranging such a rendezvous, especially with someone as powerful and – might I say it?”

“Might as well,” said Fred frankly.

“Powerfully scary as this young witch, but you ventured forth bravely-”

“I propose, had we not interrupted, he might even have ventured as far as fifth-” interrupted Fred with a leer.

“Thus demonstrating his House spirit with this eager young (and really, far too young) witch,” followed up George. “But despite his incredibly, questionably young age-

“And possibly questionable moral fiber-”

“He bravely braved new things in true Gryffindor fashion-”

“Disregarding common sense-”

“And maybe almost making a really bad hash of things.”

“Therefore, I suggest we nominate Harry as our Firstie Special Project of the year,” suggested Fred.

“Seconded!” George said, suddenly standing straighter, with an officious look on his face.

“Put it to a vote!” Fred barked. Both Twins raised their hand and they each, separately and really too loudly to be called under their breath, counted the two hands. Twice.

“Resolution passed! From this day forward, Fred and George Weasley's Firstie Special Project is to be Harry Potter. At least for a year, that is, or until we get bored with it all,” Fred declared. They lowered their hands. George walked up to the two of them where they sat on the bed side-by-side and placed a hand on each of their shoulders. Harry saw his eyes scan quickly over the violin and bow sitting on the table nearby, Harry's hospital shirt and missing outer robes, and Hermione's slightly red eyes and- SHIT, her snake familiar still wound around her arm, all in one quick sweep. Glancing back at Fred, Harry could just barely see George's expression change and his serious,
questioning look, eyebrows raised. But at a small nod from Fred, he was back to looking at them with a wide, open grin on his face.

“Harry, Hermione,” George said with a smile, “you are young. Oh, so young and innocent.”

“Not all that innocent, it seems,” Fred smarmed in the background, a smirk on his face.

“Locked alone, together, in a room—”

“Clothes thrown everywhere—”

“About to commit lascivious behavior I do not even want to guess at—”

“He’d prefer you both be seven years older or so and being magically recorded, he means,” Fred explained.

“I do wonder what Professor McGonagall would say, if she knew of this—” George said, once again getting off track.

“She'd have kittens, I'd say,” added Fred. Hermione tensed next to him, her fingers curling tighter around her wand.

“Which is why we will ensure she does not find out,” George concluded. “No reason to worry her about something that didn't almost maybe happen.” Harry knew if he didn't derail this, it could last literally hours.

“Guys, what happened to the door?” he said, trying to shrug off George's hand. “Why did you break in? How did you break in?”

“Young Harry, that was the result of our limitless curiosity—” Fred replied.

“And our latest product testing,” George finished, firmly slapping Harry on the shoulder then plopping himself down on the floor in front of them. He look at the open door and glanced at Fred again. The other boy rolled his eyes but took out his wand, waved it a few times and said something firmly under his breath, removing the scorch marks from the hall outside. He then closed the door, reapplied the spells Hermione had put on it, and added a couple more Harry didn't recognize.

“Special disenchanting tape around the door frame,” George explained. “Leaves no magical signature or physical residue, requires only a wand tap activation, good against most non-rune, non-warding locking spells.”

“Would be a lot more useful if one of the standard ingredients wasn't, uh, slightly illegal.” Fred added. “We're working on a substitution, but it isn't quite ready for general use yet. It shouldn't glow like that or, err—”

“Explode,” George added. “Anyway, we were walking through the dorms, wondering why the mind-bendingly haunting music had stopped.”

“To be honest, we were coming to stop it. With tactical pudding bombs. Don't ask,” Fred interjected.

“When what did we see?” George continued. “The Firstie's bedroom door, locked and covered in privacy spells. Well that simply wouldn't do.”

“When attempting something actually secret, never leave an obviously locked door,” Fred said.
“They call out to be...unlocked.”

“So we did,” concluded George. They looked at each other and simultaneously shrugged. Fred leaned against the wall and seemed to silently signal to George again.

“So, do tell: what in the name of Morgan's Multiple Mammaries were you two doing behind a locked, privacy shielded door in the First Year boys' dorm?” George asked, grinning and leaning in. Hermione was still holding her wand next to her leg – it twitched. Harry hurried to put a hand on her arm.

“We were about to talk about the assault on me Saturday morning,” he rushed to say. Hermione looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

“You can trust them,” Harry told her. “It wasn't these jokers.” Both Twins looked inquisitively at the bushy-haired girl. She rolled her eyes but eased the white-knuckle grip on her wand and rolled her tense shoulders.

“Fine,” she said, Perfect Little Professor back in full swing. “We were going to talk about how Harry was attacked. I have some ideas. This is almost laid out like a classic 'locked room' from a mystery book. In those, though, you usually can't question the victim.”

“Why's that?” Fred asked.

“Because they are usually murder mysteries and the victim is usually dead,” Hermione said dully, glaring at him. Fred gulped.

“We'll help, of course,” George said quickly, actually sounding serious for once. “Can't have people conking Firsties on the noggins in the bathrooms. Sets a bad precedent and all.” Well, moderately serious. Hermione shook her head disappointedly at George and pursed her lips, then apparently decided to ignore him.

“Tell us the details, Harry,” she said, holding his hand gently with her non-wand hand, weaving her fingers into his.

He explained everything he could remember, which wasn't much. Being in a potion-induced coma seemed to have taken the sharp edge off of some of the specifics. He decided to leave out the magical sensory tripping – explaining that would be hard. Hermione twitched at the attacker's odd warning, but remained silent through his description of the Headmaster showing up and sending him to the hospital wing. The Twins looked worried and swapped several telling looks.

“I don't get it,” Hermione commented after he was finished. “How did they get away in the seconds before Dumbledore showed up without opening the door?”

“And why would they warn you away from Hermione? That's what that meant, right?” George asked.

“Safe to say, assuming you aren't hanging out with any other cute young witches,” Fred added. Hermione blushed, but still frowned at him.

“I don't know what the warning means,” Harry said. “I assume it is some Blood Supremest thing. Maybe a crazy Death Eater that escape trial after the last war. Didn't really think it mattered, if they wanted to kill me.”

“It doesn't,” Hermione said, looking uncomfortable. “Looking for motivation right now is pointless. It could also be a red herring to give people false leads. But that would only make sense if they
weren't planning on killing you, or somehow knew you might not die...no, 'who' and 'why' can wait a little. We need to focus on the 'how' right now. For example, the escape of our attacker."

“What about Apparition? Would mean an adult or advanced student. Sixth or Seventh year for sure.” George suggested, not sounding convinced. Hermione rolled her eyes.

“You can't Apparate inside Hogwarts grounds. No Portkeys, either. Really, doesn't anyone read Hogwarts, A History?” she said with a disgusted sigh. “They didn't simply print it as something to prop up the wobbly leg of your desk with, you know.”

“We understand that!” Fred said, fake-affront clear in his voice. “It is far too thick. Your desk would have to be missing half a leg, at least!”

“Wait,” Hermione said, staring at a blank wall over George's head. “Your voices hurt my head, be quiet for a minute.”

All of the boys froze in place at her command. Fred looked at George. George and Fred looked at Harry. Harry looked at the two of them and shrugged.

“If this is an attempted murder mystery, I'll treat it as one,” she finally said, a slightly worrying look in her eyes.

“While the adults follow sensible things things like evidence and leads, things we do not have access to as we are merely little kids,” she scoffed, “I'll just have to play the other side of this little game: wildly unfounded deduction while hoping for a miracle clue. I already have some terribly unlikely ideas.” The boys still looked confused.

“I dare you to make less sense,” George challenged her. She rolled her eyes at them yet again.

“Let's all go look at the scene of the crime,” Hermione chirped sardonically, jumping off the bed and stomping over to the door. Finitingthe locking and privacy charms with a couple of waves of her wand, she flounced out of the room, not checking to see if anyone was following her. Shrugging at the Twins, Harry stood up and followed her. Hedwig flapped over to land on his shoulder just before he got to the doorway.

The two redheads exchanged a glance before following the oddest two Firsties they'd ever seen. No one noticed the four black snakes that slithered out of hiding to wind protectively around the violin Hermione had left on the small table, slowly easing it down to the floor with their coils and into it's hard protective case, nudging the lid closed with their heads before disappearing back under the beds.

Hermione stalked from one end of the small bathroom to the other. The twins stood in the hallway and poked their heads in, bemused looks on their virtually identical faces, while Harry bravely stood just inside the doorway. Flicking her wand restlessly and chanting under her breath, she repeatedly cast Dark detection spells (Second Year, but well within her abilities). She then tried several spells he recognized from the old Auror's manual. He hadn't known she'd read that one yet. Hedwig was now resting on his shoulder, looking alert and interested. The Twins kept glancing at his owl but didn't say anything. Hedwig simply watched Hermione impassively.

Now working through what Harry recognized as the standard Auror investigation set, she checked for magical residue, Portkey signatures, Apportion traces, and then she cast another, more powerful Dark spell detector. For those, she planted her feet firmly and waved her wand in large, exaggerated gestures, speaking loudly and grimly, every syllable having apparently angered her in a personal
Both Harry and Hedwig looked on worriedly. Looking back at the Twins, Harry saw looks of pure amazement on their faces.

“Ms. Granger...” one of them asked; Fred, he guessed. He’d lost track again.

“What in Merlin’s name was that?” the other (George, he decided through the process of elimination) finished in a whisper.

“And will you show us how to do it?” Fred added eagerly.

“Of course,” she said with a tired smile, “just ask me again after lunch when I’ve recovered. Oh, and that was a set of Auror spells for crime scene analysis. An old set, from the 50s, but still functional. I didn’t find anything interesting, obviously. There are even better ones I wouldn’t dare try to cast because of their complexity and power requirements, but the ones I just used shouldn’t be too hard for the average Magical. I learned them yesterday from an old book Harry had. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to personally run them before the room was cleaned by House Elves yesterday, but I assume the adults used those spells or similar ones.”

Twin sets eyes swiveled to look at Harry, who ignored them. Hedwig, still sitting on his shoulder turned and looked at him too. Clearing his throat, he tried to calm down the aggravated girl.

“Hermione, you’re getting too worked up. I’m sure the Headmaster-”

“Yes, I’m sure the Headmaster is doing his best, but there are lots of things to consider here. The political results of the Boy-Who-Lived getting attacked at Hogwarts. The potential for panic if people knew the details of this case. The fact that Harry hasn’t been interviewed by law enforcement personal of any sort, nor does it appear he ever will be. All this leads me to believe that this is being treated as an isolated incident, something like a school prank gone overboard or, at worst, a case of extreme bullying. This was an attempted murder, make no mistake, and the assailant appears to have used powerful magic in making his escape. Either that, or no magic at all.”

“If magic, something you and the teachers can't detect?” Harry asked.

“Correct,” she said. “There are certainly ways to scrub an area of magic, and undoubtedly magical effects that could be prepared ahead of time that would leave no signature, but the answer is much more likely to be that the actions of Headmaster Dumbledore and Harry obscured whatever signs were left.”

“You mean the Phoenix travel in and out?” Harry asked.

“Exactly. One of the other possibilities is that the perpetrator actually hid on or around you or the Headmaster, leaving the room that way.”

“So he could have hidden inside the room, using something that didn't leave any magical signature,” George said, thinking out loud.

“Like an invisibility or camouflage spell, cast somewhere else or from an enchanted item.” Hermione added.

“And then the criminal scum went along for the ride when the Headmaster did his impossible magical bird traveling thing to get Harry to the hospital wing,” Fred said, finishing the thought.

“Speaking of impossible magical creatures,” George said.
“As there isn't any really polite way to segue into this,” Fred continued.

“What's up with that snake?” they both said at once, pointing at Sal, who was still sticking out of her sleeve.

“Ah,” Hermione said, licking her lips nervously. “This is Sal. He's a magical snake.” She turned her palm up and her Familiar scooted a few more inches out onto her hand, his tongue flicking to taste the air. He then dipped his head in a clear bow to the two redheads. Hermione smiled, as if this was the correct and complete answer to their question.

“So we see,” George said slowly, looking quizzically at Sal. Fred coughed loudly.

“What my brother meant-” Fred started.

“What we both wanted to know,” George corrected.

“Is...why do you have a huge snake wrapped around your arm?” Fred finished.

“He's my Familiar,” she answered shortly, still smiling.

“That's...” Fred muttered.

“Really, really rare,” George finished. They both look at her in awe.

“You know,” Fred said after a while.

“That's something only powerful adult wizards and witches have,” George said.

“I know,” Hermione said, not commenting further. Her continuing smile was looking a little less cute and a lot more creepy.

“Ah,” Fred said. The Twins cowered in the doorway for a bit.

“So. Sal is short for...” George asked.

“Salazar, like the Hogwarts Founder, one of the most powerful wizards in the history of Western civilization,” she answered quickly. The Twins nodded slowly.

“Are you evil?” Fred asked suddenly. For the first time in Harry's memory, one of the Twins looked surprised at what the other had said. George's jaw dropped before he smacked his twin brother over the head. “You can't just ask someone if they're evil!” George said, shaking his head in dismay.

“What my idiot brother meant,” George said carefully, “is, 'are you a very, very powerful yet forgiving witch, who'll look past some harmless pranks that might happen to accidentally hit you with their splash area, even through they are clearly targeting someone else and are definitely not aimed at you?'” Hermione put her finger to her chin in mock thought.

“I guess,” she said slowly. “So long as any magical effects were reversed on me and my friends as quickly as reasonably possible. And their specific magical attributes and techniques explained to my satisfaction.”

“Deal,” both Twins immediately said, moving to shake on it, each offering a different hand, left and right. Hermione took it in stride and shook both hands at the same time. Now having made it safely inside the bathroom, the Twins started poking around, turning on faucets and kicking random tiles on the floor while she paced back and forth thinking. Harry stayed safely out of the way, petting Hedwig.
“Do you two know of any secret passages into this room?” Hermione asked after watching them for a while. They shook their heads no. Pacing back and forth for another minute, she finally threw up her hands in frustration.

“This is useless,” Hermione whined, stomping her foot. “The adults won't tell us anything. All we can do is guess. But it doesn't really matter who did it, as I'm sure they'll try again. This wasn't a crime of passion or something spur of the moment. So from now on, Harry doesn't go anywhere without an escort. Including, no especially in the bathroom.” Turning around and glaring at the Twins, she pointed an accusing finger.

“If you're taking responsibility for Harry,” she said fiercely, “you're also in charge of getting his roommates to make sure he doesn't get ambushed in the bathroom again, or anywhere else for that matter. Until I can prepare sufficient passive magical defenses, there must be at least one other person with Harry at all times, day and night.” The Twins glanced at each other, then snapped smartly to attention and saluted her.

“Sir, yes sir!” they both echoed.

“Don't worry, Herms,” Fred started.

“Don't call me Herms,” she growled at him angrily. Grimacing, Fred held up his hands in surrender.

“Ms. Hermione Granger,” George tried again, “we will protect Harry with our lives. Or at least those of the Firsties we can into doing this. Fear not, your young paramour will be safe under our care.” Hermione harrumphed at their antics, but nodded.

“Thank you George, Fred,” she said primly. “Until they catch whoever did this we must be on alert for any threats.”

“Granger, ma'am, we've already got some ideas,” Fred said. “We'll keep an eye on ickle Harrikins, don’t worry. We've got...ways of keeping track of little Firsties.” Realizing that they meant the Marauder’s Map, Harry let the last few shreds of hope for any privacy slip from his grasp.

“Good. Glad to hear it,” Hermione said, walking over and grabbing his arm. “Come, Harry. Time for lunch.” As she half-dragged Harry down the hall, Hedwig hanging onto his shoulder grumpily, she continued. “You left your box of potions at the door to your room. Get those first if you need them. We'll work on security concerns while we eat then recruit help after.”

Harry slowly realized that using the Room of Requirement for training or completing his still-nascent plans to slip away from an increasingly protective Hermione to investigate the Chamber of Secrets would have to wait until this all blew over. Of course, the fact that she was right in increasing his security didn't keep him from being annoyed. He'd had enough of that last time from the Order.

He hoped he was wrong about this not being a plot by Voldemort's Possessed Professor, because he now had a plan to safely take out that magically weak but cleverly hidden threat currently lurking in Hogwarts. It would keep both Hermione and the rest of the students out of the line of fire. It would save the unicorns from being killed. It might even save the possessed Professor Quirrell. And all he had to do was survive until Christmas, betray future secrets to his sworn enemy, and lie straight to the face of the greatest wizard alive. That assumed there wasn't some second, unknown enemy trying to join the Kill Harry Club, which would throw his plans straight out the window.

Stumbling to keep up with a very determined Hermione Granger, who had yet to release his arm from her iron grip, Harry muttered under his breath, “Constant vigilance.”
Chapter 10

Harry Potter and the Witch Queen
by TimeLoopedPowerGamer

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter.

Chapter Ten

Classes on Monday went as usual, with Quirrell continuing to be creepy in DADA and Transfiguration class an ongoing exercise in frustration for Harry. At least the whispers in the corridors about the attack on him were different from his previous experience with rumors of his conspiring with Dark Forces and being a liar and a total nutter. His first time through Hogwarts, there had sometimes even been rumors of him lying about the existence of the same Dark Forces he was supposed to have been conspiring with.

Which made no sense at all, but that's the magical world for you. The looks of pity were annoying but the random comforting hugs from some of the older girls were a welcome change from mean looks and whispered jinxes in the back he'd suffered through last time. Hermione kept a close watch on him, both between and during classes, several times seeming to have to restrain herself from hexing people who ran up to talk to him (specifically, the clingy older girls). Her wand seldom left her hand all day.

Their investigation Sunday hadn't turned up anything, but Hermione was continuing to be evasive, protective, and generally annoying. She also wasn't letting him out of her sight and, along with the Twins, had gotten the rest of the Gryffindor First Years involved. Ron and Neville were sticking to his side all the time now, doing their best Crabbe and Goyle impression. Ron seemed to be having the time of his life but Neville was constantly looking around as if someone had made a mistake. But he and Ron were the tallest and largest boys in the First Year Gryffindor dorms, which was the criteria the Twins claimed to have used in choosing them for guard duty.

Hermione was still getting some odd stares from Gryffindors who'd been victims of her impromptu dorm concert. The oldest students were used to strange things happening at Hogwarts, though, and the younger ones were mostly too timid to poke fun at her yet. When Harry asked about her roommates, she said they were leaving her alone and asked him to drop it. He wasn't fooled that everything was fine there but so long as she wasn't ending up in the hospital wing, he guessed he could leave her to solve the girls dorm issues on her own.

Charms on Tuesday was more casting exercises, which he could only try a few times before Professor Flitwick pulled him off the portions requiring spell casting to work on some separate practice and written assignments on the subject of wand angles and motions. For most students (who were actually children) this would have been seen as a punishment. Harry, with a more mature outlook because he was, could tell his professor was spending a lot of his own time giving his special needs student something to do that didn't involve his dangerous weak magical core, so Harry didn't complain.

Hermione overheard him getting extra assignments and glanced briefly over at him before returning to her own work, continuing to ignore him even though they were at the same table. But at the end of class she tagged along, sitting to one side reading the short essay he was to hand in while he demonstrated his wand motions.
Professor Flitwick praised his work as nearly perfect and gave him five House points for it. Hermione also received one for her interest in the additional classwork he’d done. With flashbacks to those disastrous Sixth Year potions classes, Harry almost expected her to be upset at him getting more points than her (and as a 30-year-old, having essentially cheated to do so), but Hermione was simply polite in thanking her teacher and seemed to think nothing more of it.

This was in stark contrast to his original timeline's Hermione. Her near cutthroat competitive streak and loudly bubbly enthusiasm at receiving a professor's praise had been legendary – and legendarily annoying to many classmates.

It seemed knowing the full extent of all the threats they faced, such as undead Dark Lords and horribly bigoted, sexist governmental establishments, had cooled her enthusiasm for minor school issues. Over the last couple of weeks he'd seen how things like House points, sucking up to professors, and even perfect grades were no longer the bushy-haired young witch's top priority. Sure, she was certainly still going to be top of her class, if possibly not her year (she wasn't perfect and some of the Ravenclaws were insane in their study habits, even compared to Hermione), but she didn't seem worried when she didn't have time to do extra credit on her assignments or missed out on getting House points for Gryffindor by answering first in class.

Of course, that more laid-back attitude about schoolwork (relatively speaking) could also have something to do with the unofficial magic lessons she was working on with Harry, which were moving more at her own phenomenal speed of learning. Harry was sure that if Hogwarts allowed students to skip grades, Hermione would have been finished with her N.E.W.T.s before he even took his O.W.L.s in his original timeline. She was just that good.

Now, given access to the right books and the support of someone able to give her personal attention and guidance, she was devouring Third Year books on all the available classes – all except for Muggle Studies, which she’d borrowed from a blond Third Year girl Harry didn't know. After reading for twenty minutes, she'd shaken her head and given the book right back.

Hermione was also obsessed with getting at least an outline of the theory of post graduation topics from the more advanced books he had snuck in. These were mostly on subjects Harry had never had the time to research in depth before, which was why he'd gone to the trouble to purchase the books in secret. She pored over introductory tomes on Alchemy, three-part guides to wide-area protection charms (a.k.a. Warding), ratty old diaries on item enchanting, and even books on non-magical topics like governmental procedures and magical law.

Because of this side project, she stood out less in class but had a much deeper knowledge of magic and the magical world. Once her professors eventually realized what they were truly dealing with, they were going to be in for the shock of their professional careers.

The unnatural yet familiar way Hermione devoured books was almost enough to make him forget once again that she was still a little kid. While Harry wasn't going to fool himself (as Dumbledore had before with him) that she was going to get anything like a normal childhood in these dark times, he was still going to try his hardest to keep the worst of things from affecting her too much, for as long as possible. Included in that plan was helping her find time to just be a kid. Which brought him to his next problem.

He had been worried about Hermione's upcoming birthday on the 19th, ever since his unplanned confession on the Hogwarts Express and his subsequent exposure as a time traveler to the young witch. Harry had originally planned on just handing out to his new-again friends generic birthday gifts, things appropriate between kids who didn't really know each other like the packs of chocolate frogs and Gobstone starter bags he'd purchased on his secret, in-disguise second trip to Diagon Alley.
But now that he thought about it, he realized he needed to do something more personal for Hermione. It was something he hadn't thought about his entire first time at Hogwarts: Hermione's parents were non-magical, so they didn't have access to owls. Even if Hermione asked a school owl to take them something, they couldn't send more than a small letter in return because they couldn't cast the shrinking spells that other parents used to allow owls to carry packages.

That must mean that, even though they likely did something at home the month before, every single year Hermione spent her birthday alone at Hogwarts with no presents, no party, and, that original first year, no friends. Harry felt ashamed when he tried and failed to recall Ron and him ever doing anything on her birthday. It seemed just a little too close to what he'd experienced with his horrible relatives.

Of course, Hermione hadn't ever brought it up, which was so very Hermione-like it was almost physically painful. It wasn't like her birthday was important, in the grand scheme of things, so she must not have thought it necessary to point out. He wondered how much that must have hurt.

Hermione's parents were non-magical dentists, giving her a sad phobia of sweets, so he had originally planned on casually giving her a set of Gobstones on her birthday. Now, however, he was much closer to her than in his original timeline at this point and significantly less emotionally crippled, so he felt he needed to do something special for her.

With some careful planning he was able to sneak out on his own that night in search of that special something. Avoiding Filch's midnight patrols without either his dad's cloak or the Marauder’s map took all his skills in misdirection and stealth. The fish filet he swiped during dinner and laid out as a distraction for the caretaker's old cat certainly helped.

He'd had to sneak out just after curfew on that mission, the only time he wasn't being watched guarded. Everyone was now keeping a much closer eye on him, with a Prefect escorting him back to the Gryffindor common room after diner every night. It cut into his time studying late in the library, but most of what he was reading right now was from his own library of ‘gray’ magic grimoires anyway. Worst of all, it made finding truly private time to talk with Hermione hard to arrange.

Instead of risking getting caught (again) in a misunderstood and compromising situation in the boys rooms late at night, they’d taken to hiding out in the common room in a corner until curfew, building a fort out of some of the sofa and chair cushions and the (magically cleaned and imbued) blankets from their beds. Hermione would then cast a rapidly increasing number of privacy charms on them and their hideaway, but they would still return to passing written messages for anything truly sensitive about time travel or their plans to take out the shade of a Dark Lord once and for all.

They'd been talking about some of the things he knew about wards and tracking charms (far too little) and some of the subjects they might need to find books for the next time they went to the library for some extra-curricular study. It was a shame they didn't yet have access to the restricted section. But mostly they were just killing time as they waited until they needed to leave for their midnight class.

Sighing softly, Harry realized he needed to just get it over with, so he reached down and drew on his Gryffindor courage – which he supposed (given what the Hat had said), was simply his courage all along. He turned to face Hermione, who was bending over some list she was making of study materials way beyond her grade level.

“Hey, Hermione,” he said, a little nervous and significantly less brave now that the time had come. “Uh, so, it's your birthday in about twenty minutes...”
She gasped out loud.

“Harry!” she hissed. “How did you—” then she slapped her forehead in realization. Sal, draped around her shoulders and peeking out of her robe, hissed a few chuckles at her antics. “Of course you would. But then you knew—”

“That you don't like people to make a big deal out of it, yes.” Harry quickly added. “Which is why I'm not playing games. Instead of a surprise party or something silly embarrassing you, I've simply arranged for a quiet little thing with some of our housemates after an early lunch. I thought I'd let you know since you hate surprises. You can invite your roommates, if you want. I don't remember if they're being pests at this point...anyway, there will be cake.”

“They are mostly just ignoring me,” Hermione said, a little sadly, “but I'll ask them anyway.”

She smirked. “Bribing them with cake might help.”

“Couldn’t hurt,” he said, reaching into his book bag. “Look, I got you this, but I didn't want to wait until tomorrow. I also didn't want the others to see it. I mean...I wasn't sure if it was the right thing to give you...” Harry trailed off, handing the slightly dingy old spell book to his friend. “Happy Birthday, Hermione.”


“Ah, well, y-you know you can borrow my books a-anytime,” he stammered, “But I, I wanted to find something, ah, special, so I snuck off to the, umm, the Room of Requirement to have a look around. So, uhh, I wanted you to have this book. For your own collection, and...yeah.” Hermione wasn't saying anything and just sat staring at the book.

“It, uh...it has spells that can permanently alter your appearance,” he babbled desperately, “which can't be detected like glamour spells can, though it also has a lot of those, and...I know, err, at least when I knew you before, that is—”

Hermione was already getting up off the floor, staring at the old book in her hands, apparently ignoring him. Harry stammered to a halt, watching her leave. As she lifted up the edge of the blanket, he heard her quietly say “thank you,” then she was gone. Harry numbly hurried to clean up their blanket fort so the Prefects wouldn't yell at them, then stumbled off in a daze.

Hermione didn’t walk with him (and Ron and Neville) to Astronomy class at midnight that night, instead leaving with her roommate Lavender. She didn't look at him while they were working out the position of the constellations and making star charts and seemed lost in thought, not once raising her hand or attempting to answer any of Professor Sinistra's questions. When they were walking back to their dorms, escorted by some unlucky Fifth Year Gryffindor Prefect, Harry tried and failed to get her attention. She just walked mechanically back to the common room and straight to the stairs to the girls' dorms.

Shoulders sagging, Harry trudged to his bed, listlessly undressing while wondering how he could have screwed up so badly. Banging his head against his pillow he cursed himself quietly. *Of course* a girl is going to be insulted if you hand her a book on how to improve her appearance – that is practically the definition of a stupid idea. Maybe he could apologize tomorrow. Maybe she wouldn't hate him forever and doom the entire planet to a magical apocalypse.

The whump whump sound of siege spells interrupted his dreams and he was already on his feet
before he was fully awake, scanning the empty bedroom. Wand in hand, he pushed out the tent flaps and stepped into the burned out park where they’d set up camp the night before. His three friends were nowhere in sight.

Applying several Auror-grade stealth and attention redirection spells (otherwise known as the Notice-Me-Not combo), he walked carefully through the ruined streets of Paris towards the sounds. Crossing a bridge, he saw a partially ruined domed building off in the distance being shelled with giant bolts of fire, the magical flames licking against an invisible shield of some sort.

Racing towards the scene of the fight as fast as he could, he carefully avoided the wrecks of cars and rubble in the street from half-collapsed buildings. Soon, the booming sounds stopped, but he simply redoubled his pace. After what seemed like several hours but must have been less than one, he reached the scene of what had been a very one-sided fight. Slowing, he took a careful look around, his stomach twisting at what he saw.

Bodies lay around a small outer courtyard in front of the ruined building, some still smoldering. The magical shield from before was nowhere in sight, most likely destroyed. Walking into the building, he saw more bodies, a macabre trail of breadcrumbs leading him on though hallways filled with bullet holes and scorched with fire.

Continuing down the last flight of stairs, hidden behind a secret panel that had been left broken open on the floor, he saw a large chamber, smooth and made entirely of marble. Cracks covered the polished walls where now broken Runes of Power were inscribed. Somewhere around fifty bodies filled the room – well, not so much bodies as scorched skeletons. They had been stacked and thrown around haphazardly, coming apart in the process and littering the room as a horrible mix of disassociated bones. A cracked steel vault door was in two halves on the ground, also smoking. He wasn't aware steel could do that.

Peeking into the next room, everything finally became clear. It was a hidden library of grimoires, and a huge one. The walls seemed to fade off into the dimly lit distance, and whether that was real or a magical illusion didn't change how impressive it was. Just as he was about to step through into the dusty cavern of books, Hermione turned the corner around one of the tall stacks and headed towards him, the buckles on her high black boots flashing in the magical blue candlelight surrounding her.

Her long back robes whipped behind her and to both sides as she marched quickly towards the entrance, but he could see trailing in her almost palpable magical wake a shiny glowing horizontal disk of blue light, pure magical force turned into a moving table. Stacked on top of it was, of course, dozens upon dozens of books.

“Harry,” she said pleasantly, “good morning! I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“Hermione. I... I thought we talked about this. No solo engagements.”

“Dear, I didn’t forget. I took Ron along with me.” As if summoned, the lanky redhead appeared around the same corner, struggling under an impossibly high armload of books.

“Why don’t you just, I don’t know, shrink them?” he asked, sidetracked and distracted. Hermione raised one delicate eyebrow.

“These are not merely books on magic, Harry. They are books of magic. The enchantments on them are highly unstable and would react...poorly to additional spatial charms being cast on them. Some are as large as a house between their covers as is. You could live inside others, in miniature worlds that contain libraries of their own. Fascinating stuff.”
He licked his lips nervously, trying to avoid stepping on a skull while shifting his feet nervously. “So, what is this place anyway?”

“Ah, lesson time. This is what I came to Paris for. The secret library under the Palais de l’Institut de France. The bodies you are avoiding at your feet are the remains of some of France’s most influential and powerful wizards. Only wizards, of course. Sexist pigs.”

Stepping into the antechamber, she casually waved a hand, clearing a spot on the floor where Ron dropped his heavy load of literature with a resounding bang. Wincing, Hermione continued.

“The secret rulers of Magical France are,” she paused, looking around, “or perhaps I should say were the Immortals, 40 wizards who held life-long positions of power over French magical society. They were responsible for the selection, teaching, and preservation of all legal and restricted spells in France, choosing the curriculum for schools such as Beauxbatons and dictating which spells could be published and which needed to be scrubbed from public knowledge. They used both Obliviations and book bans to achieve this.”

Hermione looked like she wanted to kill someone, but she’d obviously gotten at least some of that out of her system. Should be safe. For now.

“So you just killed...immortals?” Harry said slowly.

“Nah mate,” Ron said, shaking his head as he took a seat on top of the books. Hermione’s eyes narrowed, flicking from him to the stack of books he was sitting on, but he didn’t notice. “They were only called that. Hermione explained this one to me already.”

“Quite right,” she said. “They were very powerful in both worlds, you see. Their cover in the mundane was a publicly known advisory group, managing and maintaining the 'immortality' of the French language. They weren’t truly immortal, as over 500 people have held those positions over the years. But they had tried and succeed in one of the 'lessor'immortalities long ago, making them unaging and unusually naturally powerful. Most died from assassination or accident. Usually caused by a rival looking to take their place or political infighting.

“As for the public magical title, I’m sure they thought it hilarious for the Muggles to know but not understand their secret. In fact, they do their titular services for mundane France as well, but the magical side took most of their time and attention. After Death Eater forces killed nearly the entire French mundane government and most of the magical one with assassinations, poison potions, cursed artifacts, and direct combat actions, the Immortals took over. They had lots of practice defending themselves from magical sneak attacks, after all. I think only one or two of them were actually successfully killed by Voldemort’s forces, losses they quickly recovered from.”

Harry edged closer as she ranted, looking around at all the burned skeletons. “And you just killed them? I thought we’d also agreed we didn’t want to do that anymore. I mean, weren’t they technically in charge of the country? You even admit they weren’t working for Voldemort.”

Hermione’s face turned grim. “Yes, Harry. They were independent of Voldemort and ruled what is left of France. In fact, remember when we reentered the country through Italy? They were directly responsible for those labor camps we saw in Nice. You remember those, don’t you?”

Harry shuttered all over and tried very hard not to.

“Their crimes were odious and multitude,” she concluded, turning and starting to examine the broken vault door. “France, both mundane and magical, will be better off without them.”
“It doesn't seem right, Hermione,” he said, his jaw tightening. “They didn’t even get a trial. How can we decide to simply execute them, just because we want to steal their books!”

Hermione pulled her wand from empty, shimmering air and dashed it straight down in one sudden, violent gesture. The huge broken steel pieces of the door drew together again in a maelstrom of glowing blue magical power, then jumped up into the air, slamming against the vault opening with a tremendous clang. “Don’t tell me what I already know, Harry!” she yelled. “I don’t like having to do this any more than you do.”

“Then stop!” he shouted back, chopping the air with his hands. “We already know so much, so many secrets. Surely we can find some way to use this knowledge to beat Voldemort. What we’re doing is endangering both us and those we run into on this crazy quest. How many more innocent people have to die? When will it be enough?”

He looked over at Ron, whose eyes were wide as dinner plates. He shook his head and raised his hands, refusing to get involved. So much for Gryffindor courage.

Hermione tossed her wand to one side and it disappeared in a fiery flash, like in a magician's trick. Flexing her hands into tight fists, she then relaxed them slowly, inch by inch, before turning around. “It will never be enough, Harry,” she said patiently, her face completely blank. “Voldemort is willing to do things far beyond what we are. Unless we push ourselves to our very limits, we will never have the tools to be able to face him and win a final battle. What we are doing is dangerous, but it is fully justified by what these people did and what we are trying to accomplish.”

“The ends don’t justify the means, Hermione,” Harry said desperately.

She scoffed. “Harry, the ends, or the results of ones actions, must always be the thing used to justify one’s actions.”

Entering full lecture mode, she clasp her hands behind her and spoke clearly and evenly, as if to an attentive room full of students. “What you are parroting here is a misused and mindlessly simple negation of a rather straightforward aphorism. The original is about how resolving a situation does in fact justify reasonable actions taken towards it, even if those actions, taken by themselves and judged against society’s morals, are less than ethical.”

Frowning, she continued. “Half-educated bleating sheep, like those in magical Britain who sat and watched as Voldemort took over, want to sound morally and philosophically deep by using this other phrase to suggest that nothing against society's laws and mores can ever be done in pursuit of a goal, no matter how positive and provably certain the end result are, or how bad the consequences of a failure to act. Such people are really suggesting that a madman and killer like Voldemort could not be stopped by actions that made them uncomfortable, like killing people, even if those people were actively assisting in Voldemort's horrible crimes.”

She paused for a moment. “There is an argument to be made that a specific situation might be easily misinterpreted by a driven person as having a goal which justifies truly horrible things, things far in excess of the ill that might occur if no actions were taken, but this here is clearly not such a situation.”

She swept a hand around the room at the murders she'd recently committed. “These people deserved to die. The knowledge they were hording from their own people and the world was only a small part of that. Our need of that knowledge is great, and our success would save millions, if not billions of lives.

“And I did not simply slaughter them in their sleep. As always, I asked politely if they'd allow me
access to their library vault. They refused, and then tried to kill me and Ron on the spot with machine guns and curses. It would have been far safer to have simply killed them in an overwhelming first strike. I won't pretend what happened was self defense, but these horrible men were not innocent."

Her words made sense (they usually did), but looking around at all the bodies his heart felt heavy. It was one battlefield full of slaughter too many. One more atrocity than he could take.

He shook his head sadly. “I don't think I can do this anymore. I'm sorry, Hermione.”

Her eyes grew wide and she tensed up, her composure cracking a little, then she took a deep breath and everything shut down again. She slowly turned to start stacking books next to Ron's pile, moving them carefully off the glowing blue floating disk with her hands instead of magic.

“Of course, Harry,” she said calmly, not looking at him. “That is your right. I'll divide our supplies up later today and give you the key to one of the gnomish Swiss bank vaults.”

Ron started forward, falling off the stack of books, then looked around at the others as if they'd gone mad. Hermione frowned and stopped stacking books, then turned to Ron, who flinched. “I assume you'll be leaving with Harry, Ronald?”

“Err,” he started, “I, uh, I was planning on sticking with you, Hermione. And who said anything about Harry leaving?”

“I did,” she answered tersely, her jaw clenched. Ron's mouth moved open and closed a few times.

“Right. Err. I mean, I don't like the things we sometimes have to do,” he said, glancing guiltily at Harry, “but like Hermione said, it's what we've got to do, right? And it isn't like they're not bad guys, right?”

“What about all those people upstairs, and in the courtyard outside?” Harry said with growing horror, gesturing behind him. “Were they 'bad guys'? Were they even magical?”

Ron paled and looked down. Hermione turned to look at Harry over her shoulder, her face still an empty mask. “They worked for the Immortals and what remains of the government of France. Everyone in the country knows about the camps. They were as guilty as the men who ordered those abominations constructed.”

Harry shook his head again and was about to speak when a voice interrupted him from behind.

“They were...paper pushers, pushing, pushing paper,” a ghostly, almost sing-song voice said, echoing around the room. “All day, stacks and stacks of it. Some of them were old librarians who missed their forests in the shelves and didn't know any better. Most were...neutral, but they tried not to think about the horrible things that were happening in their world.”

Harry turned around and saw Luna Lovegood standing on top of one of the scorched skulls, the toes of her bare feet folding around it's curved top like she was balancing on a rock in a stream and trying not to get wet.

“Luna, why are you-?” Harry started to ask.

“Because the floor is lava, silly,” she said. “Or, at least it was lava. Or rather, hot and under lots of pressure. Most rock was at some point in time, at least originally. And now it isn't. Hermione Granger made bits of it remember being hot again, back before it was a crystal like thing and then long after carved up into block. And that killed the unkillable. Killed them with their own floor. Isn't
that odd?"

The three others stared at her in shocked silence.

“Ah, Luna?” he finally said.

“Yes, Harry Potter?” she said.

“Why are you holding a knife?”

“Oh this?” she said in surprise, gesturing with the large combat knife and splattering the floor with beads of red. It was completely covered in blood and was still dripping. Her arm and half of the front of her robes were also darkly wet.

“Someone tried to sneak up on you three while you were arguing about mortality, morality, Malfoy, matrimony, markets, muskets, morays, and other things that begin with the letter 'm’,” she said, blinking at him and speaking slowly, as if all that should be obvious.

“He died,” she added sadly. “I believe the joke would be, 'he got the point', but I don't really feel like joking about death right now. Maybe later. How about you?”

Harry looked to the others for help. Hermione turned around to face them fully and shook her head, not in answer to either of them but more as if to clear it of accumulated spiderwebs. Talking to Luna often had that effect.

Luna was still standing on the skull, happily turning the knife over and over to play with the drops of blood as they moved down the blade to the tip. She was humming a strange, spooky little tune at the same time. Harry really, really wanted to get out of this place right now, and his painful break from the trio he thought would last forever was now a distant third on his list of present worries.

“Luna, Harry has decided to part company with us,” Hermione said after regaining her composure. “Would you please help divide up the supplies for him while I finish here?”

“Of course, Hermione Granger,” Luna replied. Hermione studied her quietly for several moments. Luna looked up and, unusually for her, stared right back, looking Hermione directly in the eyes. Hermione blinked, then nodded. Luna briefly looked over at him, then looked back down at her knife, now with a small smile on her face.

“And you'll be going with him,” Hermione said, her lips now pressed together tightly.

“That is correct,” Luna repeated, returning to her dreamy inspection of her rapidly drying knife.

Harry was a mess the next day. He dragged himself downstairs early, having rushed through his shower in hopes of catching Hermione before she left for breakfast or classes. He had hardly slept at all, there were dark rings under his eyes, and his hair was even wilder than usual.

Waiting nervously on a sofa in the common room, he sat with his eyes glued to the girls’ dorm stairs, waiting for Hermione to come down and...hex him purple? Turn him into a frog? Yell at him for an hour about ruining her birthday? A few of the other girls had come down for breakfast already, some giving him odd looks.

“Do you have any idea what you did?” Lavender Brown said suddenly. Harry jumped in his seat, head whipping around. He hadn't noticed her standing behind him, glaring at his back.
“W--what, I don't know--” he started to say.

“Don't bother denying it,” Lavender interrupted. “Hermione told us it was you. Stayed up all night, she did. She's a nightmare. Well, I hope you're happy. We've got to live with her but it's you who'll have to deal with the consequences.” Shaking her head, the future diva of Gryffindor flounced out the portrait hole.

“Harry,” Hermione whispered hesitantly into his ear. He froze, then slowly turned, expecting a wand in his face or maybe a crying little girl with red eyes. What he saw was a tiny angel in human form.

“What do you think?” she asked quietly, her deep, mesmerizing brown eyes searching for a reaction. He couldn't properly feel his face right now, which was tingling and most likely red as a beet, but he was guessing she was seeing shock and more than a little reverence.

“You look amazing,” he breathed out, still in awe of the inhumanly perfect creature in front of him. Thankfully, there was nothing sexual about it -- the book he'd given her did have some of those, but he'd assumed (thankfully correctly) that she wouldn't use something like that. At least, yet.

What she had used was still overwhelming. She was a perfection of form, art in motion. Her eyes were deep pools, her every gesture a smooth dance step. A half-dozen powerful charms were slowly frying his visual cortex with magic. She'd also changed her hair, made it a set of loose brown ringlets hanging to her shoulders instead of the frizzy cloud she usually wore. It looked great. A halo seemed to surround her head, highlighting her face in the best possible light.

“Thank you, Harry,” she replied, one perfect eyebrow lifting gracefully.

“Uh,” Harry started. He swallowed, shaded his eyes with one hand, and tried again. “You, umm, might try lifting a couple of the stronger glamours. I, whoa, I don't think, uhh, the teachers will let you keep those up in class. Maybe the 'Holy Visage' and 'Perfect Grace' ones? Please? My brain feels like pudding right now.”

“Oh, sorry!” she exclaimed, waving her wand at her face. “I think I must have gotten a little carried away, but I stayed up all night learning these and I want to try them and I just know I must look awful from getting no sleep. Is this better?”

Now able to see her directly for more than ten seconds without passing out, he took a closer look. She wasn't wearing any makeup, magical or otherwise, but her hair still fell in gentle ringlets over her shoulders. It just didn't shine with ethereal beauty anymore. He could see now that her eyes were as bruised looking as his, it was just disguised so the dark smudges weren't as noticeable.

“Magically following in your parents' footsteps, eh?” Harry said, noticing her nervous grin. She blushed, embarrassed to be caught. “Yes, very funny,” she shot back, covering her mouth with one hand. “I only shrunk them a little. My parents don't take me as a patient, ethical issues, so they might not even notice.” Harry looked at her quizzically.

“Okay, fine,” she snarled with a grin. “They'll notice, but it isn't like they can do anything about it. The spell's effects are permanent, after all.”

“You did something similar last time, except that someone hit you with a curse that made your front teeth longer first. Then you 'forgot,’” Harry made finger quotes, “to tell Madam Pomfrey when they were shrunk to the correct size and got her to shrink them down smaller.”

She snorted in reply. “That seems like a perfectly acceptable response. Anyway, I was probably traumatized or something.”
“Yes, I'm sure,” Harry said sarcastically. Smiling as he gazed at his formally fuzzy-haired friend, he said, “Now that my brain isn't seeping out my ears, I can see what a great job you've done. I had been, uhh, rather afraid that I'd screwed up badly.”

“Not very sorry about that, Harry,” she said, frowning at him. “It wasn't a very sensitive gift to give a young girl. You're just lucky I'm exceptionally forgiving. And that it was exactly what I wanted.”

Plopping down on the couch, she patted his hand reassuringly. “Thank you very much. I've been watching the other girls using some complicated charms to keep their complexion clear, their clothes wrinkle-free, their hair perfect, but it wasn't the kind of thing I felt I could ask about. Not being raised in a magical household makes me a bit of an outsider and asking annoying questions would just show off what a berk I am. I don't understand why there isn't a class in this stuff. It is all so easy once you have all the correct spells in one place.”

“You could have asked me,” Harry said quietly.

“Ask a boy I just met about magical hygiene charms? Ask a boy how to use magic to dress myself quicker in the morning?” She frowned at him.

“Admit out loud to a boy that I hated my hair and wanted a magical solution?” Hermione asked, running one hand over her new curls and raising one delicate eyebrow.

“I think not. I may have overdone it this time but I'll just have to get the hang of it. Practice makes perfect and my roommates can just deal with it. They weren't very happy with how many spells I was trying out or that I was at it all night, even though I closed my bed's curtains and put up some silencing spells, though I did forgot to keep them up and they wore off eventually. I woke them up this morning playing with the one that makes my laughter tinkle like tiny bells. Not sure I like that one, though. We'll see.”

“Well, I'm just glad I, err, guessed right after all,” he said, sheepishly.

“Yes, well done.”

“Why do you think there isn't a class on it?” he asked.

“Not sure. I'd imagine it is because they don't want to talk about it in public. Using magic to change yourself and your appearance isn't something people seem comfortable with.”

“Yeah. I know some of the more...exotic glamour and beauty charms are borderline Dark, but none are actually Ministry banned.”

“I have no interest in changing my sex or growing any additional number of limbs, thank you. I happen to be happy with both as they currently are.” Hermione said shortly. Harry coughed abruptly.

“Uh, right,” he said, remembering a certain Metamorphmagus. “I know natural morphers aren't well liked. Remind me to introduce your to my, uh, second...no, third cousin...once removed? Not sure about that. All the old family trees look more like climbing vines, anyway. My therapist's daughter, Nymphadora Tonks is one, is my point. She was okay talking about it with me before, just don't call her by her first name.” Hermione looked at him and blinked.

“Anyway,” he continued, “There is something people don't like about how they can magically look like someone else. Or change themselves at any time to look better than other people are naturally.”

“I can see how some people might think everyone's 'natural beauty' ought to be enough,” she said, looking frustrated and using the most angry finger-quotes he'd ever seen. “That's exactly the kind of
thing people 'naturally' gifted with perfectly symmetrical features, culturally acceptable facial and body types, and a childhood full of training on acceptable methods for 'natural' beauty enhancement say. I hate my 'natural' hair so very much. It takes forever to do anything with it and it doesn't look good most of the time.”

“I'd argue with that last point,” Harry said, raising his hands defensively when Hermione's eyebrows started scrunching up (sure sign of an impending argument).

“But that isn't the point: you're a witch, Hermione,” Harry said gently. “You have the power to control yourself and your environment more than any non-magical person in the history of humanity. You're smart and responsible. You should have a chance to use that power as you wish. It doesn't hurt anyone.” She smiled brightly at him and he grinned back playfully.

“Unless you stack too many of those glamours up again, that is,” he added. Hermione pursed her lips and poked him sharply in the ribs. They sat there quietly for a while, Hermione in deep thought again. She still wore a small smile and was playing with her hair, running a finger over a brown curl that fell down across her shoulder.

“How long?” Hermione asked, turning to stare at him.

“Err, what?”

“How long until she told you?” Hermione clarified.

“Oh. Uh. Right. Two years after...school.” Harry said, figuring out the question was about when his future-past Hermione had let him know how she felt about her appearance. They weren't set up for privacy, so it was time for coded messages.

“I'm glad she eventually clued you in,” Hermione said, smirking once again. She grabbed the front of his robes and dragged him into a lung-bruising hug. “Thank you very much, Harry. It was exactly what I wanted.”

“Haff' bif'ay,” he squeaked out with his final breath. She eventually released him, most likely saving him from asphyxiation, then leaped to her feet and dragged him off the couch.

“Time for breakfast. I'm really looking forward to that little party later, Harry. This is the best birthday ever.” She skipped toward the portrait door, pulling Harry behind her by his hand. A little dizzy from the emotional and physical whiplash, Harry was just glad his luck was holding for once as he stumbled after her.

The rest of the week the school was quiet, teachers were being no worse than their usually mean and creepy selves (even the possessed one), and Hermione was actually being treated well by her peers in the Gryffindor girls dorm. Overall, things were much better than his last time through this year. Maybe he'd make it to Christmas without another incident. In fact, Harry had really thought everything was going to go smoothly until he woke up to a wand in his face.

“Hermione, wha-” he started to say, looking up into his best friend's large, shining brown eyes. He stopped when he saw her blank, expressionless face in the faint moonlight that filled the room. Her vinewood wand was steady in her hand, pointed right between his eyes.

His bed curtains were closed but it was the night of the full moon, and a diffuse, spooky glow seemed to have seeped dimly into every crack. The ominous flickering light from her sparking wand tip only made her thick, churning magical presence even more intimidating. It almost physically pressed him down into the mattress and certainly made him forget it was a twelve year old holding
him at wand point.

Checking, but already suspecting the answer, he found he couldn't move his limbs even an inch, nor his head more than to speak or look around. Figured. Hermione was too smart to let her wand get that close to him if he could move. Basic combat tactics seemed to come naturally to her, at least the most common sense ones.

“Harry, my memories appear to have been altered,” she said in a quiet monotone. “I...I need to confirm who did it. I need your help and I think yours might have been changed, too.” Harry's heart slid into his stomach.

She was kneeling astride his chest again, her hair half-way between the brown ringlets she'd taken to wearing and her natural frizzy bush. Her entire body was tense under her thick cotton nightgown.

“And I’m in a Body Bind because—” he started, trying to stay calm even as his palms started sweating. If he could, he would have been shaking already with fear. Not for his safety, but for that of his vulnerable young friend. He just needed to stay calm and think this out, fast.

“Because I can’t trust you aren't under the Imperius or some other mind control,” she answered flatly. “If it is who I think it is that has been violating my mind, we might both be in a lot of danger.”

After pausing for a quiet moment, Harry asked a horrible question. “Can you prove you’re, well, you?”.

“Fair enough,” she said, then looked at her right sleeve.

“I am here, Speaker. Ssalazar confirmmss the Warm One'sss identity,” Sal said quietly. No one could command someone else’s familiar and they would die before succumbing to any magical interference. Also, he spoke Parseltongue to him, which no one else knew he knew.

“I am sssatisssfied,” he hissed to Sal, though he knew she could still be under someone's control, magically or through threats.

“Okay, how are you going to check to see if my memories are altered?”

Hermione swayed a little, then continued, her voice still empty of emotion, “Right, the how: I have an...odd little ritual spell from another one of your books. It originated in India, and was brought over here by- well, I think it would likely be illegal if the Ministry knew it really existed for...for a couple of reasons. But it is safe, so far as I can tell, and we need a way to check both ours memories and our current mental states.” Her face twitched and her control started to crumble.

“I-I'm so s-sorry Harry,” she whispered to him in the dark. “This must be awful for you. I just...I don't know any other way to fix this. I have to be able to trust you, and you me. Please, please understand.” She was begging him with her every word now, her voice shaking.

“It'll be okay, Hermione,” Harry said softly, sounding calmer than he really was. “Just let me know what I can do to help.”

This was close to one of his worst case scenarios, he thought. If he lost Hermione's trust, or if someone placed one of them under some kind of magical control, it could ruin everything. Had Voldemort gotten to them? Maybe Hermione showing the true extent of her abilities when he was around in Quirrell's body wasn't such a good idea.

She finished rolling up her right sleeve to the elbow, just below where Sal was still coiled. Reaching inside the neck of her nightgown with her slightly-shaky left hand, she carefully unsheathed a small
silver ritual knife. Harry involuntary flinched, actually making his entire body twitch even under the spell, and he started breathing a little faster. Hermione, being so close and sitting directly on his chest, noticed and choked back what sounded like a sob.

“N-no Harry, this is for me,” she said quickly with a tremor in her voice. “I’m so, so sorry. This must bring back horrible...just...just give me a moment to prepare.” She took the knife and slashed her right forearm in one swift motion. Her wand didn't move an inch but she hissed in pain. Harry was slightly worried that she was using yet another blood ritual, but the books she had been working from certainly weren't Dark enough for him to be worried. Yet.

Wiping the knife on her gown-covered leg, she carefully put it back in the sheath she had hidden inside the thick cotton nightdress. Steadying herself visibly, her mask of indifference came down again.

“This one needs a sealer, a second, or in this case third party to complete the spell,” Hermione said, now drifting into full Lecture Mode. She was obviously hiding behind Perfect Little Professor and her natural Occlumency, seeming to calm down a great deal in the process.

“One of the reasons Familiars are so sought after, historically, is that they can fulfill this magical purpose in rituals, assuming they are sufficiently magical. Luckily, I have one of the most powerful Familiars I can find record of in the library.

“The Headmaster's Phoenix, Salazar Slytherin's, err, snake, you and Hedwig, and...from what you've told me, Tom with his own snake, are obvious examples of other powerful Familiar relationships.” Taking a swipe through the painful looking cut on her arm with her left middle finger, she dabbed the blood into a pooled smear, like a painter with their pallet.

Hermione shifted nervously above him. “This ritual was...well, I'll tell you the history later. It connects two minds for about thirty minutes. The disadvantages are that you can't search someone's mind, like one can with intensive directed Legilimency, and Occlumency shields against it completely, even with relatively unskilled and weak abilities.

“It is meant to work on the subjects cooperatively to bring the thoughts and images in the forefront of one person's mind into that of the other. It should also be clear if a mental control curse is being applied to one of the parties, as that weakens their will and interferes with their intent activating the ritual.

“I suspect that Headmaster Dumbledore made Snape do something like this before he trusted him, though, because once contact is allowed, it is complete. In all ways. You know everything the other person is experiencing: emotionally, physically, and mentally – and vice versa.”

“I think I understand, Hermione,” Harry said. “But don't you mean Professor Snape?” Her stifled, snotty snort of a laugh answered whether she remembered his stories of her, Dumbledore, and McGonagall all correcting his disrespecting the Potions Master in another timeline. Those tales had seemed to help when she was practically in tears after the greasy git's horrible classes.

“S-stop cracking jokes, Potter!” she said, her voice less tense. “I need a steady hand for this next part!”

Wiping her nose on her sleeve, she glared at him. “Don't. Move.”

Bringing her finger to his head, she continued commenting on what she was doing. “This part is usually done by the, uh, by a man with his blood, but it doesn't seem gender linked, at least in my initial analysis. I really need to know more about spell building and Arithmantic relationships.” With
a quick twist, she left a mark of some kind on his head with her still-warm blood.

Sal took this moment to make his appearance from her right sleeve, running down her wand arm to sit on Harry's chest in one large, slightly heavy silver and black coil.

"I am sssorry about thisss, Ssspeaker," he said to Harry. "My Familiar, the Warm One, thinksss thissss isss the bessst way to ressstore the trussst between mateesss. After sshe dissscovered her mind, and possssssibly yourssss, were attacked sshe deessaisspered. I am honored to assssssissst her."

"I quite underssstand, Sssalazar," Harry replied in a quiet hiss. He felt Hermione relax a little more, her legs no longer threatening to squeeze the breath out of him. Shooing Sal off Harry's chest to one side, she took another dab of blood from her arm and pressed a large, perfectly round dot of blood to her own head. She then looked down silently at Sal, who presented his own head. She painted his angular cheeks with her blood, just under his eyes, then ran a single line down his scaly forehead. They both turned to look at Harry.

"Okay Harry, this is a call and response ritual," she said. "I can't force your responses or the spell fails, but neither can a curse. The words don't come out of a spell book, but they should be...nudged slightly by the magic of the ritual. Say what you want, what comes naturally, and it will work. And...and thank you for trusting me with this." Her face fell a little but she still kept her wand trained on him. Good girl. Constant Vigilance, and all.

"I want to get to the bottom of this as much as you do, Hermione," he said. "Let's get started."

Nodding, she set her shoulders and started waving her wand, describing a ritual space and cleansing it with the motions. She then surprised him by kissing Sal right on his scaly snout before starting the ritual chant.

"Know me and all I am, Harry James Potter," she said, voice unnaturally echoing with the magic. "Join with me for a short while so I might know you." The spot on her forehead started glowing, as did the marks on Sal's face. He assumed his mark was glowing as well. The air felt full, the moment pregnant with magic. He recognized his part had come.

"Hermione Jean Granger, I accept; in return, I offer myself, that you might know me." He had no idea why he said that, that way, but he meant it with all his heart. He trusted her like no one else, and so slowly dropped his mental barriers for her.

"So be it," she said.

She leaned over and shifted to hover her face fractions of an inch away from his. He could feel her breath on his lips and for one silently thunderous second, he thought she was going to kiss him to seal the ritual. For some crazy reason, he wondered what that would be like, and whether Sal would tell him. Realizing she was about be able to read that terribly embarrassing thought, he tried to drive away such ideas completely.

"Open your mind to me, Harry," she whispered as she pressed their glowing, bloody foreheads together. He braced himself as he felt her warm skin against his and her nose slid next to his and he was...totally unaffected. Nothing happened, then Hermione's eyebrows scrunched up cutely.

"What?" she barked in surprise. Harry held his breath. Did this mean one of them had been-

"Did you drop your own Occlumency?" he asked. She blinked then, to his surprise, cursed silently.

"Right, thanks Harry," she said, visibly relaxing out of her false persona and mental defenses. The "real" Hermione's soft brown eyes and worried face appeared for a second. Then, in a flash of wild
color and sensations, their thoughts were joined.

Lord Voldemort, Greatest and most Feared Wizard in the World, looked through his unwilling servant's eyes as the shivering man made his cold, pathetic way through the Forbidden Forest. Delving into the depths of that most Dark domain had been trying in this weakling's body, but he had also had several unpleasant surprises. It had been harder to find a unicorn herd than he'd originally expected, further delaying that plan, and a patrol of centaurs had almost found his servant, leading the sad little man to hide in a ditch like a dog.

Him, Lord Voldemort, hide from some idiot horse creatures? What a shockingly repellant idea. He was invincible and immortal, but for now he needed this fleshy puppet to fulfill his next plan. His weakness was becoming more and more trying, though, as the trip had been full of setbacks for his disappointing servant. Most surprising of all had been the swarms of giant spiders – almost certainly Acromantula, but they had not stayed around to look closer. He briefly wondered if the colony was related to the huge pet spider that half-giant fool Hagrid had been hiding, almost five decades ago. It seemed like the kind of foolish thing that disgusting idiot would do.

As his servant blasted a nest of screeching and flapping fairies out of his way, he considered the darkened woods. The Forbidden Forest was an enigma; deep, mysterious, and placed directly next to Hogwarts, it was full of virtually unique and dangerous creatures, ranging from the dangerous but Light, such as unicorns, to Darker creatures, such as uncontrolled inferi left over from forgotten wizarding wars and giant blood sucking vampire bats. None stood a chance against the Dark Lord, of course, but he risked damage to his fragile vessel. The fool's magic was all that he could call on in this state, so despite knowing spells of unspeakable power, he had to restrict himself to using those possible for mere mortals. With his brilliant mind, it was still sufficient.

He, Voldemort, undying Lord of the Dark, had personally come to the forest for something specific, a tool to aid him in his quest for the Stone. If was not his first choice, though. He only wished his current worthless host could give him access to his magical birthright as heir of Slytherin: Parselmouth, the ability to talk to snakes. With that magical genetic ability, an ancient Basilisk under Hogwarts would be his to command and Dumbledore could be easily distracted, running around trying to prevent an endless stream of blood traitor and Muggle-born student deaths.

However, his servant was simply a puppet and a nearly-powerless host, not a true body of his own flesh. The quivering fool certainly had not drop of the blood of Slytherin in him. His, the Great Lord Voldemort's own DNA was required for him to once again possess that Most Noble ability.

He supposed another Parselmouth's blood would work with some other Dark rituals to give him a new body, one able to use the powers of his ancestor once again. The principle of magical abilities and blood equivalence in Dark resurrection rituals was something he had worked out long ago, thanks to investigations into that corrupt Muggle world's knowledge of genetics.

That old fool Grindelwald had also worked with the German wizarding government on a study of Muggle and magical genetics, to link up with their own blood purity program. Their goal had been to make both stronger, but their methods were blinded by their weakness and obsession. Grindelwald's ultimate fate at the end of Dumbledore's wand and his sad little country's sad little fall from power were a stern warning what not to do.

No bargaining with Muggles, no crazy plans to share power in exchange for creating some perfect Muggle or wizard supermen. No, he would simply gain an invincible position of power himself. Then he would end the foolish, dangerous practice of allowing at least two more Muggles to know of the wizarding world for every new Muggle-born. Dangerous foolishness that, and Dumbledore and his allies certainly weren't going to stop it. Yes, safer to take a child from their parents as soon as
the Ministry's Magical Births and Records scrying department detected them, then foster them with a Pure-blood family to teach them their place in wizarding society. A much kinder, safer option than leaving them with those horrible Muggles for eleven years.

And also ban all marriages with Muggles, of course. Clearly such breeches of the Statute of Secrecy endangered everyone! That such nonsense was still allowed was- but that was for later. His only goal now was the Stone. That would bring his original body back, ready for his shade to reinhabit it and as strong as ever. According to some of his readings, possibly even stronger. That was the promise of the Elixir of Life.

But he was currently caught in an unfortunate and paradoxical situation. All he could do now was vaguely sense the emotions and hear the voices of snakes, most of his power lost with his body (which was, after all, the actual part of him that was magically related to Slytherin). If he had a strong familiar, he was sure he could communicate better with at least that snake. Perhaps that large magical green adder he'd been possessing in Albania, the one he'd forced Quirrell to bring with them...

She was nothing compared to Slytherin's snake, though. And the great serpent would have been the easiest way to get the Stone. But he needed the Stone to get his body, which would allow him to regain control of the great serpent. So this other, lesser plan would have to do.

At first he'd racked his incorporeal brain for ideas after dragging his servant's invisible, scentless, soundless body out of Gringotts, the supposedly impenetrable bank. That had been a complete waste of his time and talent, though it was not as hard as the goblins lead everyone to believe. For someone with the true power of the Mage, it was a simple task, even in a weak body such as he currently had.

After repairing his servant and reviewing his memories of the few last days, looking for anything he might have missed, he'd finally put two and two together. Bumbling Hagrid with the Potter whelp and the missing Stone from Dumbledore's vault. It was at Hogwarts now and the half-giant fool had snatched it from under his nose. So it wasn't surprising that another kind of lumbering pawn had been brought to mind as he recalled his servant's few known skills, among them a knowledge of the habits of trolls. This was the seed for his brilliant new plan. A mountain troll was now trapped and sedated in a ritually sealed clearing deep in the forest near the castle, its seasonal mate killed and reduced down for potion ingredients.

His servant would brew a simple but odoriferous mixture, formed from the scent of prey and the pheromones of his now-deceased mate in heat. Placed along a trail it would draw in the troll, straight as an arrow, directly to the lower passages of the castle, the gates of which his servant would sabotage and leave open.

Trolls could survive a long time without eating, but by the time the brute was released into the school on Samhain he would be almost insane from hungers of both kinds – all the better to distract Dumbledore while he, Lord Voldemort, recovered the key to his own resurrection and triumphant return to the Wizarding world. And if Quirrell somehow failed, the remotely triggered release of the troll and the innocent looking broken entryway wouldn't point to him, giving his sniveling servant another chance to gain access to the Stone.

He had thought long and hard about how his exit from the school would work, after a successful retrieval of the Stone. The obvious thing to do would be simply to disappear the same night. But there were other goals that could be served at the same time. Kidnapping Harry Potter was the first on his list.

Snatching Harry the day after retrieving the stone, taking advantage of all the confusion, would be easy enough and the child probably wouldn't even fight back if “Trusted Professor Quirrell” simply told the child to accompany him outside the castle grounds. After the resurrection ritual, he could
begin research into repairing the boy's odd magical illness, all while showing him the luxuries he had obviously never experienced – how those of the Blood of Atlantis, the Chosen Ones, the ancestors of the Mages of Ancient Power should live. That would be the first step in gaining the boy's trust. A good approach, one that only left Harry's Muggle-born friend as a stumbling block in his, Lord Voldemort's, grand plan.

Turning a bright orange flame on a large spider that had strayed too near, his servant stumbled from exhaustion as he hurried to return to the school before they were missed. Lord Voldemort had more important things to think about, of course.

Question was, to take the tiny Mudblood female with them, using her to keep Harry in line, or to simply feed the boy's despair by arranging for her horrible and untimely death before the attempt on the Stone.

The bookish brat was virtually inseparable from Harry and was an obvious emotional weak point. She was also clearly quite powerful – he wasn't blinded by Blood Purity nonsense as his followers were and believed him to be; in fact, her growing magical skills and palpable aura reminded him of his own youth and meteoric rise.

And if those quiet whispers of snakes he half-heard in the classroom when she was present were suggestive of her power, she might even share yet another rare gift with him. That intrigued him greatly, so he had obviously tried to search her mind. She seemed to have some natural defenses against mental probing, however, and also wouldn't meet his eyes. So the wandless, wordless, eyeless Legilimency he'd attempted (something he knew no other could even dream of) had sadly failed before he got more than vague emotions. If anything this defense, however feeble and untrained, only made her more interesting to him.

She was a Muggle-born, true, but separated from her Muggle parents and their world's endless depravities, she would be a useful pawn, one that could serve a dual purpose as both a hostage and as another witch of Beatrix's power (or even greater) for his Death Eater army. In time, she might even serve at his side, not as an equal but possibly as a trusted lieutenant. Perhaps, if she was in fact not truly a Muggle-born but a distant cousin of his from some squib line of Slytherin's descent, her blood could be used in an alternative resurrection ritual.

If he somehow failed to acquire the Stone, that is. It was good to go forward with multiple plans, all leading to his, Lord Voldemort's, ultimate victory.

Casting a Disillusionment spell on himself, Quirrell dragged his body through several dense thorn bushes to avoid yet another centaur patrol. Lord Voldemort did not need to feel the pain of his idiot servant's feeble body, so he simply turned off that sense, ignored the pathetic moans, and continued his planning.

All this was speculation, though. The girl's death, combined with Harry's removal from Dumbledore's influence, would certainly place the wizarding world's savior firmly and solely under his, Lord Voldemort's, control. He could arrange for something truly shocking, something that would happen right in front of young Harry Potter. Best of all would be a situation where the lad might have been able to save the girl, if only he were more powerful. Her dying screams of pain as her lifeblood spilled out on the floor would shatter whatever trust in the safety of Hogwarts or in Dumbledore protecting him Harry had acquired.

After that, his own promises to protect the lad and the doubt and guilt of his own abilities would seal his fate. A ritual to return the boy's magic would be the next step in subverting Harry to his side. Teaching him the true power of magic, the secrets of the Dark, and perhaps one of the lesser immortalities would bind the boy's loyalty to him, forever.
In the balance though, Lord Voldemort saw he could always kill the girl later if she became troublesome. Arranging a situation where it appeared that the Ministry, Dumbledore, or some other authority figures were responsible for her painful demise would be easy enough, and would still be almost as effective a lesson to manipulate the boy. Perhaps if their youthful relationship advanced...further, he thought with disgust, such a personal loss would be even more effective.

But that brought up another facet: what if she did have The Gift of Parselmouth – could he really destroy that, or would it be better to nurture it? Perhaps allow her to serve Harry in her...female way instead of turning her into an insane killing machine, like Bellatrix. Hmm, their children would surely have The Gift. In a few short decades he, the Immortal Lord Voldemort, would have a growing core of loyal Parselmouth servants, one without ties to either the wizarding world or the Muggles. Unlike those arrogant Pure-blood idiots, they would serve only him and his interests, their pride only in their loyalty to him.

The thought of those two children under his control, shaped in his image, one day standing loyally at his side – both James Potter's brat, fated to destroy him, and the Muggle-born witch, possibly the most powerful Mage born in half a century and deliciously eclipsing any of those arrogant, preening Pure-blood bitches – that was seductive, more so than any plan he'd had since his untimely “death.” And the promise of a line of powerful, Gifted servants birthed by her, formed from their combined genetic might? That was the perfect icing on the cake. Yes, he, Lord Voldemort would liberate them both from this festering hole of useless Muggle-lovers and teach them the true meaning of Power: service to him, and to the art of Dark Magic.

Dragging himself step by step up to the castle gates, his robes hastily repaired with the last remnants of his magical power, Quirrell looked forward to his master returning to his slumbers so he could clean up and rest at last. His limbs shook and he could barely stand straight, but he had to pretend that nothing was the matter for just little while longer. Lord Voldemort continued his musings, thankfully in silence.

Quirrell blundered into the Headmaster just inside the front doors of the castle, the shock nearly killing him. It was unusual to see Dumbledore out at this hour and the DADA professor was completely unprepared with excuses or any kind of cover story. The old fool however was distracted, fiddling with one of his watches, so he was able to hobble by without more than a grunt of greeting from his master's ancient foe.

Albus Dumbledore was confused, tapping the pocket watch monitoring Harry Potter's health with his wand. For some reason, it was now claiming that Harry was both perfectly fine and suffering from a cut to his right arm. His second right arm. Odd. Perhaps the charms needed work. He'd see Filius tomorrow and go over them with the small Professor and charms genius. It might be that he had missed some variable in his haste to put together the device, that horrible day that Harry Potter re-entered the wizarding world. It had been a decade since his last major Enchantment project and he'd ended up rushing it. The alternative was that Harry had somehow acquired another set of limbs, one of which he'd wounded. Which he would have said was virtually impossible, but given some of the Weasley Twins' pranks...was more possible the last couple of years.

Well, no matter. If there was any change for the worse, he could be there in an instant. It was most likely a simple tussle with his roommates and the injury strangely presented in his device wasn't even bad enough to warrant a trip to see Poppy. The poor boy's life obviously wasn't in danger and he was still in his dorm room, which according to the monitoring and alarm devices he'd activated and now kept on his desk, held only students safe in their beds. Jumping in to save the lad for no reason would only frighten him.
Maybe he would ask Minnie tomorrow to see what had happened. Yes, show the lad people cared but not smother him with pointless worry. That was the best approach. Having the most famous and powerful wizard around suddenly appear over his bed would be a shock the Harry didn't need. Answers could wait until morning.
Chapter 11

Harry Potter and the Witch Queen
by TimeLoopedPowerGamer

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter.

Chapter Eleven

Their arm suddenly ached with sharp pain (“-still hurts and he can feel it now, I should have learned a healing-”) from Their earlier ritual knife wound. They felt very, very odd. There was a weight on Their mind, something They recognized as similar to a light Legilimency probe. They could also see at the same time both a very wide and frightened pair of soft brown eyes and a coolly confident and striking pair of green ones.

They noticed They also felt both of Their bodies at the same time – one, paralyzed from the spell (“-stupid, stupid, how can he ever forgi-”) that...Hermione had put on...Harry's body earlier. Strange. It was hard for Them to think of having separate identities, even names, now that They were Joined. Senses overlapped awkwardly, some concepts seemed exaggerated, and there was some unusual background interference tickling at Their minds that They didn't understand. Thankfully, it was becoming easier to deal with every second. Like eyes adjusting to the bright glare of sunlight after a darkened room, They slowly regained both Their senses and the ability to focus.

There was the feeling of being under the sheets and blankets, of nightshirt on skin, all along with a skinny 12-year-old witch pressing down on Their unmoving form. It didn't hurt Them, it was merely a warm and heavy presence. They could also feel the body's heart beating a little fast and its steady breathing.

The other body produced the feeling of the soft, thick winter nightgown it was wearing (“-no you idiot, don't think about what you're wearing when he might be able to hear you! LA LA LA-”), the gentle movement of the other body breathing underneath it, and the blankets it was sitting on between them. One of Their hands, one of those belonging to the girl's body, still tightly gripped a smooth wooden wand handle. That one's breathing was slightly ragged and its heart was racing with panic barely contained. The left hand belonging to that body had run around the back of the other's head to hold Their foreheads firmly together, weaving its fingers into the other's hair for a better grip.
“This is really strange,” Harry said, not sensing anything over Their mental connection as soon as he started to speak. He felt a little distant for a moment longer, then They started sensing everything clearer again. Something had happened when...he spoke, pulling him partially out of Their connection, but it seemed fine now. Well, not entirely fine. They were growing increasingly upset. The source of that feeling was clear.

“Hermione,” Harry said firmly. Her body drew an abrupt breath but he didn't feel the connection to her retreat as far as before – in fact, those leaking and partially unconnected thoughts pressed down even harder and she started shaking (“-fouling this all up, and he must be angry, and I've certainly hurt his feelings terribly-”).

“It's fine, Hermione,” he interrupted quickly, still trying to pull back and communicate in a more normal way, but not yet resorting to Occlumency. He was beginning to be pulled into her panic while connected, so continued to try to speak out loud. “It'll be okay. I'm not mad. Just relax. Take a few deep breaths.”

Slipping back into the connection again, They took a lungful of air together. Both bodies then nodded in sync. Briefly, They thought about having long hair. It sort of weighed down one of Their heads in a not entirely unfamiliar way (“-of course, he's a boy and has never worn it long...would he like it if I cut-”). Once more, They found Themselves getting sidetracked.

Harry pulled back a little and spoke aloud again, “Maybe it would be easier to get through explaining what's going on if you said everything out loud until you needed the link for something. There seems to be some kind of mental squelch built into the spell to avoid shared thoughts interfering with what you're trying to say. At least, that seems to be how it works.”

As the connection finally retreated a little, he could hear a distant sort of hum from her, like from another room, then her eyes relaxed and she blinked a few times. “Of course Harry. That's a very good idea.”

The hum continued as she took another deep breath with her head still pressed to his, tickling his face as she exhaled. Her hand adjusting its grip on the back of his head and her trembling stilled. The connection slowly began to return again. He could still feel her wand pressed into his side, though, ready to stun him. He...no, They approved of Their continued caution.

Hermione then spoke slowly and clearly, like she'd rehearsed this part in her head (which she likely just had). “I think someone has modified both of our memories. I'm going to show you what happened to me and then we'll look through your memories for something similar, as well as checking both of us for other memory charms or curses. I can't trust even my own mind right now. You've got to help me do this, Harry.”

Instead of Their connection coming into focus again, shared senses grew fuzzy in an instant. Thoughts, both internal and half understood bits belonging to the other, skittered around like water on a hot skillet, making Them feel dizzy and more than a little sick.

“What's happening Harry?” Hermione asked in a panic.

“I don't know. Did you do something?”

“No! Did you?”

“No. Everything just suddenly went crazy. Maybe we should start over.”

Hermione groaned and looked about to cry. “Oh no! I can't, Harry. It took so much out of me to cast
This in the first place. It feels like I've run around the entire castle a dozen times. Maybe if we repeat
the incantation itself?"

"I'm willing to try anything," he said, closing his eyes to concentrate. Without the magic driving his
words, they didn't seem to come to him as easily. He had said something about giving himself and
sharing-

Then all the sickening, lurching wrongness went away and They were One again as if nothing had
happened. Confused, They swapped ideas at the speed of thought, racing through multiple
possibilities. Several minutes and hours worth of internal discussion later, They decided it was
something about what They had been thinking at the time throwing off the ritual. It did require
specific and free consent from both parties, and though They didn't remember thinking about
withdrawing from the ritual, maybe a stray fearful thought had been enough.

That made sense to Them, so They focused briefly on Their agreement and felt Their shared
happiness at the way things were going. Even better, emotional syncing seemed smoother now and
thoughts flowed more freely as identity became just a little more abstract.

They put down the wand, knowing it wasn't needed any longer. That was when They noticed one of
the two that was One, the part who was The Harry's mind, couldn't directly control the other's body
("-ossover of motor control for the magical sensory interface, but shared proprioception appears
unaffected, interes- "). Odd, it seemed They could label Their elements better now, even as thoughts
flowed together faster and smoother. The sensation was similar to telling which was the left and
which the right leg, if those had been given names for some reason.

Concentrating on what they needed to do, They cupped The Harry's cheek with Their hand and
closed The Hermione's eyes as They started recalling the troubling memories They wanted to share.
The spell book one of Them had read, and that They were now mutually using the knowledge of,
had said that full sensory memory sharing wasn't automatic but that proper intent would bring the
desired effect. It seemed to be starting to work, but it certainly wasn't easy or effortless.

Just as images began to come to Them, Their minds struggling as if trying to remember the answer to
an especially difficult test question, They noticed The Harry's eyes were still open and looking
fondly at The Hermione's face from this extremely close range. That interested Them, and They
focused more on that feeling, tilting both Their heads slightly to get a better look. The Harry's body
smiled as They took in The Hermione's face, now almost completely distracting Them from the task
at hand.

One set of eyes still closed, They saw The Hermione's body frown cutely ("-huh?") in concentration,
just like They always did when They were working on a problem. A part of Them wished that The
Harry would stop being so distracting. The Hermione's beautiful brown eyes ("-WHAT?") snapped
open, staring into The Harry's green ones.

The moment was smashed as images from The Hermione's memory of a dark, shadowy man
standing over a bed were thrust into Their joined Foremind. It blotted out the fragile moment with
feelings of panic and terror.

It was worse than They had expected. Their synced breaths came fast as cold, helpless emotions and
sweat-soaked panicked thoughts all came together to almost blank out Their minds. It was from The
Hermione's perspective, of course, and They fully shared her sight, her foremost thoughts, and her
emotions.

There was a stranger, a dark shadow that didn't belong, springing from nowhere as her eyes flew
open. Sleep had flown from her when some slight sound had alerted her; now there were primal feelings of sleeping interrupted and vulnerability as the curtains around her bed shifted slightly behind the figure. Panic. A thousand unspeakable scenarios ran through her already fully-awake second mind.

She was about to reach for her wand under her pillow- but no, too slow. His was already pointing at her, a whispered word on his lips, and then she couldn't move. In the memory, her mind raced faster than ever before in her life. A fraction of a second to swear that if she lived through this, she would find a way to keep it from happening ever again, no matter the cost.

This was worse than anything she had ever had happen to her before! (Was he a Death Eater?)

Why was school always like this, she just wanted to learn! (Was this her death?)

Harry must have felt like this before. (Would this man kidnap her, take her away from Hogwarts and Harry forever?)

She would never see Harry again. (Oh god, was this man going to, to do something to her?)

Please no, no, Harry- (No, please, not-)

A flash.

Then her mind was soft and,

(she was fighting, it was wrong, she would never surrender-),

but a soft haze fell over her thoughts and he was saying something and she would ignore the rat Scabbers who was a nice rat because he was just a rat and nothing about him was strange and anything she thought she saw him do wasn't important anyway,

(but it was so very important and she was failing Harry, which she had sworn an oath to never do this time, andshe-),

would only notice Scabbers to avoid that unimportant rat because she didn't like rats,

(and this must be a mental compulsion spell of some sort, a powerful one cast by an adult wizard, but she could-),

just forget about this because it was just a dream and she was falling asleep again and in the morning it would all be forgotten again.

(Rage! No, this was her mind, her fortress! A plan: store something away here in her magical mind with those senses and emotions most closely linked to memory...fear, smell!)

Fighting magical induced sleep, she took a deep sniff:

comforting girls dorm smell, ignore;

clean sheets smell, ignore;

her preferred shampoo and soap smell, ignore;

a filthy, terrible unwashed male smell (remember);

dirty robes and rat cage smell, (must remember, don't forget, don't fail him, remember, remember, remem-).

A dim flash.

She wanted to sleep more than anything, except...she needed to remember...

They dropped out of the memories. The Hermione's body was shaking again, much stronger this time but They would not withdraw back into Their individual, lonely minds. There was strength even in this shared shame and pain. They were not alone now. No words needed to be said. There
was a job to complete and They were brave enough to do it. The Harry must have his memories, emotions, and very magic inspected, his freedom of will determined. They must be able to trust Themselves again. Because They knew that shadowy figure now.

Pettigrew. They remembered him again. Everything he'd ever done. The Halloween betrayal They only knew from stories and one last horrible memory of the murder of a young family. A family They'd now never have a chance to know. Everything the Betrayer had ever done to The Harry and his friends in that other future time. More memories of a history They swore would never be again came quickly and easily now, only needing a thought to share.

They saw the rat's dishonorable end, alone and still trying to run in a snowy field somewhere in eastern Germany.

That future's Harry stood over a smoking body. His cold pleasure at finally avenging his family in some small way filled Them.

Looking over his shoulder, They saw his friends Hermione, Ron, and L--- looking on. His gaze was focused on the hard but beautiful woman Hermione had become and the small, tight smile on her face.

She amazed and also scared him with her drive and her nearly overwhelming power. He was a very powerful wizard himself, most likely his old Headmaster's equal in raw strength if not knowledge, but she seemed to have surpassed them in both fields. He was proud to have her at his side in this never-ending fight against Voldemort's evil. She was the one person he couldn't imagine winning this war without.

As for the others...as for Ron and...and-

A haunting, humming tune drifted in the background of the memory.

They regained focus again, returning to the present. Now They believed The Harry's story about that future more completely. It felt right and true, beyond a doubt. They were still glad that there had been continued caution, though. It pleased Them even as it was a source of minor shame that this hidden doubt had still existed. They could trust even more fully if only this could be cleared up.

Attention was now turned to The Harry's more recent memories, those from the first few days of school. One specific night was clouded, knotted up and hidden from Them on purpose. That would not be allowed. Their minds were Their own.

Focusing all of Their attention at the burr in The Harry's memories, They tried to tease apart the fog and tangles by force of will. The rat Pettigrew had done something to Their Harry and Their Hermione. The Betrayer had hurt Them. That would not be allowed.

Physical senses grew dimmer as They sank deep into the connection formed between Them and into Their Harry's mind. All was now emotion and thought and Their magic. There was not some perceivable alternate world here, some concrete shared vision in which they walked hand in hand, but merely a cloud of thoughts and dream-wishes shared in their minds. Magical intent and an unnameable, secret elemental source, that from which their wills and minds sprung, connected shared concepts and thoughts with a tenuous spiderweb of logic and reason.

Pulling and tugging together at the hidden memory, They demanded of Themselves more and more power to rip away the Knot in Their Harry's mind. Their senses were filled with magics – both that of the older, more refined, small and sharp, and that of the younger, barely controlled and raging like a burning forest.
They gripped at the Curse together, prying it apart slowly even as Their magic ached and burned at the effort.

A Latch slipped and another Forgotten, though not one of the Betrayer's, unlocked partially and swung open a crack. Memories leaked sloppily, as in dreams. Exotic incense invaded Their senses, something familiar but Forgotten.

They paused in confusion and started to look for this new presence in Their mind.

Soft singing, a woman rocked Them slowly. She sang a Song of Love and Defiance and the Music of Forgetting filled Their minds again. Their attention was gently directed away from that other Forgotten and back to Their true goal.

They were swept along with the Music. The other Forgotten wasn't important. They bore down together again, Their Hermione's magic thrown into Their Harry with reckless abandon, filling body and mind, giving strength and substance to their struggles.

Huge claws gripped the Curse tightly now, trying to crush it through sheer strength. But the Curse had been made by an adult wizard, with adult power and skill, and the Child's fury-born might was no match for it. Screaming out her frustrations in a titanic roar, she reared back and took in a huge breath, the thick, invincible scales on her chest flexing. Flames spat out from her toothy maw in a scorching howl, bathing the Curse in Burning Blue Dragonfire. The Curse glowed bright red and cracked, but it did not Break.

Naked but for a loincloth, his body covered in cuts and bruises, the Warrior now approached the Curse. Glaring with hate in his burning green eyes, he hefted his only remaining Weapon, a simple wooden spear with a sharp, well-forged steel head. He was tired and his entire body ached, but still he drew back his sinewy arms for a single, powerful, two-handed strike. His thickly muscled back arched, then flexed forward like a cracking whip. His arms, hips, and back moved in perfect sync, driving the spear into the Curse with terrific violence.

The force of the blow splintered the spear's simple wooden shaft, but the steel spearhead lodged itself deep into a crack in the Curse. Though his only weapon was destroyed, the Warrior would not give up. His Iron Will was unbreakable. Lifting a bare foot, he ignored the wooden fragments that remained from the broken shaft and drove his heel painfully into the spearhead's rounded metal back with one final blow, slamming it all the way into the Curse.

The pathetic, desperate little man's spell finally shattered like glass. They winced in pain as the shards that remained blew apart and scraped against both Their Harry's mind and his magic on the way out. A rapidly approaching headache was sharpy building, but that didn't matter now. They had won.

Something else Forgotten slammed shut and a Latch clicked again.

A hazy memory surfaced, much weaker than the other but clear enough.

Waking to a shadow, a flash like in the other memory, total paralysis, whispered words such as the rat is just a rat, ignore him, another flash, then forced sleep.

The memory was less detailed but was still filled with his anger and fear. Concern for a dear young friend and what would happen to her if he died were at the forefront of his mind. There were also thoughts for the safety of the rest of the world and other friends, both young and old, but most of what might have been his final moments were filled with thoughts of the bright guiding star of his life and her smiling face.
There was also another memory, a later one. Apparently the rat had gotten to Their Harry twice. Still, the other memory was unlocked, even if it was only muffled noises and a feeling of floating while someone whispered at him. All three events had been almost exactly the same. Though blurry, all were complete and apparently unmodified memories. There had been no other spells cast in any of the attacks. No mind controlling Unforgivables, no Dark charms other than a strong memory spell.

It was almost enough, but They had to be sure. The elder of the Two provided Them with information about the detectible mental and physical effects of mind control curses. That agreed with the old Auror manual's brief descriptions that They had recently read. It suggested that there were hints to look for, like pauses in action, emotional responses being muted, and magical auras corrupted and twisted by Dark spells.

They saw no evidence of anything like that in either of them. Thoughts raced free and memories were unclouded now, They had no missing time or unaccountable emotions, and They had just felt each others magic more clearly than ever before. With the exception of Harry's Dark curse scar, which was expected, Their auras were pure and untainted.

They rejoiced.

Snatching up Their wand, They flicked it precisely while muttering the counterspell to release Their Harry. There was then confusion and aching bodies tangled in the blanket still between Them as They toppled sideways, Their foreheads still pressed together and eyes squeezed shut on tear-stained faces.

Their arms, all four of them, wrapped tight as They lay next to Themselves. Meaningless comforting words played out in perfect stereo from Their mouths. It was impossible to stop shaking now and They were so tired, as if They'd just run a marathon. Relief and joy briefly smothered the sharp shared pain of an immense and growing migraine, but They couldn't rest yet. There were still plans that needed to be made.

Pettigrew would not be ignored ever again. Not now that They remembered. There were secret charms and magical items used to protect important government workers (the smart, skilled ones, like Mr. Weasley, and the vital but stupid, like Fudge) as well as for foreign VIPs (like the Delacour family during the Triwizard). They would eventually figure out how to acquire one of them. Both Hedwig and Sal and the other snakes could look out for Them for now. They would be safe. They would make Themselves safe, with magic and fire and an iron will that not even Unforgivables could bend.

They already had plans, now once again remembered. Ones to trap a rat and save an innocent man. To clear the name of the only family One of the Two who were currently One had ever known. Their last Shared thought before reluctantly separating and ending the spell was one of total agreement.

They silently swore that Vengeance would be Theirs.

Knowing that their cover was entirely and totally blown if anyone had been observing them at any time over the last ten or so minutes, Harry and Hermione sat on top of the blankets on his bed, forgoing everything but the basic silencing charms (which she'd already put up before the ritual). They were slowly recovering from their mental link, trying to sort their thoughts out again now that they were separate. It was a painfully lesser 'they' than before.

Though as excited to talk about his feelings now as when he really was eleven, Harry needed to figure out something to say that would make things less substantially weird between them. Hermione
couldn't even look at him yet, now that they had ended the ritual spell and retreated to opposite sides of the bed. He didn't exactly blame her. They'd just been inside each other's heads and, in some strange way, that had been quite...intimate. Not a word he was particularly comfortable to have anywhere near very twelve-year-old Hermione Granger.

Looking over at his best friend, he saw her hands were still shaking. Comforting her was his immediate thought, but after feeling her very senses like they'd been his own mind and body, it didn't seem appropriate to reach over and give her a comforting hug or even touch her at all. Hermione was a very tactile, very huggy person, but any reassurances would have to be verbal only, at least until things felt more comfortable. But he had no idea what he should say.

He was still shaking a little himself from adrenaline and the side-effects of a mild pain potion he'd taken. Just after coming back, it had seemed like a sensible precaution to stock up on those when remembering what Hogwarts had been like the first time. It certainly helped with the crushing headache. Thankfully now that Hermione was no longer in his head and feeling his own pains, she didn't need a potion herself.

Breaking that curse hadn't been much more damaging for him than a good long Legilimency session with Snape. He would be back to normal once the magical mental trauma naturally healed. His previous life had involved near constant assaults by Voldemort through his scar's connection to the evil bastard. It was something he was used to by now.

But there was still something...off. An odd empty spot in his thoughts where she had been. Missing was the almost instant consensus and the lightning fast second opinion that he'd grown used to over their brief exchange. It wasn't that bad, but he knew by now that he had a skewed idea of what that meant. Hermione did seem to be doing okay, but he had to reminded himself once again that she was not the seasoned warrior-witch he'd grown into adulthood with. Despite much evidence to the contrary, she was still just a little girl. A little girl who'd just had a horrible experience and had dealt with it better and more effectively than most adults Harry had known.

So that's what he told her. “You handled that well, Hermione. If we could have told Professor Dumbledore, I doubt he would have come up with anything better. I think you did the right thing.”

Her shoulders relaxed just a little and she stopped picking at the blankets in front of her. Placing her hands on her knees, she sat with her legs folded sideways on the bed, still not looking up. “We were right about the Imperius Curse? We're...we're not under it?”

“Yes, absolutely not.”

“I read somewhere about it not being detectible after it has been used, so...”

“That's true. If it had been used on us and the terms of the curse had already ended, what we were command to do completed, then no one could tell afterward. It also leaves no trace after being released on the death of the caster of the curse. That's how Death Eaters like Lucius Malfoy got away with claiming they were under the Imperius after everyone thought Voldemort died. But I'm still pretty certain we haven't had it cast on us. At least, not at school.”

“How can you be sure and how does that Unforgivable really work, anyway?” she asked, then continued without pausing to wait for an answer. “The books on the Unforgivables in the library, at least in the non-restricted section, mostly read like Ministry propaganda pieces. How can we know how to protect ourselves and others from it if they censor that information? All those books were allowed to say was 'Don't cast it. Very bad spell. Go directly to Azkaban. Do not pass Go. Do not collect 200 Galleons.' That sort of thing. Useless. Honestly! How do they expect anyone to defend themselves without more to go on?”
Harry almost smiled. Hermione couldn't be too shook up if she was back to endless questions again. He was only surprised she wasn't taking notes for extra credit in Defense. Though asking Voldemort for that might be too much even for her. “The way it was explained to me during the war is that the caster gives a single instruction, one the victim has to understand, and then, unless they resist, they are forced to carry out that order to the best of their ability.”

“So if you forced Goyle to do your homework...”

He nodded. “Big mistake. They might do better than they think they can, pushing themselves to the limit, but they can't do the impossible. As for detection, there is a subtle taint on someone's magical aura that can be read while the curse is active. Assuming you have a way to do that. Most of the time, security people can't check for it, as those magical scans are both invasive and very personal in nature. Similar to, err, to what we just did.

“That is one of the reasons the curse is so illegal, it is very hard to detect when someone is under control. Most common active mental magic can be detected with any number of common curse revealing spells, and people under them react oddly in some way. Some powerful magicals, most likely including the Headmaster himself, are said to be able to detect those lesser magics without even a spell. Not Imperius, though.”

“But Harry, how do we know someone didn't use it on us and the order has already been completed?”

“Well,” he said, “we'd still remember doing whatever it was.”

She frowned. “Then our inability to remember anything unusual means we are likely okay? Assuming another, more complicated scheme hasn't been enacted on us?”

“Most likely,” he said. “Obliviation, which is technically illegal for anyone other than Ministry assigned personnel to use, is unlikely. Unlike Imperius, such violations on magicals can be easily detected if someone looks close enough at a victim's memories. That's why Lockhart only uses it on people no one will ever check.”

Hermione's eyes narrowed, and he quickly continued before getting sidetracked once again. “It is especially visible to detection spells soon after its use and only gradually fades with time.

“Pettigrew would have to have cast it on us recently, and separate from his other attacks. And we, err, were rather close to each others memories, so we likely would have noticed something wrong. Add to that the fact that while Obliviate is relatively easy to cast on non-magicals,” Hermione glared at him at that, but he continued, “it is very hard to cast on magicals and magical creatures. They have a natural resistance to it, one that scales with personal magical power. The best defense against the rat right now and him maybe using that spell on us is Sal and the other snakes. He is afraid of them, and for good reason.”

They both looked over at her familiar, still coiled by the side of the bed. He nodded slowly at them, then lay his head down again.

“Good, I just wanted to be certain,” she said thoughtfully. “I deduced that the rat can smell snakes. That's why he hasn't tried to apply the charms on me since that first week. It is also why I know he isn't in the dorms right now. I asked Sal to get his friends to hang out in here all day.”

“Oh. Uh, please thank them all for me Ssal,” he said, turning again to the magical adder.

“Mossst welcome, Ssspeaker. I will tell my sssisssstersss ass well,” said a new serpentine voice from
under the bed. Sal snickered his open-mouthed snake laugh and closed his eyes, resting his head on his coils but still periodically sniffing the air with his tongue.

Hermione smiled over at Sal. She looked a lot calmer now. Taking a deep breath, she said, “My magically protected sensory memories triggered in my extended mental space when Ronald was cleaning out his disgusting rat cage in the common room the other day. I think Seamus complained to a Prefect about it. The spell was wearing off anyway though, as the rat hadn’t been able to recast it again on me like he did with you.

“Sal and the others usually stay in my dorm room at night, so the rat couldn't get close. After realizing what was happening, and...well, once I took a few minutes throwing-up my dinner in the girl's bathroom, I spent the rest of the night working apart the remaining magic of the memory charm that rat put on me. It was much less well formed than yours, likely because of my special...brain situation. So, that's how I remembered what happened. I'm worried about Sal though, especially if Pettigrew gets impatient with a snake hanging around me and my room.”

“We should be able to make all of the snakes safe,” Harry said after thinking for a moment. “They should hide, just not in obvious locations in your dorm room. I can tell them to keep hidden and stay away from any possibly poisoned prey or food left lying around in the castle as well. We'll have to make sure to feed them only secured food from sealed and protected sources, or stuff common to all the students. Maybe stuff directly from the kitchens.

“When they're not with us, if they keep to the secret pipe passages they should be safe. All those passages that the basilisk used... Will use? Anyway, those will work fine for them getting around. I think some of the older Slytherins actually have exemptions for pet snakes as well, so they won't be treated as pests or anything even if a teacher accidentally spots them. And no one will try to Obliviate them even if they know about them. I'm not sure that would even work. So they can warn you even if someone does something to you that you can't remember.”

Hermione frowned in thought. She nodded, then started looking nervous again.

“You can ask me anything, Hermione,” he said reassuringly. “I know this has been really strange...”

Biting her lip a bit, she finally said, “Harry, about that memory. The one from...after the rat died...”

“I can’t really tell you about that,” he interrupted quickly. “It likely won’t happen again anyway. Those other people were my friends but, as I said before, they deserve a kind of privacy.”

She nodded, staring at her bare feet poking out from under her nightgown.

“I wasn't going to ask about them,” she said in a small voice, “though...I'm sorry, but I got their names from your mind by accident. Now I understand why you're trying to include Ronald in our study sessions. Which is fine, he's okay I guess. Most of the time. I don't know a Luna, though. And that's not short for anything... Maybe she's in a different house... Or she's in a different year, maybe not at school yet.”

Harry sighed. Hermione held her hands up off the blanket in mock surrender, then folded them in her lap again.

“Was that...” she started, then hesitated. “Was that before I, you know, turned evil?” Tears were now collecting in her huge brown eyes.

“Hey now,” Harry said with a frown, “you didn't really...as I said, that version of you just made some bad mistakes. It was...complicated.”
She was still sniffling, clearly waiting for more. He sighed again. “That was long before the Bargain. The four of us were great friends, all looking for ways to fight Tom Riddle together.” She nodded jerkily, then frowned.

“What I...what I really wanted to ask about,” she stopped, then tried again. “Did I...did the adult me in the future really look that cool and, and beautiful?”

Her face was scrunched up and she was blushing.

Remembering the black combat robes, Auror-class enchanted combat body armor, and black dragon-hide boots they’d all been wearing back then, he chuckled. “I've always thought you were both pretty and pretty cool, Hermione.”

She blushed even deeper.

“But yeah, we all thought we were superheroes or something. Dressed the part, too. I'm not sure we ever really did any good, though. Not in the long run. It wasn't long after we caught up with the rat that...that we went our separate ways.” They both sat quietly again for a while. Hermione sniffed wetly a couple of times, then wiped her nose on her sleeve.

“I...I mean she had her hair natural, though. You know, all frizzy. Didn't she know the same charms I do?”

Harry frowned in thought. “I remember she did, or similar ones, but she almost never used them. Asked her about it once, after London. She said it didn't matter anymore. I don't know what she meant, but she usually kept it like that, just clean and tied back.”

Harry could almost see Hermione processing that, her eyebrows scrunched up and her nose wrinkled while she chewed her lower lip in thought. He kept quiet, knowing it wouldn't help to interrupt. After a while she suddenly relaxed, blinked twice, then glanced up at him briefly before quickly looking away. Shaking her head, she started poking the blanket with one finger.

“What can you tell me about that spell?” Harry finally asked, searching for another subject. “I've never run into it before. Much better for that sort of thing than any I know of. What's it called?” She perked up a little, then poked at the blanket again, not looking at him. Harry simply stared at her, knowing she'd give in eventually. She couldn't avoid sharing information like that, it simply wasn't in her nature.

“I don't want you to freak out, Harry,” she started, never a good sign. “It's called, err... I found it...”

“Look, I know it was a blood ritual,” Harry said. “A minor one, but still – the Ministry doesn't like those. It didn't seem obviously Dark, so it can't be that bad right? You know I'm okay with that kind of magic unless it could hurt someone.”

Hermione gulped and shivered a little, then nodded, took a deep breath, and tried again. “I had seen it weeks ago, but only remembered it after I discovered what happened to me the day before yesterday.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “That's why you were so tired and weird all through class the last two days. You almost fell asleep in History of Magic once.”

He grinned. “I should have been checking you for evil diaries after that, shouldn't I?”

“Not. Funny. Potter,” she said, while also suppressing a smirk. “Anyway, when I was in a panic, wanting to work out a way of checking you for mind control spells, I remembered it again. It was in
the back of an old homemaker's charms book, one of those that you bought for the low-powered
house guarding charms and other warding rituals.”

She hesitated, then mumbled, “That particular section though was on, uh, marital aid spells.”

“...what?” Harry said with growing horror.

Hermione scrambled to keep talking, as if enough words would make this less mortifying to be
discussing. “Well, you do know that arranged marriages used to be, well, a thing in the magical
world? Much more recently than in the mundane world. Really disturbing what that says about
magical society, and-”

Harry coughed lightly, interrupting her.

“Err, right. The ritual spell...” She sighed then slumped in thought, rocking back and forth a little.
“Well, let me set some context for what I'm trying to explain. Imagine this: It is 100 years ago in
Magical Britain. You're a 14-year-old pure-blood girl, schooled in the magical arts at Hogwarts since
age eleven.” Harry's face twisted up in confusion but Hermione ignored his obvious discomfort with
her thought experiment.

“I've read all about this period, you know – from, uh, from library books in my spare time,” she
explained quickly, starting to really get into her scatterbrained but very eagerly delivered lecture.
“After I finished reading through Hogwarts, A History once, I started on British magical society's
history and culture, trying to, ah expand my horizons and get to know the political lay of the land so
to speak, and even though there isn't a class on it per se, I thought that- Uh, so I found that education
is one very necessary bit of culturally enforced gender equality in magical Britain's upper class, both
then and now. Great skill in magic is expected of all powerful pure-blood witches (and they are, by
tradition, all expected to be powerful).

“So again, imagine: it is 100 years ago in Magical Britain, you're 14, and you've now just been
introduced to the person you're going to marry, likely on the very day of your wedding. You couldn't
hope to choose your own husband (or even whether or not to marry at all) before the coming of age
in the magical world at seventeen, and even after that, exercising any personal choice could have
required you eloping and being expelled from your family with no belongings or even a last name –
you'd get the same for refusing to marry, even as an adult. So you're not really happy about this
arranged marriage, but you're not in a position to do anything about it because of the horrible,
backward, sexist medieval patriarchal society you live in, and you sort of expected something like
this to happen.”

Harry ran a hand over his face and tried to get a handle on his anger and disgust, which were
currently barely winning out over his worry and confusion in his mind. He had vaguely known such
things happened at one time, but it wasn't good that it was related to this ritual they'd both just done.

His temper hadn't gotten him in trouble yet in this timeline, though, and he planned to keep it that
way. He certainly wasn't about to start taking his frustrations out on little Hermione. She was just as
distressed by the whole thing as he was, if not more. And no matter how much he wanted to yell at
her about using strange and powerful blood rituals from...from a sex manual, he wasn't going to start
an argument over this now. One she would probably win anyway.

Dragging his attention inward for a moment, he was a little surprised when his Occlumency seemed
to come to him easier this time, even though he was already starting to get rather upset. The small
magics of the discipline slid over his thoughts, cushioning him against his emotions like a big pillow
and steadying his mind. This was different from having to be dragged into place by a supreme force
of will, as was usual. He shook his head, reluctantly trying to focus on Hermione's continuing
“-and he's most likely close to your age, possibly even still in Hogwarts himself. As most such
arrangements weren't made for obscure political reasons but for joining two families, usually for
pure-blood breeding reasons, he most likely won't be three times older or something, though he
might already be finished with Hogwarts.”

She looked disgusted herself, but continued. “Now, uh, think about your, err, your wedding night.
This might, revolting as it sounds, take place here at Hogwarts itself, in one of the currently
completely unused married students’ quarters. I think they currently use them as storage rooms but,
but that isn't relevant. For this historic example, it doesn't matter.”

She waved her hands aimlessly a bit then pressed them together and shoved them back in her lap.
She continued in an even greater rush, her sentences starting to run together a bit as they usually did
when she was nervous. “The point is, though you haven't done accidental magic since before you
went to Hogwarts, right now you are really scared and really, really unhappy and even feeling
physically threatened and it is as likely now as at any point in your life that your magic will act out
violently, you see – this is the perfect situation for accidental magic to happen.

“Now, maybe your new husband isn't such a bad sort, but you are being forced into this and, despite
it having been a different time and culture, though disturbingly, not that distant or different, as some
people alive today might still be in one of those marriages, it is still very, very close to just being
rape.”

Harry winced but Hermione didn't appear to notice. Finally taking a breath, she seemed to try to say
something several times before continuing. “I'm...not sure if you're aware, but sexual assault is rare in
the magical world. Accidental magic striking out at a rapist doesn't require the use of one, but even
the poorest housewitch or manual laborer has a wand of some sort, even if it isn't an Ollivanders
original creation.”

She paused again, a thoughtful look passing over her face as she drifted off subject a little. “It has
occurred to me that the magical world is an interesting study in gender power balance in a heavily
armed society. No one has tried to disarm all witches as a group in a long, long time. A pure-blood's
wife or daughter not having a wand is like suggesting that they married a Muggle or a squib, or have
children who are such, making that an oddly equitable social faux pas. This brings to the magical
world's treatment of woman's rights an odd mix of almost modern respect and equality and a kind of
chauvinism that has been outdated for centuries. But back to my example.

“You're scared, you're magically just as powerful as your husband, and he isn't allowed to simply use
spells to force you to...accommodate him, as that is both illegal – you see, despite the arranged
marriage, you have to formally 'agree' to it – and though you don't have much choice, forcing you to
do...that would be impractical anyway for several reasons. After all, the very next day he'll have to
deal with you having a fully functioning deadly weapon.”

Though she didn't notice it, the same cold look briefly passed over them both as Hermione
continued, “Now your husband's family doesn't want to lose a son to 'accidentally' having his, err,
genitals magically displaced three feet to the right while trying to force himself on you, an unwilling,
frightened, trained witch. Nor do they want him mysteriously poisoned some time later by an
undetectable agent mimicking a heart attack, say a potion magically switched into his wineglass one
night.

“So some pure-blood families used to teach this ancient spell (still do for all I know). The... the ritual,
borrowed from Magical India (another society with the upper classes arranging marriages), allows
the couple to come to, well, an accord of sorts. It functions as an instant way of gaining real, lasting
trust between two strangers. A magical way to share experiences and thoughts, to see what the other person knows and feels. A way to let him see, to force his perspective to your own, to make him face your experiences and concerns, maybe allowing you both to come to some agreement that leaves this hypothetical you feeling less violated in this horrible theoretical situation.”

She paused again and licked her lips nervously, but being Hermione Granger meant you couldn't censor information from a lecture, so she stumbled ahead. “Also, uh. You were expected to...err, possibly renew the spell multiple times over the night to, to complete the, uh, act under it as well. Which is...the books...it is reported to be an...intense shared experience. Ah, that would be a sort of, uh, another reason not to, to murder the new spouse forced on you, I guess.”

Hands twisted together and blushing tomato red, she rushed on to her next point. “I didn't know for sure if it would work right on us, as we're a little younger than it is mentioned being used in – the ritual that is! Not... right, uh, what I read was about older people, but we're likely the right age, as Hogwarts First Year magicals are considered okay as a lower-limit for safe magic use in general, so it made sense so long as I could power the main ritual anchor, and there are not physical effects, so... so, as I've got about the same magic levels (though not skills or spells, of course) as an average Hogwarts graduate already, I thought it would be safe...so that's what happened.”

Harry stared at her in shock. Hermione was blushing fiercely and chewing her lip nervously, but she was also looking defiantly back at him, waiting for his response. He suffocated his anger at the situation deep under fluffy Occlumency pillows, ignored the numbing shock of the whole thing, and tried to think clearly.

“That's brilliant, Hermione,” he finally said, always a good start (and always true). “I'd have never thought about using that spell that way, even if I'd heard of it before. How did you even find out about it, though?”

She gulped and blushed even deeper somehow. “Well, uh, some of the smaller book you grabbed weren't actually technically history or spell books. But I still found references in one that lead me to another of your spell books, once I understood the subject. Which is part of the reason I sped through Hogwarts, A History so fast, to get more context...”

Harry frowned and raised dark eyebrows in response.

“They were, well, those books I found in your trunk were,” Hermione said, shrinking at his expression, “uhh...some moderately historically accurate...uh...erota?”

Eyes wide, Harry was now blushing as deeply as she was.

“I...I'm so sorry, I had no idea those were in there!” he said in a panic. “I just choose books that sounded like they were on spells, and those must have been in with some of the others I picked up in a hurry from the ratty bargain shelves.”

He winced already in anticipation of the response, but still felt he should bravely add, “Ah, so you shouldn't really be-” Hermione's scorching glance alone shut that sentence down cold.

“If you dare to try and tell me what I may and may not read,” she said hotly, “after I have already, with my parents' permission I might add, finished auditing first year university anatomy and autopsy pathology classes, with full textbooks and videotaped demonstration addendum, then you are sadly mistaken Mister Potter.

“When I was 10 years old, before I knew about Hogwarts or being magical, I was starting on a very advanced and fast track indeed. I already have the beginnings of an early medical student's
knowledge of the human body. This includes those parts mentioned in sloppy prose in the books which you so object to me reading.”

This was all news to him. Unfortunately, through some odd quirk of musculature and random nerve firings, his mouth still opened again and attempted to form words immediately after that.

“I have also already read extensively of French Renaissance and 18th century erotic poetry,” she interrupted, chin raised high, a triumphant look on her face. Her words were clipped and perfect, as if speaking to an ungrateful N.E.W.T.s level class that was already half-dozing, but the burning in her eyes was clearly not that of her Occlumentic shield personality.

Harry stared blankly at her, mouth hanging slightly open.

“In the original French, of course,” she added, brow crinkling a little at his expression of pained dismay. There was an odd tickling in his mind, something he was just now noticing.

“As also with the expressed permission of my parents,” she said with growing confusion and eyebrow scrunching, taking another guess at his problem. “French isn’t that hard to learn!”

Harry still had a freshly-bricked look on his face but kept silent, wondering what was going on.

“The subject interested me and my parents naturally supported that!” she finally stated, folding her arms in a huff and rolling her eyes. Her blush was once again no longer under control, betraying that blasé explanation.

Harry closed his mouth with a snap. Commenting was dangerous. He also tried hard not to simply close his eyes and sigh deeply. He felt very off-balance, and it didn’t entirely seem to be his feelings. But this was something he was used to from his previous timeline and Voldemort’s frequent forays through his cursed scar link, the Dark Lord dancing on his very emotions with spiky boots. This seemed to be something similar. Sadly, Hermione was still talking, not apparently having noticed what was happening.

“These 20th century Magical British books were...quaint and vanilla in comparison,” Hermione continued ruthlessly. “For example, they were entirely between married couples. That meaning just a man and a woman, apparently, and not even featuring a secret lover. Both variables the mundane French writers expanded on both numerically and combinatorially, on gender and marital fidelity issues. One of the features of the British magical writings on, on the subject, however was the use of this spell, and its slightly, err, romanticized side-effects.”

Sighing deeply, he ground his eyeballs into their sockets with their own closed lids. Harry gripped his knees tightly, trying to block out his knowing of all that with a sudden blast of accidental magic. Which of course didn't work. It never did. He was still feeling a little angry, and also confused, embarrassed, and indignant. The last was obvious Hermione’s emotion, though he wasn’t sure about the others.

“Calm down,” she scolded. “The topic was sex, Harry. Not violent Satanic rituals. Those books won't somehow destroy my fragile, innocent young girl-mind. Anymore than has already occurred from unrelated events. Though Magical Britain seems to class them similarly, based on where you found those books. The suggestion being they are equally evil, that is. The rituals and sex. Not my innocent young girl-mind.”

“Though now that I think about it-” she said, trailing off. Her righteous bravado was starting to crack, as was her didactic technique and oratorical quality (and why was he using such big words in his head?), but she wasn't retreating into her shell as usual. Instead, she simply bulled ahead,
discomfort clear but disregarded.

“Anyway, they really were quite tame books,” she continued. “I'm not sure why you're so upset (though, why do I know)... And I've read far more graphic. I've seen more explicit in movies and on TV. In tabloids, for that matter. The only thing my parents really object to is extreme violence. For example, when I asked, they took me to see an experimental French romantic film without question, but they still don't like for me to watch American action movies. Too violent, they say.

“In fact, my descent into such brutish behavior, as evidenced by my reactions to both the Weasley's surprise dorm inspection and my own just completed assault on you (no Harry, there is no other word for it), would worry daddy far more than my rapid mastery of unnatural forces or the questionable temporal-dynamic nature of my best friend, who is also a boy. In my expert opinion, none of those are even close to rising to the same relative scale of worrying for him as my accidentally finding quite frankly amateurish pornography in your trunk, especially as it led directly to a way to better recover and protect myself from a magical threat against which they couldn't possibly assist me.”

She smiled a pained little smile and reached out as if to pat his hand. But she ended up pulling back at the last moment, patting the blankets just in front instead. “If it matters, I believe you didn't intentionally purchase those. If for no other reason than because I doubt you've really fully physically entered puberty yet, err, at this time, and would in any case, based on what I've read and heard about boys, have attempted to hide it and limit my access to its location. Thank you for that, by the way. The access. I do so love rare and unusual books. As I'm sure you know.”

Hermione looked at Harry's red, pinched face with a bit of worry. “I can give the books back, of course.”

“No, no,” Harry said faintly. “All things considered, you seem better able to...explain the situation if you were found with them.” Hermione looked slightly satisfied with that answer, then she frowned again.

“You aren't mad at me for something, are you?” she asked with more than a little worry in her voice. Harry very, very carefully didn't sigh again.

“Of course not,” he said, looking her in the eyes with great effort. “I just...forgot what it's like, being around you being you. I could never be mad at you for that. Also, there is something...even with Occlumency...”

Hermione winced almost imperceptibly. Harry's eyes narrowed. She tilted her head slightly, looking him straight in the eyes, but hesitantly. He looked back firmly. Her eyes widened suddenly, and she sat up straighter again, almost smiling.

“So you see I'm not really mad at you. But have you been noticing...that?” Harry asked, vaguely waving between them.

“Yes.”

“Seems to only work for emotional issues, though. And not very well. A weak connection, if anything.”

“You obviously didn't pick up on my detailed explanation of something factual before I stated it out loud.”

“So, what?” he asked with a shake of his head. “I'm feeling what you do still? Like during the
“Similar,” she said, rubbing her arm through the sleeve of her gown with one hand. “I have some ideas, but it doesn't appear to be very strong. More like a vague, floaty emotional impression. Eye contact does make it clearer.”

“We should go to Madam Pomfrey if it gets worse.”

“Agreed. But it might just be a side-effect that wasn't stated in the book. And many uncomfortable questions would be asked if we had to tell someone about...about this. We should wait and see what happens.” They sat silently, staring into each other's eyes, poking at this odd new feeling. It didn't fill that small void in Harry, but the sense of emptiness was becoming less obvious. He could faintly feel her start to settle down emotionally, maybe finally convinced that everything really was going to work out.

“So,” Harry said, after they spent an odd couple of minutes that way. Hermione blinked sleepily at him, a contented smile on her face as she swayed slightly to one side.

“So,” he repeated, Hermione dragged herself back from wherever she'd gone, but still looked very sleepy. “I now remember my plan to take care of our rat problem, as you know. But looking at things again, it's clear I'll need your help for it to work. If you're willing.”

With sudden focus she nodded grimly. “Of course, Harry. The rat won't get away with this.”

“Good. Now, I think it's time for bed. You're falling asleep sitting up.”

She nodded and awkwardly leaned over to get Sal back on her arm. “Right Harry. I should...need to try to get at least a little sleep tonight.”

“Time to go, sssisssster,” Sal hissed to the snake under the bed as he crawled up Hermione's sleeve. “Sssspeaker, another of our ssssisssstersss is keeping watch from jussst outssside, on the window ledge. The old ssstonesss on the tower are climbable. For usss.”

Harry nodded at the black adder, who bowed in return. Stumbling to her feet, Hermione continued to babble, weighed down by her snake and listing slightly to one side. She paused while the snake under his bed crawled up her leg. “And I can't sleep here. No. Need to sleep in my own bed. Because...that's where I sleep. Not here...”

Harry watched as she shambled sleepily through the bed's curtains. Flopping back down, thoroughly exhausted mentally, he wondered if he'd get any more sleep himself. Looking up at the ceiling, he saw Hedwig still perching on a tall bedpost. It was where she'd been during the entire ritual, watching over them and the rat.

“What am I going to do now, Hedwig?” he asked softly.

His familiar blinked slowly at him, then turned her head to look around in both directions in that impossible, neck-ache-causing way owls loved.


Hedwig barked softly and gave him a sad look, then spread her wide wings and flew off, most likely to get some more sleep herself.

“Yeah, me neither,” Harry whispered to himself.
Not knowing he had been discovered, Wormtail was content over the next two weeks to sleep away most of the day and all night in Ron's cage, coming out to lazily eat snacks that Ron fed him but otherwise just lying around all the time. Harry knew this was most likely a side effect of being transformed so much. It took a lot of magic to maintain, and living like a rat wasn't a healthy thing for a human to do for that long. Most likely sleeping all the time was the only way he could keep up the Animagus transformation. It was certainly safer, and that was what he knew was the primary motivation behind Pettigrew's cowardly actions.

Tucked away in their improved and massively enchanted pillow fort in a corner of the common room behind a sofa, Harry and Hermione had been discussing their new security threats and the magical world's current political situation.

“I still can't believe that idiot could break into the girls dorm,” Hermione said, shaking her head in disgust. “A correctly done Obliviate and I might never have been the wiser. The Confundus Charm he apparently used was really weak as well. It didn't take me long to figure it out with Sal's help, and I noticed it broke immediately when you remembered him. Which makes sense, if the Imperius really doesn't work on you. But I likely would never have checked myself for missing memories if he'd used a stronger curse.”

“He's a coward, Hermione,” Harry reminded her, “and he didn't want to do more than he had to. Using Confundus Charms on Ron's friends and family meant minimal risk. Compared to that, the memory charms he used to cover that up were much harder to cast and significantly more complex, but it was still very straight forward to use. Perhaps it was a specialty of his, as horrible as that sounds.

“I'd guess he was using that combination on the entire Weasley family for years, though, as Obliviating magical children is even more complicated than with magical adults, especially repeatedly. A single misstep and he'd have been found out by sending a Weasley kid or someone else in Gryffindor to St. Mungo's with mental spell damage.”

Hermione looked very thoughtful (even for her). “Do you think maybe he was concerned about hurting someone?” she asked slowly.

“Well Hermione, he is a murderer, a pure-blood supremacist, and a marked Death Eater. But he's also afraid of conflict and the consequences of his actions. He's not some Dark magic obsessed maniac and he doesn't like to do anything drastic unless he's absolutely cornered. So maybe he didn't really care about the mundanes on the street he killed while escaping from Sirius in a panic, but maybe he actually does have moral objections to doing something that might risk hurting even a mundane-born unnecessarily.”

“Well, it doesn't really matter,” she added, shuffling her papers back together. “We'll work out a way to get him put away forever.”

Hermione ran a simple locator charm again, finding it still pointed in the direction of the cage up in Ron's room. “But I do think we should take care of the traitor sooner rather than later. The rat messed with my mind and I still have trouble sleeping at night in the dorms, knowing he was creeping around there.”

She was poking the back of one of the chairs forming a wall in their Wednesday night blanket fort. Everyone was allowed to stay up late that night, because a curfew two or three hours earlier was basically pointless and would be ignored by most of the students anyway.

“You've got Sal looking out for you now,” Harry reminded her. “He won't let anything happen, nor will the others. And I've got one of the snakes lurking near my dorm every night.”
Hermione nodded but she was still obviously upset.

“We need to wait,” he said once again. “We need to set the stage for the political side of getting my godfather freed before trying to introduce new evidence in his case by exposing Pettigrew. Getting the DMLE head Madam Bones and also Minister Fudge at least neutral toward the idea first is critical unless we want to risk Fudge just disappearing him as an embarrassing problem.”

“I know, I know. I just...it's really creepy.” A shiver went her entire body. “And seeing him crawling around on Ronald Weasley all the time. Ugh. I'm just thankful you got the rest of your roommates to agree the rat needed to stay in his cage at night and during meals, at least. I'm not sure how you can stand it, being in the same room as that...that animal, especially while you sleep.”

Harry sighed. “I'd crawl through broken glass naked if I thought it would save Sirius. I'm going to do this right. Sirius will be a free man and Wormtail will be dead or in prison. I can't let anything jeopardize that. My biggest worry is the rat smelling something's wrong and bolting, but it looks like he's taking advantage of his new, mostly-caged status to avoid both the snakes and our attention. He hasn't tried charming us again, so maybe he thinks reduced contact means he doesn't need to recast his memory spells.”

“As long as we don't do anything suspicious he shouldn't suspect anything. We're just little kids, after all. Sal will make sure the snakes don't spook him. They aren't as, well, responsible as he is but they'll listen to him.”

“Good. Now we just need to use Fudge's desire for popularity to our advantage, maybe along with my fame. Assuming I can keep the magical world from hating me for a few more months.”

“You should start talking to some of the other students soon, including the ones in other Houses,” she said. “Expanding our study group will be a good excuse to expand your contacts. I'll focus on laying the groundwork for the political side. I've started working on a list of people in the Wizengamot and Ministry, those who'll need to be swayed to our side. As you originally planned, my first push will be commenting favorably on Fudge's less contentious and stupid policies through a series of letters to the editor, owl posted anonymously from Hogwarts to the Daily Prophet. I've got a subscription and have started reading it every day.”

She rolled her eyes, looking disgusted. “That paper is so vapid and empty of substance that letters from ‘A Hogwarts Student’ will definitely draw their attention, especially when people assume it is from a bright and ambitious pure-blood Seventh Year Slytherin student, not a mundane-born First Year. Most people aren't heavily involved in politics in the magical world, so some ambitious student getting national attention should also draw Fudge's. The rest of the list, at least those without relatives at Hogwarts, will be harder to contact. But that's your job, Mister Famous.”

“I think Amelia Bones is already at least neutral to our position and has a niece in our year, Hufflepuff if I remember correctly,” Harry said, grinning at her teasing. “She might be the first one to work on. Madam Bones is Head of DMLE and isn't going to be happy about a man imprisoned without a fair and lawful trial, something Sirius never received in the first place. She should be on our side by default no matter how we bring up Sirius' case, at least as long as it doesn't look like she's being pressured politically too much. She shouldn't fight us on a trial otherwise.”

“That still leaves that idiot Fudge's Death Eater financial supporters to worry about. Bones is a pure-blood, but not an obvious bigot.”

“Yeah, she's okay and Fudge isn't actually one of the really bad blood bigots. He only gets paid by them.”
“Strange, isn't it?” she commented wryly. “Based on what I've read, he should have been Dumbledore's greatest ally in the government, fighting against Voldemort and for mundane and mundane-born rights. Not sure where things went wrong in your...situation. According to back issues of the Prophet, which I found magically scanned and stored in the Hogwarts library under a most interesting archive cube, sort of like Muggle microfiche, which displayed the images of the paper, moving magical pictures and all, using what appeared to be- uh, anyway, his campaign slogan when he first ran for Minister was 'A Fair Deal for Wizards Who Deal Fair with Muggles,' which is-

“Really sexist,” Harry interrupted, “but on the right track.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at him and harrumphed, but didn't disagree. “Anyway,” she continued, glaring at him for the interruption, “first, we show public support for Fudge's policies through these letters. Then, when the situation with Sirius' trial, or rather the lack thereof, becomes public, hopefully along with Pettigrew's capture, we can use your fame, student contacts with important parents, and the secret letter writer's public popularity to support an honest and open trial for your godfather and the rat.”

“The Minister has a history with scandals working in his favor,” Harry said. “Fudge would have lost to Bartemius Crouch Senior, but then the whole thing with his son being convicted of being a Death Eater happened. Fudge will be careful about anything relating to questionable justice for Death Eaters because of that. He won't want to look weak.”

“Which brings up another point, Harry. While I certainly don't agree with the implicit and continuing torture of sentencing someone to Azkaban, obviously cruel and unusual punishment, the entire situation with Crouch's son needs to be resolved at some point. We have an obligation to expose Barty Crouch Junior's current location to law enforcement before he escapes from his father's control again. Since we have secret knowledge of what really happened, we also have a moral responsibility in this situation.”

Hermione tapped her finger on her chin, thinking over their options. “Maybe if we can also work out a way to expose that little situation and point out to the Minister how he can use it to politically make up for Sirius' situation, it will grease the wheels of justice. It helps that Sirius' lack of a proper trial happened during Milicent Bagnold's tenure as Minister. And that this was also while Crouch Senior was Head of DMLE. That should help the Ministry blame him for the whole thing, while also prosecuting him for breaking his son out of Azkaban and hiding him in his house.”

“That's a good idea, too,” Harry said, nodding. “Last time, it looked like Fudge was mostly afraid of being seen as weak if the feared 'criminal' and Death Eater Sirius Black had not only been allowed to escape on his watch, but was also found to be completely innocent after an expensive manhunt. We still can't allow Fudge a chance to cover things up, though, so it will have to seem to be in his best interest from the very start. If we time things right, the popularity of the published letters supporting Fudge's policies that seem to be from a pure-blood student at Hogwarts will reach their peak popularity just when we get a chance to expose Crouch's son, his father's involvement in Sirius' lack of a trial, and the capture of the secret Death Eater, Peter Pettigrew.”

“I'll be sending off the first letter to the paper tomorrow,” Hermione said with a grin. “Monday, the Prophet had an article about Fudge's plan to increase funding for the DMLE, the stated cause is to help in investigating incidents of 'Muggle-baiting.' Lucius Malfoy doesn't have him entirely in his pocket yet, so Fudge still has a moderate public stance on the issue. But the way things are now, I think his funding bill will be defeated in the Wizengamot by blood bigots, older neutral pure-bloods, and the economic conservatives, even though Fudge's supporters and Dumbledore's faction are backing it. Many pure-bloods don't think 'Muggle-baiting' is an important issue. Because of cutbacks,
there simply isn't the money in the budget right now to carry out proper investigations, ones that clearly show the true horror of the situation, but that isn't something most consider a vital funding area right now.

“Which means I'll get lots of attention by suggesting in my letter something very controversial, almost guaranteeing that it'll be published: that this funding bill's language is a good first step but doesn’t go far enough. I'll propose additional increases in funding for the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts department and that some new DMLE funds be earmarked specifically for the Aurors.”

“But won't that make things worse for him in getting support for his bill?” Harry said, confused.

“Perhaps, but the bill is secondary to our plans. Though this does bring other issues to the front, which might help him forge a revised bill using new approaches to gain support. Like how long it has been since the Auror department of the DMLE was properly funded. It lost a lot of political support after the war was over, its departmental budget gutted. People didn't see the need to fund dark lord fighting so heavily after The Dark Lord was apparently dead. The DMLE in general then suffered when Crouch was kicked out in disgrace over his son, and Madam Bones is only just starting to get it back into shape. She could really use the money.”

“Okay, but why would pure-bloods want to fund the Aurors, let alone the DMLE?”

“Most pure-bloods aren't Death Eater supporters, Harry. As a group, they are actually strong on justice and law enforcement issues, according to the publicly printed open Wizengamot session voting records in the library. So in my rather lengthy letter, I'll suggest violent and potentially injurious attacks on 'Muggles' – though I hate to use that term, you know I prefer 'mundanes', and thank you for remember to use it yourself – anyway, I'll suggest those attacks should automatically be classified as assault, which they currently are not, and that they be assigned to the Auror department, who'll work closely with Misuse on cases where enchanted or charmed Muggle items are involved. The public relations framing will be calling those who perform such acts 'dangerous, low-class hooligans and thugs' and 'budding Dark wizards and witches.' And to make the budgetary bean counters happy, I'll also point out that increasing fines on those caught assaulting 'Muggles' would help pay for the previously mentioned increased law enforcement funding, along with a small increase in luxury taxes on the sale of expensive enchanted items, some of which are mundane artifacts used in those very assaults.

“The 'ex' Death Eaters, newly rich and powerful after the war and horrible bigots every one, won't support it anyway, so their voting block doesn't need to be convinced. The law enforcement angle will make it hard to argue against the idea, and that should keep the neutral rich pure-bloods from openly contesting it because of the tax increases, which are there to make the budget obsessed members happier. As it was raised by a third party, it won't look like Fudge and Dumbledore ramming something through even if they later officially author the bill. This will help the revised bill gain more support. Regardless of what happens, my letter writing campaign will gain popularity. And if the suggestions work, many of Riddle's old supporters will find it harder to assault mundanes, like...like my parents, and other innocents. It'll also shine more light on the sale of powerful magical items, many of which are dangerous and Dark and imported from overseas.”

“Thanks again for the help, Hermione,” Harry said with a wide smile. “I'm horrible at this political stuff but you're a natural.”

Hermione blushed at the compliment and poked at the fringe of the carpet. “I talked to Neville and Ron about most of it and helped them write letters to their parents and guardian to get more information on the current political situation, including things that don't make it into the papers. So
those aren't really my ideas. Neville asked his Gran (who is on the Wizengamot) about some of the
details of the current political landscape there, and Ron's dad Arthur is in the Ministry, Head of the
Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department in fact, and he has his ear to the ground about some of the
interdepartmental gossip. Most of those ideas are ones some Wizengamot members and Madam
Bones herself have been in favor of for years it seems, but they have political opponents who would
jump on the chance to oppose any measures appearing to come directly from them.

“As a side benefit, the adults think their kids are showing a greater interest in their jobs and political
matters in general. I've managed to keep my name out of it so far. And I do think both Ron and
Neville are, in fact, taking a greater interested, as I usually discuss my ideas with them in, err, great
details. So it is good for them too. But really, it is all the adults' ideas and yours.”

“But you're the one who put everything together. If you're able to do this from Hogwarts by writing
a few letters, think of what you could accomplish with a real political position.”

“I doubt I could ever get into the Ministry, Harry, let alone on the Wizengamot,” she said with a
frown. “One is very biased against mundane-born and the other is nearly entirely unelected
hereditary seats, mostly consisting of very old wizards.”

Harry grinned and shook his head. “I know you, Hermione. With Voldemort and his Death Eaters
out of the way, you'll be able to get around those issues. The Wizengamot has a hereditary Potter seat
waiting for me when I turn twenty-one, so I've got that part covered. And there's no law stopping
you from being a department head or even Minister for Magic. You'd be a better one than Fudge
now, and you haven't even graduated yet.”

She blushed and looked about to disagree, but he continued. “So we take down Voldemort together,
use your fame as 'A Hogwarts Student' and co-defeater of Voldemort to get you into a high position,
and then we'll start working on reforming society together from the inside out, dragging Magical
Britain into the modern world. Those old wizards won't know what hit them.”
Chapter Twelve

The beginning of October was very quiet. Everyone had settled into a routine with classes and homework, including the worst teachers in the school. Snape and Quirrell continued their casual, low-level harassment of Hermione and, to a lesser extent, other mundane-born, something which Harry felt powerless to counter.

Complaining about Snape had never worked for Harry before and Hermione was against it herself based on long experience of such complaints backfiring on her. Harry didn’t have guardians that could intervene and Hermione’s parents couldn’t back her up either; they were of course mundanes, as Hermione had always in his future insisted on calling non-magicals and did again now in imitation of Harry.

Her parents (and other mundanes) were not only not allowed to visit Hogwarts for any kind of parent teacher meetings, but were considered by most magics only barely competent to care for a magical child in the first place, being viewed with suspicion at the best of times and as quasi-sentient animals at the worst. But as Snape only messed with her daily practicals and didn’t actually interfere with her graded tests themselves, which was all she really cared about, she wasn’t going to do anything about his behavior during lessons. Harry was likewise willing to grit his teeth and ignore it. For now.

The greasy Potions professor was still relentless in mocking her all throughout his classes – as a “stupid Muggle-born,” a dunderhead Gryffindor, and, paradoxically, a hopelessly eager know-it-all and overachiever.

Harry simply watched and took mental note of who smirked and laughed, using what he would have called his “Slytherin” side – that is, if he hadn’t just recently learned that the entire House sorting system was a bit of a sham. Big surprise there. How could even a magical hat determine what kind of person someone would be in a year, let alone the rest of their lives? Obvious in retrospect. Very obvious considering the rat had ended up in Gryffindor and Malfoy in Slytherin.

So Hermione got lots and lots of practice with her Occlumency. Turbulent emotional situations were, after all, stressful yet effective practice in mental control. Some afternoons after DADA or double Potions, though, Hermione was so drained emotionally that she simply huddled with Harry and a book on a couch in the Gryffindor common room. Sometimes, she even read the book, instead of just staring blankly at it while shaking slightly.

The odd hybrid Occlumency she was working on involved blocking bits of her mind from other bits,
as well as shielding against external attack. As well as giving her the ability to pretend to be someone else, this also let her guard her physical mind from casual surface inspection – something he thought Dumbledore, Riddle, and also maybe Snape could do without casting the full spell. All without letting them know she had mental shielding, unless they dug much deeper with an obvious attack.

Harry still couldn't use Legilimency to actively test it, but the Auror detection charms and various mental training spells to discover Occlumency said, when she use just her basic Occlumency, that whatever she was doing was shielding at least somewhat. Hermione claimed the shield felt really flimsy to her and was determined to improve with practice. Unfortunately, that involved practicing in front of Voldemort himself, risking both of their secrets every time she bravely went to DADA class.

But when she released her mental barriers, everything sort of crashed down on her at once. It was heartbreaking to see, but Hermione insisted on pushing herself to the limit in training to keep his secrets. Harry tried to comfort her when he could, but the constant stress was beginning to show. She spent a lot of her time during the weekends when she wasn't studying advanced magic with Harry trying to relax with her violin, practicing her music. It seemed to help, but both freeing the school of the shade of Voldemort and somehow muzzling Snape was the only permanent solution.

Harry and Hermione had even looked in the library for a list of Hogwarts rules in hopes of finding something against Snape's awful behavior, but it was quickly clear that there was no such rule. Teaching methods were at the discretion of the professors and otherwise only subject to the Headmaster's review. The other rules they'd found, mostly endless lists of Ministry standards, were equally archaic – more pre-Victorian than modern in their educational methods. Both were were shocked to find that Filch was right – even corporal punishment had only recently, in the last couple of generations, been banned by a Headmaster's decree. It had been Dumbledore's order, unsurprisingly.

Their other problem teacher was a different matter. They wanted as little attention from Quirrell as possible. Trying to go to their Head of House or the Headmaster about vaguely insulting language against mundanes and mundane-born was laughable. Given the Hogwarts rumor mill, such attempts would only get back to the host of Voldemort's shade, likely in less than a day (likely from Malfoy), so that was out of the question. Everyone knew it was happening, anyway.

These failures made the long weeks even longer, so when he saw the older students pairing off and heading to Hogsmeade for the second time that year, Harry decided it was time to start working on countering another of Tom's plots with the help of an old friend.

Regular visits and clever questions on the next few weekends with Hagrid suggested that their possessed professor wasn't currently attacking unicorns for their blood, so Harry guessed that Voldemort's host must not be falling apart yet. Harry suspected that Quirrell hadn't started killing unicorns until later in the school year, early '92, but he wasn't willing to bet the lives of such pure and innocent creatures just to give his other plans more time. He couldn't exactly raise his hand in class and ask Quirrell directly, so he just had to keep monitoring the situation as best he could.

After their third visit to the groundskeeper's hut for elevenses and preteen Spanish Inquisition theater, Hermione had apparently noticed his poorly concealed worry and frustration. She had waited until they were in the noisy Great Hall during lunch later that day to interrogate him, which was a good move. Her tradecraft was getting better by the day.

“You're brooding again, Harry. Spill it. What's wrong?” she asked quietly, sitting close beside him and piling steamed vegetables onto both of their plates.

The elves had somehow figured out Hermione's dislike of the more greasy and unhealthy dishes, so they now filled the area around her with stuff she liked more. It meant that the other boys had slowly
started shifting further away, towards the puddings and larger slabs of meat, leaving Harry sitting in a small area of mostly First through Third year girls who were watching their figures. Ron and Neville still stoically sat across the table from them, but they usually grabbed a few dishes from other parts of the table before sitting down.

Harry wasn't sure how the elves in the kitchen always seemed to figure out where they were going to sit – maybe they simply prepared an area with the dishes and that was where Hermione would always choose, he hadn't noticed. But that was significantly less interesting a problem than the other dozen or so he was currently dealing with.

First up, concerned and increasingly impatient looking Hermione Granger, amateur psychologist. At least this would be less of a mental chess match than his sessions with Mrs. Tonks, as he had significantly less to hide from the young witch.

“I'm feeling guilty about using Hagrid for information,” he said with a sigh. “It doesn't seem right, like I'm lying to him. I know what might happen, so I feel responsible and want to do something. But that doesn't give me any right to use him like this.”

“You aren't using anyone, Harry,” she retorted, spearing two small skinless roast chicken breasts for them from a nearby serving plate. “Hagrid obviously enjoys your visits, as do you. And aren't you visiting more often than you...usually would?'

She was referring to his first timeline, of course, when he was actually eleven and had spent little time during the school year visiting the lonely man – at least until he'd started teaching classes, but that had been different. He realized that Hagrid had seemed to glow with happiness every time Harry, Hermione, and his new honor guard of Ron and Neville showed up this time around. Did Hagrid have that same look the first time, only he'd been too shy or distracted to notice on the few occasions he'd bothered to visit every year?

“I guess you're right, Hermione. I just want to make sure I'm not taking advantage of anyone.”

She eyed him closely. Since they were in public, where mind reading adults were, she had her Occlumency and Perfect Little Professor personality front and center, even with him. Now unable to even think about their secrets normally, Harry knew she was instead receiving preprocessed information from her magical mind, which was safe from at possible casual scans and could feed her conclusions based on those most precious secrets. Hermione had described the effect as like someone handing you a script to read and knowing emotionally it was correct, but not having the facts to back up why it made sense. She also said that was really, really annoying, and it usually put her on edge when they started talking about sensitive information like this with her hybrid Occlumency still active.

“You aren't taking advantage of anyone. I can see that,” she snapped. “But also be sure you don't push people away, just to avoid situations where you might have...what could be considered an unfair advantage in a relationship, because individuals still have a choice as to whether or not to befriend you, and they can make their own decision as to what they feel is a fair and balanced social exchange.”

Winding down and narrowing her eyes again, she added, “I think I've already made that clear with respect to myself?”

He nodded, wryly smiling back and drawing a small return smile from his friend. When she turned back to her plate, rubbing her temples slowly, he (finally) noticed she was wearing her hair in a complicated, magically-formed French braid of some sort up in a crest on the back of her head. It wrapped around itself, holding her hair out of the way and attaching to the back of her head without
apparent clips or holders of any kind. It looked like magic, so he assumed it was. Absorbed as he'd been with his own moody problems, he hadn't taken note of her style choice that day as he usually did.

It complemented the minor glamour she'd cast that morning, one which sharpened her appearance, drew out her cheekbones, and gave her gaze a serious feeling and a hawk-like glint, one which suggested you had her full and undivided attention and had better get on with it. Actually, it reminded him of Hedwig's best glares. He wondered if both females practiced that look in a mirror.

Hermione had also put on some subtle makeup charms, nothing he'd even notice if he didn't know she didn't actually get that much sun in Northern Scotland and rarely had bright rosy cheeks from long days in the library. But the result was surprisingly effective. Overall, she looked like an alert, neatly groomed young bird of prey, one that nested in libraries and hunted for juicy books amongst the stacks.

As he was admiring Hermione with a slightly dazed look on his face, Lavender flounced over to them and squealed. “Eee! Love your hair, 'Mione. Show us that charm later?”

This was another effect of Hermione not getting harassed by her dorm-mates this time – all four of them were apparently very impressed and or intimidated by her skills in glamour and beauty charms, and they'd sort of bonded over that. Hermione reported this with an eye roll, unimpressed with how vapid their interests were. In fact, despite their annoyance at her after that first all-night study session, they had all showed up to her lunchtime birthday party in the common room the next day, polite, social, and eager to learn what she knew.

Though Hermione had no interest in joining their ever internally shifting and growing multi-House clique, they were happy to leave her to her studies relatively unmolested. It probably helped that Hermione wasn't being an annoying know-it-all in class this time – not that that excused their behavior before.

Hermione's eyebrow twitched violently at the hated shortening of her name, then settled as she calmly turned and smiled at her roommate, agreeing to her request. “Certainly. It is a variation of the basic hair tying charm, and you've already got that one down. Shouldn't take long to show you this one.”

The ditsy blond Gryffindor squealed again and clapped her hands onto Hermione's shoulders, bouncing up and down a little. “Ooo, that'll be so awesome. Thank you so much, 'Mione! You're the best.” She then skipped off to sit by Parvati and started gesturing at them while talking rapidly. The dark-haired girl's eyes widened comically and she squealed loudly enough to be audible over the babble of the rest of the lunch crowd. The two of them then waved happily at Hermione, who waved back with a strained smile before returning to her lunch.

“I am beginning to regret agreeing to teach them all those charms,” Hermione said, muttering into her asparagus. “I should have directed them to your study session, to work on their hovering charms or something actually academically significant.”

“Then just tell them no,” Harry said, poking at his own plate of mostly vegetables.

Hermione sighed, then attacked her chicken with a fork, a knife, and some surprising aggression. “It doesn't work like that with these girls, Harry. If Ron or Neville, or even Seamus, asked you to help him with homework, you could just say, 'sorry, not now mate, I'm busy,' and that would be the end of it. If he was annoyed with you, he'd likely get over it in a matter of minutes.

“With the girls in my dorm, that would be seen as some kind of subtle snub, with repercussions likely
lasting weeks, if not months. And I'm just starting to get their respect and acceptance, which I was not at all expecting. It has something to do with my showing an interest in beauty charms, a hobby of theirs as well, even though I usually use the fastest and most efficient charms, though those aren't always the easiest, instead of following those odd magical culture fashion magazines like they do... In any case, I'm not going to risk that good will just because their shrill giggling hurts my head sometimes.”

Harry knew Hermione was spending a small amount of her rapidly shrinking spare time experimenting with different hair styles and charms, usually coming up with something new for every day of the week – though she did complain that anything she did would eventually return to a bushy mess, usually after no more than a day. It wasn't a problem her roommates had, which aggravated the sometimes-bushy-haired girl to no end. Sharing knowledge of the charms was just a side-effect of her semi-public spell work and Hermione being her usual helpful self, but it seemed to smooth relations with her roommates in ways Harry hadn't expected.

Thinking it was a good thing that Hermione was able to bridge the gap between her much more mature and academic outlook and their interests in hair, clothes, and gossip, he was trying to secretly and subtly encourage it. Hermione, not being fantastically dense, realized what he was doing (likely before he did), so he was only partially successful there. Thankfully, she also seemed to be okay with his well intentioned hints that she spend some time away from old books on questionable magic and advanced Transfiguration texts.

Automatically eating what Hermione had put on his plate, Harry considered all of his old and now new-again childhood friends. Next to him, Hermione ate with her usual cool, nearly robotic efficiency, clearly eager to get finished with the tedious but necessary task of fueling the body she required functional in order to read books.

Well, his feelings toward his best friend were obvious. He wanted to lock Hermione away in a secret wizard's tower in the middle of nowhere and under heavy guard until the war to come was over. Sadly, that simply wasn't an option. Even if he was smart enough to manage it somehow, she'd hate him forever. And anyway, he needed her help to set things right this time, even if that put her in more danger than the safer course of not being his friend and not helping to fight the forces of evil from the front lines.

He didn't know of anyone else at school as capable as she was once more quickly growing to be. The continuing poor quality of DADA instruction didn't help there, of course, as most of the older students had had teachers even worse than Quirrell and Lockhart. But Harry considered that, given how introverted he'd been (especially at first), he could be wrong.

Running through his more distant classmates in his mind, Harry realized he mostly knew the older boys from the DA and didn't know anyone in the other Houses who'd graduated (or, in one case, died) before his Fifth Year. He also didn't know many of the girls in any of the other years. Hermione couldn't really be compared to the girls in her year, that was for sure, and most of the older students were only interested in passing their N.E.W.T.s., while those in Ginny's year and younger had mostly just kept their heads down, being far too young to fight in the battles to come.

Looking over at the other First Year Gryffindor girls gathered together and chatting happily over lunch, he realized it was odd how few girls he really knew at all well from his time in school. His eyebrows scrunched together while he continued to eat.

Well, other than the obvious constant in his life that was Hermione, there was Ginny, of course. Over the years, she had gradually become more comfortable being around him and had become like a sister. Because she'd been a year behind his other friends and painfully shy at first, they weren't as
close as he was with Hermione. They also didn't hang out that much outside of DA meetings and Quidditch practices.

And then after he'd put Snape in the Hospital Wing in Sixth Year in a burst of anger during DADA class, he'd been suspended from Quidditch for two months, banned from both practices and playing. That had been a dark time for him, and in anger and fear he'd made the questionable decision to avoid Ginny and Ron to keep from drawing them into his mess and endangering their own chances at playing.

Lots of bad memories from that year. They'd lost that first match against Slytherin without him. Ginny had played great at Seeker, actually catching the Snitch, but Ron fell apart in goal so badly that her catch merely ended the game, with Slytherin still winning 220-180. Then Ron and Hermione had had a huge yelling match and things had just gone downhill from there. Thank goodness he hadn't gone through with his plan to pretend to spike Ron's drink with that luck potion. That clearly wouldn't have worked and would only have made things twice as bad afterward.

So Ron wasn't talking to him at that point and Harry wasn't trying to talk to either him or his sister for most of Sixth Year. The summer after his godfather had died had been bad, but that had been worse. Thankfully Hermione and Neville had decided to quietly stay by his side whenever he wasn't in classes or detention with Professor McGonagall, not trying to fix him somehow, but simply being there for him when he felt like everything was falling apart. He owed them a lot for that but he didn't remember ever thanking them.

It was around that time when Hermione and Neville had begun...whatever their relationship had been. As for Hermione and himself, they'd finally decided to use the Prince's book together, both apologizing and quickly forgiving each other for their silly argument over it. After separating himself from the Weasleys, it had been a tough year, and neither of them were willing to lose a friend over a silly old marked-up textbook.

In the end, they still hadn't ever found out who it had belonged to, though it seemed less important after everything else that happened that year. Later, after the fall of Hogwarts, Hermione had admitted that it had been mostly hurt feelings and jealousy that had made her so emphatic in her opposition to the strange book – not jealousy of him or his success in class, but about the book itself. Yep, leave it to Hermione to be jealous of a book. But that hadn't been the worst social issue he'd had that year.

Butting heads with Dumbledore about Snape had broken their shaky relationship, which had finally been starting to recover from the aftermath of Sirius' death. Harry hadn't gotten a chance to talk about the Horcruxes again with him before the Death Eater attack and the Headmaster's mysterious death. After that, everything was sort of a blur.

Hermione hadn't stopped crying all week. When they'd eventually patched things up, Ron was stunned and silent, Ginny listless and broken. Harry's mind had been blank with shock and guilt and Neville had been like a stone statue, standing motionless beside Hermione at Dumbledore's hastily put together funeral. They'd both had an arm around her shoulders as she openly wept, tears rolling down their cheeks as well.

Even though it had still been early May, the school had simply closed and sent away all the students. On the train home, Hermione had slipped out of the compartment with Neville. They'd both come back with teary red eyes. No one had the nerve to ask what had happened, but that train ride home was the last time they'd seen Neville.

So many mistakes he'd not make again. It had been dumb of him to avoid his friends, especially his Quidditch friends. Now that he thought about it, most of the other girls he'd known, and adding to
his short list of female friends, had been his Quidditch teammates. But they were older and, like with
Ginny, never really hung out much other than practices or DA sessions.

Same with Cho, really. Ugh. The less remembered about that brief but intensely embarrassing
relationship the better. Yet another thing he could change. She seemed nice enough, but that had
been a huge mistake for both of them and he didn't really see her as a fighter, like Hermione
and...Ginny had been.

There really wasn't much more when it came to girls. Sure, he'd taken Parvati to the Yule Ball that
one year during the Triwizard, and he had usually had a lot of attention from Hogwarts' female
population, some of it actually positive some years, but Hermione and Ginny had really been his only
close female friends, other than... of course, there had also been...

Harry frowned. This was silly. He remembered that she was small, sort of quietly sad, had those
huge gray eyes that seemed to stare right into your soul... He'd taken her to Slughorn's party, for
Merlin's sake. She'd looked beautiful and otherworldly that night, with a small smile like she had a
secret no one else knew, but more importantly, much later on, they had... They had...

He shook his head to try and clear it. What was it Hermione always said when he drew a blank on
something? If it was really that important, he'd remember later?

Looking across the table, he saw Ron and Neville talking about Quidditch – well mostly Ron was
talking and Neville was listening. Surprisingly, the shy boy seemed comfortable with his position as
one of Harry's new bodyguards and also looked happy to have a growing friend in an outgoing Ron
Weasley. Harry knew he'd not been as good a friend himself to them this time around, something
else he was thinking hard about changing, but he had no intention of involving either of the boys in
his fight. At least, not until much, much later.

When he got down to it, he just didn't have the time to spend hanging out with Ron. So, that was
another relationship he was intentionally changing. But protecting them from the dangers of Dark
Lords and Death Eater plots was worth changing or even losing their childhood relationships for a
time. They were young and had plenty of time (if Harry had any say in the matter), and it wouldn't
be forever. He could always hang out with Ron more when there wasn't a Dark Lord hiding in the
castle.

Without realizing it, Harry had finished his plate. He felt full now and a little more sure of himself
again. While he didn't want to lie to his friends about what was happening, he couldn't burden them
this early with his secrets, even if they had been capable of keeping them. And he didn't see Ron or
Neville studying for months just to learn Occlumency, even if he had a way to convince them it was
necessary. Ron was happy simply to hang out with Harry while doing his 'bodyguard' duties
between classes. Being forced into sticking so close to the supportive Hermione and the surprisingly
extroverted Ron seemed to have done Neville a world of good.

So while Harry still felt little guilty about his ulterior motives for how he treated his formerly much
closer friends, including the one who introduced him to the hidden magical world, he would simply
have to be sure to make his interactions with them honest and meaningful. Visiting Hagrid could be
for other reasons than pumping him for his poorly kept secrets and reports on the Forbidden Forest. It
could also be because he enjoyed talking about odd creatures, the magical world, and Hagrid's
memories of his parents. Yes, that was something Harry could get behind.

Noticing how Hermione gathered up Neville and Ron with just her eyes as they got ready to leave
the Great Hall, he shouldered his book bag and started to go over that day's study group topics in his
head while he walked beside her. Ron grabbed a couple of rolls off the table as he stood up, but then
rushed to join them, filing in behind Harry. Neville had trouble looking Harry in the eyes still, but he
took up his place walking with them without hesitation, just behind Hermione in their usual square formation.

Having apparently noticed how lost in thought he was, Hermione simply kept a watchful eye on the other students, exits, and possible dangers, the same as Harry did, but all while also turning to answer over her shoulder some question Ron had about when their Charms homework was due. Neville then actually started a conversation with Ron himself, making sure the sometimes forgetful redhead knew about the Herbology chapter they needed to read up on before next class, something Harry wasn't planning on covering that study session.

Today was going to be mostly charms. As Harry couldn't actually do any of the activities more than once or twice, he was focusing on the theoretical aspects and helping people with their homework. Just because he wasn't able to cast many hovering charms didn't mean he wasn't able to correct and provide pointers to others, something his slowly growing study group seemed to appreciate. It was the third full group meet up so far and things seemed to be going well.

They'd need to figure out a way to get the other Houses involved, though, as currently they were just working out of the Gryffindor common room. That kept students from other Houses from attending, which was sort of the point of his project. That was the next obstacle to conquer, and he was sure Hermione already had some ideas to help him out.

“I'm not sure why you don't just run the study group, Hermione,” he said as they walked back to the Gryffindor dorms.

“Simple, Harry. You're both a public figure and a uniting factor in the social groups at Hogwarts.”

Harry noticed both Neville and Ron were listening closely to the conversation. “Yeah, but you're a lot better at taking notes and studying. Wouldn't they respect that as well?”

Hermione shook her head. “No, Harry. Some might. But I have two points against me. One, I'm not well known yet. Maybe after this year, but for now I don't have many graded assignments under my belt. The second point...”

Here she sighed and shook her head again. “I'm a mundane-born. That divides people immediately. Most Pure-bloods – present company excluded of course,” she added, turning to nod at Ron and Neville, who grunted and blushed back at her, respectively, “think Muggles, or mundanes as I like to call them, and, by extension mundane-born themselves, are sort of stupid in the ways of their world. Bad at magic, sort of mad and prone to strange obsessions. Backward in many ways. I can reverse that opinion in my own case, but I certainly wouldn't attract much attention as the head of a study group right now.”

“But I'm famous and a Half-blood, so I can swing it.”

“In a nutshell, yes,” she said. “There are other upsides as well. Those already bigoted against mundane-born might be drawn in and actually learn something from coincidentally working along side someone like me, someone who doesn't meet their preconceived notions. Those who are mundane-born will feel more at ease with someone who knows what a light switch is, and will also get a chance to meet people from older families with traditions in the magical world. It could be a learning experience far beyond what many people would be expecting, giving benefits other that the purely academic.”

Ron snorted and slapped Neville on the back. “Well, she's convinced me, mate, how about you?”

Neville looked confused. “Uh...we've already been going. Twice now?”
“Yeah, but we didn't know why, right?” Ron said with a wide grin. “I'm getting all sorts of learning about culture and stuff, and I didn't even notice. Maybe I can even give my dad some pointers about Muggles after this year.”

Everything was going to be fine. All his classmates were here. No one was obviously missing or lost. Hermione was practically magically glued to his side. Wait, now that he thought about it, that wasn't such... No, no need. She knew what was at stake. Now, just to wait for-

The doors to the Great Hall slammed open, almost exactly when he expected. As Quirrell stumbled to a halt and started babbling about trolls, an act that looked a lot more fake to him this time, Harry jumped on top of the bench and started scanning the crowd of students. Most were looking at Quirrell with various amounts of shock. Hermione was at his side, looking at the professors, most likely to see how they were going to react. Not exactly normal, but most people weren't looking at the students anyway.

Harry quickly spotted Neville, Ron and his brothers, the rest of Harry's roommates, Hermione's roommates, all of his previous life's Quidditch teammates, including their new Seeker, poor Jack Sloper. Harry had watched his tryout. It had been...bad. But they were all here.

He looked over the other tables, seeing the few people he recognized by sight all at their respective tables. That unfortunately included Draco and his goons. Ah well, Draco getting crushed by a rampaging troll would be too easy. Harry never had that kind of luck.

Dumbledore was ordering everyone to the dorms, something Harry didn't entirely understand as it sent half of the school toward the vague direction of “the dungeons.” He could only hope the Headmaster knew what he was doing. As he lined up with the rest of the Gryffindor students, herded into place by the shoves of over-eager Prefects, he latched onto Hermione's hand with an iron grip.

There was a crush right at the stairway, Ravenclaw and Gryffindor Prefects glaring at each-other. As students started filing out the double-doors and collected in the entry hall in confused knots waiting to go up the stairs, Harry was getting jostled roughly from all sides, almost losing Hermione. Elbowing an upperclassman rather savagely with a blow to his kidney, he regained his previous place at his best friend's side. Just as they got to the second floor landing, he tripped over something and, rather than drag the little girl to the ground, let go of her hand.

Crashing to the hard stone floor and executing a clumsy breakfall, he barely avoiding being trampled by his fellow students. Luckily, he didn't seem have to sustained any serious damage due to long experience and practice falling down, and maybe also a magical's basic resistance to damage. Just as he was about to climb to his feet and curse whoever had tripped him, his arms and legs were pinned to his sides violently, then someone grabbed him around his chest and someone else snagged his legs. He was being dragged across the stone floor now, away from his classmates, grabbed by invisible hands.

In fact, he couldn't even see his body – something had rendered him invisible as well. He tried to shout out as he was dragged around a corner and out of sight, and found he had also been silenced. He couldn't get at his wand with his arms pinned so he had no way of resisting when he was roughly turned over and a red light slapped into his face. He lost consciousness, his last thoughts recognition of the familiar sting of a stunner spell.

His face was pressed into the cold, hard floor – tiles rather than stone, he saw. Blinking and remaining still in case he could catch his captor by surprise, Harry readied his aching arms to push himself to his feet while trying to figure out what was going on. But before he could gather his wits
and act, he was violently flipped upside-down and shoved up against a wall, his head banging down against the floor as he slipped down a bit. An invisible force was holding him head down against the wall of a Hogwarts bathroom, his arms and legs once again immobilized.

Looking around in panic, he tried to think. Continuing to struggle against the magic holding him immobilized didn't work, and he couldn't see his foes, if they were in fact actually still here. Odd that they didn't use a sticking charm or something like that – they were obviously magicals. He looked around, searching for something to use to his advantage.

All Hogwarts bathrooms seemed to be different, as if making any two of the rooms the same would have hurt the artistic sensibilities of the long dead architects of the ancient castle. But even upside down, this one looked...familiar. And also slightly strange. There was something odd about the room and something he was forgetting. But that was less important right now than getting free somehow and figuring out what the hell had just happened.

“Help! Anyone! Help me! Help!” Harry struggled violently against his invisible bonds again, shouting at the top of his lungs for help the whole time, but he didn't hold much hope.

The castle was huge and the rooms were all surprisingly well soundproofed for wood and stone construction, most likely because of some low-level magic. He continued to thrash around for what felt like hours but couldn't have been longer than a couple of minutes. He was not willing to give up but was unable to move his arms or legs even an inch. He also couldn't reach his wand. He had started to feel his voice growing hoarse when the bathroom door banged open loudly.

There were two loud pops and then the force holding him to the wall disappeared. He fell off the wall, straight onto his head, crumpling to the floor in a painful pile. Struggling to his feet, he reflexively snapped his wand into his right hand and grabbed a small knife he had hidden in a cardboard sheath in his boot with the other.

He then froze. The smell hit him almost as fast as the realization of what was going on. He was in a girl's bathroom, on the second floor of Hogwarts castle, on Halloween. About to be killed by an angry mountain troll.

One part of twelve-year-old Hermione Granger's mind was rapidly reviewing her five major contingency plans for the evening and the three primary worst-case “bug out” plans that Harry had insisted they needed in case they had to immediately leave Hogwarts to escape from Death Eaters, Voldemort or, most disturbingly, how to do so after first rescuing the other from a suborned or traitorous teacher.

The other, larger part of Hermione Granger's mind was desperately trying to avoid throwing up. Though she'd known all about the events surrounding the troll that Halloween thanks to Harry, that somehow didn't make everything magically alright. She'd noted at the time that he hadn't said who had teased her and made her want hide in a bathroom all day, but everything else had seemed to follow the events as Harry had related.

Making another mental note to get answers on that first point later as it could be important, she continued walking nervously along with the other students filing out of the Great Hall, Harry's hand locked in a death grip with her own.

She tried to still her mind, practicing some of the Occlumency skills she'd been learning over the last month. That didn't work too well, as her second, magic-based mind was fully alerted and muttering facts and plans at her the whole time, spoiling anything close to an empty mind. Part of her (that part)
was convinced that everything was going wrong and she was still going to somehow end up in a bathroom with a rampaging troll and then die a horrible, messy death. Her imagination had been working overtime on that one all day and most of the night last week. Harry had said everything was safe, it was just some bad luck last time that she'd been in any danger at all, but that didn't really help.

It was still all happening, and there was a dangerous troll in the school, which should have been safe from such things. Now they were evacuating the Great Hall and about to climb the stairs to their dorms and, though Harry was still with her, she was still very, very frightened.

Not willing to let him go for a moment even though they were getting squished by the crowd of Gryffindors, she squeezed his hand even harder, the small bones there shifting against each other in a way that must have been painful for him ("number of bones in the human hand, twenty-seven, consisting of fourteen phalanges, five metacarpals, and eight carpals – mnemonic for the carpal bones, Some Lovers Try Positions That They Can’t Handle,” whispered her entirely unhelpful mind in a background hum of knowledge). If she wasn’t careful – yep, sure enough, her own left hand was aching now. Stupid health monitoring charm. She eased up some and the small, distant ache went away.

But then there was a yell and a yank and she was no longer holding his hand at all. She felt a sudden twinge in one arm, then an aching, stiff feeling all over. That must be Harry! Someone was hurting him!

Ron and Neville had gotten separated from them and weren’t in sight. She could see the Twins’ red heads over the crowd, but they were way up at the front, already starting up the stairs to the third floor. Trying to fight against the flow of students, she looked around frantically for Harry, her minds going into overdrive as she started hyperventilating. Everything was fading to gray as (she vaguely realized) her visual processing centers were being relegated to secondary importance in favor of supplying more information to her magical thought interface.

She stared straight ahead with fists clenched. Plans and possibilities filled both her minds as they synced closer than usual. Everything else seemed to be moving in slow motion, including her racing heart ("Systole,” part of her mind whispered, recognizing a faint thump). She didn't have much time.

Facts: Harry was missing, there was a troll, Quirrell was still in the Great Hall, but he'd try to slip away in all the confusion. Her mind raced, but around in little circles. She didn't know what to do. ("Diastole,” came the whisper again, counting out her slowed sense of time). She needed to think faster. Bearing down, she intentionally forced more magic into the connection. Vision and hearing faded entirely, leaving nothing but her heartbeat.


Priorities: she had to find Harry first, before someone else did, someone who meant him harm.

All this was based on future knowledge, though. Maybe something had changed? Reevaluate.

Most powerful known elements were estimated to be the troll, McGonagall, Snape, Voldemort/Quirrell, Dumbledore, in increasing order of power. Harry's previous attacker was a possibility. Some other, unknown party could also be taking advantage of the situation. Useless to speculate without further information.

Possible locations for Harry were multitude, but knowing the night's events in Harry's original timeline and Harry's systemic issues with luck, she had a very bad feeling about all this. So find Harry. Nothing else mattered right now.
“Systole,” she noted again. And that was all the time she'd allow – a single heartbeat to think and panic. Everything snapped back and her senses and her mind were clear and focused, the world speeding back up again. Her original plans were almost useless, but she still needed to take action.

“Sal!” she frantically (though silently) thought at her familiar. “You've got to find Harry! Lead me to him!”

Feeling a very strong sense of agreement from the sleek black and silver adder, she bullied her way over to the wall and reached down, letting Sal slip out of her sleeve and to the floor. Watching Sal slither away along the base of the wall and into the shadows for a painful handful of seconds, she quickly fought to the back of the line of students, then yelled at the top of her lungs.

“OH NO, HARRY'S MISSING!”

In addition to starting an informational chain leading to a teacher (eventually, painfully large amounts of time later) being alerted to the situation, that also had the effect of causing the entire group of Gryffindors and the nearby Ravenclaws to immediately look in all directions and start babbling loudly. Ducking low, she dashed at full speed around a corner and headed in the direction Sal had taken. In addition to being able to feel the iron certainty about his current hunt and the strength of Harry's trail, she could also vaguely tell which direction Sal was in and how far away.

While running flat out after the surprisingly fast snake, her mind was working on causes, uselessly trying to identify who was behind what was certainly another attack of some sort. Worst case first.

If Headmaster Dumbledore is against Harry, she considered as part of her frantic dual-stream of consciousness, we are both in a lot of trouble. Escape and rearm in that case. Run fast, run far. Likely, they would both be recaptured anyway, but there were ways to escape and evade in the mundane world that would increases their chances. Not a pleasant thought, but she needed to look at the worst possibilities. Surprise would be on her side, and she might be able to rescue Harry if the Headmaster wasn't personally guarding him.

Dangerously paranoid? Maybe, if both a Dark Lord and likely some other mysterious person weren't actually, provably out to get your only friend in the world. Best to plan for the worst and, if study time allowed, then also plan for the best. But most people were stupidly optimistic and didn't want to think the worst. Many literally wouldn't think about things that disturbed them. Well, not her. Not when Harry depended on her. And Headmaster Dumbledore having it in for Harry was close to the worst imaginable situation. Thankfully it seemed unlikely, based on Harry's knowledge of the Headmaster. Which meant it was likely “merely” a Dark Lord or the mysterious foe.

Reaching an intersection, she went straight without even pausing, knowing exactly where Sal was now. She felt she could almost see through the eyes of the snake as he raced unnaturally quickly along the cold corridors. It was starting to give her an odd case of double vision, so she immediately pulled back from that feeling. But even back entirely in her own body, every sense felt heightened now. She could almost smell the scent of Harry's trail herself.

Unconsciously, she took an even deeper breath, nostrils flaring as her body tried to run air over a sensory system of which she probably only had a vestigial version. But magic didn't care whether or not she had a Jacobson's organ, so she clearly taste-smelled something unmistakeably Harry in the air.

Also something else, something slightly stronger but unknown. Something bitter and dangerous. Likely, his attackers. But not Headmaster Dumbledore, thankfully. She didn't think too hard about how she knew what he smell/tasted like, but she felt Sal distantly agree with her conclusion.
True, their Headmaster had made some bad decisions in regard to Harry. But none of those appeared to be provably malicious. That was a conclusion Harry had reached, at least. He seemed to forgive Headmaster Dumbledore for screwing up his childhood and, most likely, dooming the world by not training Harry to find the soul containers, or even to be able to properly fight against Tom Riddle.

All that had been for Harry (until recently, sort of) a long time ago. Water under the bridge. Hermione wasn't ready to forgive so quickly. She considered again how the Headmaster was the one who kept letting horrible DADA teachers take shots at Harry, and how the Headmaster was also the one who'd apparently found Harry after the attack in the dorm bathroom. Not proof against him, but it didn't sound good. Lots of times, police considered people reporting crimes and first on the scenes to be the first suspects, and for good reason. But there were other people with much clearer motives to consider.

Unless something changed, the Dark Lord would fail in his mission for the Stone tonight. The Headmaster obviously wasn't helping him get it, so they wouldn't be working together in any odd plots against Harry. Saying he was sure the defenses would have stopped Voldemort the first time, Harry pointed out very plainly that interfering there tonight was the stupidest thing they could do, so she wasn't going to run in and try to stop Quirrell, or anything stupid like that. That wasn't where Sal was leading her anyway. No, Voldemort didn't seem to be directly involved in this attack, and she had just seen Quirrell standing in the Great Hall talking to Professor McGonagall.

Of the teachers (minus the obvious one possessed by Voldemort) only Snape seemed likely as either the unknown attacker or a hypothetical evil Dumbledore's secret agent. But Harry seemed convinced that the abrasive professor was as innocent of the mystery attacks, and he'd said Snape held the Headmaster's complete confidence. The man was certainly well educated in Potions, but his behavior in the classroom was reprehensible. Best to put that aside until she had more evidence one way or the other. Being a bad teacher didn't make one automatically part of an evil conspiracy.

Other than the greasy Potions Professor, Harry had really only had direct experience with Professor McGonagall in any context other than the classroom. Harry had little information on her future activities, other than as a teacher and, briefly, Headmistress and defender of the school.

Hermione decided to also file any suspicious information there away for later, but currently the Deputy Headmistress working against the Headmaster seemed...implausible. She appeared strict but helpful with Harry, as with all her students. But Hermione had caught how sometimes, when he wasn't looking, she stared at him with sadness in her eyes. Perhaps she now knew about the...situation that had resulted in poor Harry's other scars, mundane ones that were now fading due to the potions he was taking daily. Most terrible to consider of all, Professor McGonagall might have already known of his situation before Harry's return from the future and attendant physical collapse. File that away for later analysis and, if necessary, vengeance.

Odd, she thought as her short legs pumped at full speed, vengeance wasn't a subject she'd made a tab for in her binder while preparing for the year's classes. Apparently that was an oversight. Well, always something new to learn.

It was odd how much she thought about violence lately. Also, how much really aggressive planning she did for potential dangerous situations these days. What made it truly strange was that Harry, the sort of instigator of all these thoughts, seemed like such a generally gentle and kind individual. All those horrible things seemed to just happen to him. Now that he was back to being an eleven-year-old again, and Dumbledore had seemed to be actually trying to take care of him, instead of being safer and protected, it was still happening. Even in what should be the safest place in the world, a magical castle specifically designed to keep students safe!
Some adults are falling down on the job, Hermione thought, not for the first time since meeting Harry. Good thing she was ready for this. Sort of.

She was now feeling unnaturally giddy and excited, alert but not at all horrified or scared. This was, she noted carefully, because she'd shoved all those emotions literally into the back of her mind, where her magical brain-parts would just have to cope. This had the advantage of shutting it up for a minute, though there was also still a magical snake in her mind, pushing on her emotional buttons. Ignoring those churning feelings was hard, but Hermione Granger Prime had better things to do than cower in a corner and cry her eyes out, which is what she'd otherwise be doing right now.

Reaching the end of the hallway, she tried to corner at speed in her black school flats, which apparently had vastly insufficient traction on polished stone floor ties. Curse word! Right, additional note: winter break, get a proper pair of black trainers instead of wearing stupid magical-world footwear. Score so far, the Nike corporation 1, anonymous cordwainer 0.

“They aren't even actually magical!” she scoffed out loud to herself as she continued to skid into a run again, working her wand out of her makeshift arm holster carefully. “They don't have any spells at all on them! And the price!”

The fact that Harry had commented favorably about them the week they met didn't mean they weren't crap, and he had been sort of kidding anyway, but then... No, wait, this was all a distraction. Shoes weren't important. Hmm, Lavender would faint from shock at that but-

No! Focus on plans. “Prior planning prevents piss poor performance,” she muttered to herself in automatic associative response, secretly relishing in the use of a “bad word” in the phrase. Oh yes, she had plans. The only real problem had been working out a way to take care of a troll (if she ran into it) with her minimal magical training. Harry's description of basically accidentally knocking it out with the help of another Firstie, physical combat, and a First Year levitation spell wasn't comforting. He hadn't wanted to discuss anything but avoidance strategies with her. She went a little further than that on her own.

So plans. One: if in a corridor free of obstructions, ice the floor and run. Wouldn't work if the troll was too close or-

“Ahh!” she panted in pain. Her thoughts were interrupted by a sudden stitch in her side, indicating she was obviously not in very good shape and was reaching her limits already. Good thing she'd caught up with Sal, who was currently ramming his head into a door, attempting to get into... shit.

Jumping over Sal and slamming into the unlatched bathroom door at full speed, she skidded to a halt, her nightmare brought to life in front of her. The ugly gray troll was swinging a club straight at Harry Potter's head, giving her zero time to think. Thankfully she had done her thinking ahead of time and already had the spell she needed ready on her lips

Barely able to pant out the words, she whipped her wand around. Pulling hard on that deep pool of magic she had inside, trying to overcast as much as possible without destroying the spell, she pointed her wand and shot out a madly spitting white streak of electric-looking magic.

The overpowered Banishing Charm hit the troll's club like the fist of an angry god, blowing it out of one beefy, gnarled hand and slamming it into the stone wall above Harry's head. The handle exploded on impact with a huge crash and a spray of wood, throwing the rest into a nearby stall. Hermione had already ducked down and covered her face with her arm, expecting such a result.

Then there was a bright flash as Harry fired off a spell of his own. Her eyes had been covered, so she was fine, but it looked like the troll had taken it straight in the face. She knew it wouldn't be enough,
though. That was likely all the strength Harry had, as he was now slumped on the floor. She wasn't doing too well herself. Her head was starting to pound and she was still having problems catching her breath.

This suggested that running wouldn't work, even if Harry wasn't still trapped with the troll between him and the door. Well, that and the fact that the unladen median top ground speed of a mountain troll was over twenty kilometers per hour, which was faster than she could sprint on a good day. Harry could do better than her, she was sure, but not right now. Right now, he was still picking himself up off the floor and his arms were shaking badly.

Feeling her familiar's presence at her side, she reached down her wand arm to him. She tried hard to even her breathing as Salazar wound himself around her arm. This close, she could clearly feel her familiar's every instinct, telling her in no uncertain terms that they needed to bite this threat hard, empty their venom sacs, and put this danger to herself and her mate down immediately. Shaking her head to clear the odd snake emotions and the haziness from her sight, she tried to calm and clear her mind again. This next part was going to be tricky, but she thought she knew what to do.

She saw that the troll was starting to slowly turn around, confusion on his- Was it his? No obviously enlarged mammary glads visible and...oh my. Yes. That wasn't a very effective loincloth, was it. There was confusion on his face as he blinked and stared blankly at his hands, held a few inches from his dazed eyes. Hermione then fired a supercharged water spell directly at his face.

"Aguamenti!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. She held the gushing stream on the spluttering troll for several seconds until he was thoroughly soaked and gallons of it had started pooling on the floor.

Ending the spell with a gasp, she planted her feet and brought both hands to the correct front and ready position, her wand carefully poised and loose in her right hand, her left empty and slightly flexed, all as if she were about to conduct an invisible symphony orchestra.

The troll now seemed, if anything, more confused than before, staring down at the tiny person who'd just given it a bath. Didn't seem like that was going to stop the troll from crushing her, though. Lumbering slowly forward, the troll reached out a hand that would certainly kill her if she didn't either run and leave her friend to his death or successfully complete her spell in time.

Consciously putting all of her questions and fears into a box and shoving it down the link to her magical self, she moved her wand precisely, just as she'd practiced, her other hand reinforcing the spell and adding additional power controls. Just like the book had said. Just like she'd practiced over and over. Just like when she'd finally gotten it to work that one time last weekend. But it had worked. In the small scale experiment. So the theory was sound.

"Draw an exact circle," she repeated to herself in her head, "and bisect it vertically. Now, standard transfiguration bracketing, just like every First Year learns, except they don't learn why, then concentrate like mad and shove all your magical power into this and save your best friend's life."

The room was suddenly filled with a baleful hissing and popping noise. A bright orange-red light danced across the floor. Hermione relaxed a little, ignored the soon-to-be horrific effects her spell was causing, and focused on continuing her successful transmutation until all reagents were used up. It was a simple stage one purification, thankfully, so she wasn't changing from one metal to another, just altering its form and temperature.
The troll paused and started back, staring around as water started rolling across the floor and up the
troll's leg, the spell drawing more reagents in from the surrounding environment which she'd
thoroughly soaked in salt water. She noticed the floor was quickly starting to dry up, all of the water
now covering the troll, who was also surrounded by a sputtering orange fire that seemed to feed on
the water instead of being extinguished. The troll was panicking and flailing around, but didn't seem
to be all that affected by the fire yet.

Reaching out and holding onto the transmutation with her off hand, clutching at it with clawed and
aching fingers, she carefully passed control of that spell to her other mind, shifting her primary
attention to casting another water spell. With a groaned shout, saltwater arced through the air again
and was immediately consumed by the greedy transmutation and growing orange flames.

She panted as the wet, hot air blowing off the troll's struggling form whipped her hair back, causing
her carefully tied twin braids to start coming undone, frizzing out again with the magical interference
and moisture. Black smoke spiraled towards the ceiling but disappeared before it got more than a few
feet, which was good as it would be very nasty to inhale.

Stars were sparking in her vision and she was barely standing after the sudden outpouring of power.
She realized with sudden horror that it still wasn't enough. The troll's thick skin was burning, and its
terrible, deafening screams and wild thrashing suggested that it was hurting a great deal, but she was
running out of reagents and the fire simply wasn't getting hot enough, fast enough, to do any
permanent damage. She needed...more.

Dropping the water spell, she felt the transmutation begin to wind down on its own, starved for the
saltwater it needed to continue. She clutched at the distant fire with both her wand and her bare hand,
trying to will it higher with all her strength, but the flames were already beginning to fall again.

It was then that Hermione realized she had failed. For all her planning, she was going to fail, and the
consequences of that, here and now, were unthinkable. Shaking her head, she rejected that
conclusion and searched further afield for an answer. Another part of her mind still held together the
transmutation, willing the last of the sodium into a pure elemental form.

No. She couldn't fail. She couldn't fail him. She couldn't fail herself, not when she finally had that of
which she'd always dreamed. She needed more fire, somehow. Options span in her head. Troll skin
was quite resistant to magic, even compared to other magical beings like herself. You couldn't just
light them on fire with an Incendio. Fiendfyre was uncontrollable, and by Harry's tutoring not
something to be messed with. Not that she even knew how to invoke it.

Hermione screamed silently in her head as her shoulders slumped. There had to be some way to
solve this problem, some way to pass this test, something magical that she knew how to do that could
help.

But no, that wasn't it, she realized with a start. It was conceptualization of the result that drove magic.
The intention, the drive, the necessity that reality change, bend to the will of the spell caster. She
didn't need to start a larger fire through some complicated means. She already had the basic element,
a hydrogen fire. Now she just needed the troll to BURN.

Hermione fell to her knees as interconnections in her mind snapped together fully again for the first
time in months. Her weakly constructed Occlumency shattered, spilling her emotions from her
magical mindspace into her already panicked mundane mind.

Her physical brain, burning with magic and panicked chemical responses, rebelled against her abuse
of arcane power. Large areas lit up all at once where there should have been orderly activity and her
body shook, back twisting and hunching her over. On her knees, arms wrapped around herself, she
almost toppled the rest of the way to the floor as her muscles contracted wildly and her mind went white. She cried out in pain and her wand clattered to the floor from her contorted fingers.

With what awareness she had left, she concentrated desperately on the steps she'd been taught by Madam Pomfrey when she'd come in with issues in controlling her accidental magic. Purposefully letting go all thoughts of control, she shoved as hard as she could and the blocked up magic exploded out of her with a blast like a huge firecracker going off. The flickering flames still licking at the troll's limbs danced and the doors on the bathroom stalls rattled violently.

Gasping in pain, she tried to collect herself again, but it still hurt too much to think. Somehow, Salazar had kept her transmutation active. Her magical black adder Familiar had held the spell together as the magically induced epileptic seizure had ripped through her. It wasn't without cost, though. Sal was now a burning cord wrapped around her arm, his scorching heat leeching magic from her at an alarming rate and adding one more minor pain to her mountain of suffering.

She felt him still in her mind, one of the few anchors she'd used to pull herself back from the edge of magical catastrophe. Thankfully, the unfocused magic had been successfully expelled to save her from further injury, but it still left her in immense pain, and with a slowly dissipating cloud of wild magic sparking angrily around her. She could feel her entire self once again, magical thoughts mixing with and washing out all others. Chaotic images and crushing emotions fell on her like a collapsing wall.

Teeth grinding and hands clenched, Hermione tried to push through the pain burning in every muscle in her body, tried to push past the magically boosted emotions, tried to push it out, to push everything out. The cloud of unfocused mystical energy was drifting closer to the troll, circling it slowly like water around a drain, seemingly drawn to the fire like a moth.

The furious and badly burned troll was still yelling and batting at the remaining fires on its skin, but had regained some awareness. It turned and took one huge, ground shaking step closer to her, fury clear in its eyes. It was then briefly distracted, swatting at the spiraling, sparking magic it finally noticed circling around its head. Suddenly, the sparking cloud of magic jumped like an electric arc towards the troll, diving into and reigniting the remaining flames and driving them higher. Springing back to life, they glowed a hot, bright blue color now.

Staring up, clutching her arms around herself in pain, Hermione knew it wouldn't last. It still wasn't enough and she needed to finish this. Still focusing on what she needed, what had to happen, she didn't notice her bushy hair was now smoking and standing on end and the puddle of water she was sitting in was steaming away. She only saw the troll towering over her as she knelt on the rapidly warming bathroom floor.

Wandless now, both hands simply clenched at her sides, she glared up at the troll and struck out with all of her fear and anger and pain, screaming at the top of her lungs a single word, “BURN!”

The magical blue glow flared and grew painfully bright as the damp troll suddenly exploded in roiling fire. Eyes locked to the burning form in front of her, Hermione didn't flinch or stop channeling out the seemingly limitless power the magical fire was asking of her. It was emptying her, leaving her as thin and dry as the air in the room. But this was what she'd demanded of her magic, and either she would die casting or the troll would. A hissed war cry from Sal, still painfully hot and wrapped tight around her aching arm, seconded her determination as she continued to bare down.

The frantic troll tried to bat the raging fire off its body, but more flames appeared just as rapidly as it put them out. It opened its mouth to scream, but the air in its lungs was drawn to fuel the reaction and more embers appeared inside its mouth. As the troll's knees hit the ground with an earthshaking crash, Hermione continued to kneel, motionless and still holding onto the raging magic, the firelight
reflected in her unblinking brown eyes.

Half a minute later, once there was nothing but a horribly stinking charred pile on the ground and the flames had started to flicker out, along with almost the last of her magic, she finally slumped sideways, shaking arms too tired to stop herself from hitting her head sharply against the wet stone floor of the bathroom.

Picking the larger, more obvious shards of the club out of his arm and brushing off some soot of unspeakable origin, Harry struggled to his feet again. He put the kitchen knife away in his boot, gripped his wand tightly and uselessly – if he was attacked again, he couldn't even make an eleven-year-old sneeze with what he had left – and started limping around the troll's smoldering corpse.

Slumping down next to where Hermione still lay panting and retching, he checked her for obvious injuries. She seemed unharmed other than a slightly reddened left hand, some burns low on her right arm, and most likely a bump on her head, which worried him the most as she was now throwing up. Painfully reaching out an arm, Harry snagged her wand from where it had rolled and stuffed it into his robes.

He grabbed Hermione under her arms and gently lifted her out of the messy pool of slightly-used Hogwarts feast on the floor. After half walking, half dragging her back out of the room and setting her upright against the wall next to the open doorway, he took Hermione's chin in his hand and turned her to face him. Her brown eyes were wet and huge and she shrank back as if she expected a strike across the face – or at least a horrible, cruel rebuke of some kind.

Summoning almost the last of his power, he raised his wand and ran a tiny household cleaning charm to remove the vomit from Hermione's face and now very frizzy hair. She blinked, then shakily looked him over. He handed Hermione her wand and she took it automatically, continuing to stare at him.

“I killed a thinking being,” she said, still looking for something in his face. She grasped her wand tighter in her small hand, now laying bonelessly on the ground. Her other arm was tucked across her body as if holding her insides together.

“Yeah,” he replied, meeting her gaze with silent, unblinking green eyes. Hermione stared back for a long moment, then nodded jerkily, now looking more frightened than when she had burst into the room and started casting on a huge mountain troll. She took a deep breath, twitched once, her entire body shuddering, then exhaled all at once, like someone had punched her in the stomach.

Harry watched as Hermione's special brand of Occlumency slowly came back up again, her eyes dulling and her emotionally crushed face smoothing out. Then she turned away, slumping against the wall and tilting her head to stare at the ceiling.

“Are you hurt?” she asked in a whisper.

“No, I'm fine thanks to you,” he said, patting her shoulder. He scanned the area carefully. “It looks like someone grabbed me, stunned me, then left me here for the troll. Weak but effective invisibility spells of some kind, a silence spell, and a pathetic stunner. Seem to be long gone now. Same profile as before, but they just left instead of trying to attack me directly this time. You and Sal okay?”

She shook her head but said, “Sal's okay. I just sent him away so he won't be found out. He didn't like that. I don't have much right now, magically. It feels...my chest and stomach feel sort of...empty. And I'm not hurt but... well, my left hand hurts a bit, as does my right arm...and my head, but otherwise...but I'm not really fine with what just happened, Harry.”
“I know the feelings,” he said with a shaky sigh. “All of them. I'm sorry about all this, I should have-”

“Don't,” she interrupted. “Don't you dare apologize for the horrible things other people try and do to you. You don't need to explain how...how something like this makes you feel. Not to me. I...I understand. Even better, now.”

Harry slowly nodded, started to apologize again, then stopped when he locked eyes with a frowning young witch who was apparently reading his mind with the usual, non-magical technique practiced by women of all ages and magical ability. Sighing, he eased himself down next to her, leaning his back against the wall. He had really expected to be taking this worse himself, but something about actually being in mortal peril had seemed...comforting.

“Also, don't lie,” Hermione continued, scolding him. “You aren't fine. I can faintly feel the lacerations on your arms, the contusions on you head and leg, and the minor ligament damage from your brand new sprained ankle. *Remember?*”

Harry, who had not, in fact, remembered about the health monitoring charm, wondered briefly what else he might have forgotten. He then shrugged and tried to evade. “Whatever you say, Hermione. Speaking of lying: teachers will be showing up in seconds. I suggest the whole truth about events from the moment I was grabbed. Minus Sal and the usual. Might want to dance around...whatever that was with the fire, but that's up to you. Could blame it on accidental magic, which it looked like that last part was anyway.”

He reached over and patted her knee. He wasn't sure who he was really trying to calm, her or himself. “We'll be fine,” he said, continuing to rub her knee reassuringly. Looking her over again, he frowned at her distant, listless appearance.

“Hermione-” Harry started, pausing when he saw her expression. Eyes narrow, she glared back at him.

“Yes, Harry. I'm shielding hard, pushing back almost all my emotions again. And I'll let it down slowly and have a nice girly cry as soon as I get back to my dorms. Maybe I'll sob on your shoulder tomorrow morning for a few minutes; I'll have to schedule that in pencil, though. For now, I'd like to think clearly for a while and save my rapidly increasing number of hygiene issues from the additional descriptors of 'tear stained' or 'snot covered.' I've also managed to avoided both 'bloody' and 'urine soaked' tonight, so at least my dignity is still somewhat intact.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and ran a hand over her face. “Good thing I'm caught up on homework. I'll be spending the rest of the week working this out with my violin and that soulful little Rachmaninoff piece I found. That is, if all my free time isn't spent in detentions from the second Madam Pomfrey lets me out of the hospital wing.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Harry said. “If they give you a complete medical exam, you might have to explain your little tattoo.”

She squeaked in surprise, dropped her wand in her lap, and grabbed her arm, just over the health monitoring charm's mark. “Oh no, Harry, I didn't think- I mean I *did* think, can't really stop, just not about-” Harry chuckled and squeezed her knee lightly, interrupting her panicked rambling.

“It isn't illegal, Hermione. It also isn't permanent. If you can keep your clothes on, they likely won't even notice it. If not, they'll make you help them unbind the charm. Just calm down. Everything will be okay.”
“That's fine for you to say, Harry,” she grumbled. “You're the Boy-Who-Lived. The worst that they’ll do to you is detentions. What if they toss my trunk and find all those Knockturn Alley 'gray' magic books I've borrowed from you? They'll think I'm turning Dark or something, learning evil Charms and casting weird spells on the hero of the magical world!”

“You have been casting weird spells on me,” he reminded her with a grin.

She glared back and huffed in annoyance, then her eyes grew wide and she covered her mouth with a shaking hand. “Oh no, your...your smut books are still in there! No no, this is so much worse! They'll think I'm an evil, perverted witch working with the Death Eaters to corrupt you! Or that I'm some bigot's idea of a nasty, dirty little Muggle. Or, or that I'm...that I would try to use m-my... t-to make you—”

“No, they won’t,” Harry said with a sigh. “I'll take care of it. Lavender and Parvarti have been borrowing them, yeah? Here's the situation: right now, you've got a bump on your head that, combined with you throwing up and being at least a little magically exhausted, I'm not entirely happy with. Madam Pomfrey will be even less pleased, knowing her. She'll want you to spend the night under observation.

“That means I can probably get out of the Hospital Wing before you, and before you've had to explain yourself much; so I'll just go straight back to the Gryffindor dorms and ask your roommate to hide the rest of those books with her stuff while you're still in Madam Pomfrey's tender care, along with any other non-school books in your trunk. But they won't search your stuff. Because you haven't done anything wrong.”

Hermione frowned and looked like she was about to start arguing. Thankfully, they both finally heard running footsteps heading down the corridors towards them. At least two adults, if he heard right. Not likely a threat. His current enemies didn't run in noisy herds. He relaxed a little but kept his wand in his hand, as did Hermione he noted with pride.

Good girl, he thought. Stay ready. Constant vigilance and all.

What he wasn't ready for was her punching him in the arm angrily with her wand hand, still cradling her other hand against her body. She leaned over, getting right in his surprised face until their noses almost touched.

“They could expel me because of something like contraband,” she hissed, “or worse, confiscate all my books! You had better take care of it, Harry Potter.”

Sulkily slouching against Harry's side, she leaned her head on his shoulder as they waited for the teachers to arrive and start handing out the inevitable punishments.

Severus Snape eyed the ashen ruins of the mountain troll with distaste. He was careful to view most things with distaste, as maintaining a consistent demeanor was key to his most secret and undetectable layer of mental defenses. Those were in addition to his strong but obvious mental shields. At this moment, however, it was mostly useful for keeping him from throwing up at the horrible smell.

His wounded leg was bound up so as to not drip on the floor, but it still hurt like hellfire. That encounter would have been even worse if the Headmaster hadn't insisted that they add another restraining layer to the stupid dog's control collars – something about keeping any children from being hurt if they opened the door.
Which obviously they would.

This entire setup was the least subtle thing ever, but it was the way the Headmaster wanted it. Absurd old fool. As it was, Severus had only been grazed by the overgrown mutt's claws, not savaged by one of the heads. But that was only because he wasn't trying to get through the trap door itself, simply checking the alarms on it, which still required he get closer than was really safe. They had all been in place, every warning spell untriggered. Albus had checked his own devices, confirming the situation. The Stone was still safe. For now.

“Well, Severus?” Albus Dumbledore asked, suddenly standing just over his shoulder, having arrived perfectly silently and without any obvious magical presence to give him away. Only long experience and finely honed reflexes entirely unlike a cat's – more like a snake's, really – kept Severus from leaping three feet into the air.

“It was the two of them,” he replied smoothly, “Potter and Granger. Flitwick and McGonagall found them out in the hall six minutes after Granger screamed like a banshee and ran off. It took Granger less than three minutes to locate Potter, which is...abnormal.”

“Ah, well, there are more things in love and magic, dear boy, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” Albus said infuriatingly.

“I should never have taken you to that outdoor Shakespeare thing in Glasgow during Summer break,” Severus sniped back. He just knew Albus was grinning through his beard at him. Albus knew he knew this, but he didn't turn around to give the old nutter the satisfaction of making him actually see such goofy nonsense.

“The traces are over there and there,” he pointed out to his old teacher. “I trapped them with an Erstle Net but did not attempt destructive analysis. This is not a crime scene, given that trolls are classed as magical creatures and as no students were actually seriously hurt, so we are not legally required to preserve any evidence.”

“Correct as usual, Severus,” Albus chortled as he moved to the indicated area near the door, which was glowing slightly green in a rough cloud shape. Another green cloud was by the wall on the other side of the room, low down against the floor.

“As I see things, Headmaster,” Severus stated with cold, clipped words, “the girl ran in, saw Potter on the ground by the wall and disarmed the troll. Potter attempted to cast some weak and useless spell to distract the troll, the troll turned to attack Granger, and then...it turned to ash, over the course of about two minutes of unnatural fire.”

“Oh my, that normally doesn't happen. Unless this is some new troll disease I was unaware of...?”

“No,” Severus answered sharply.

“AH. Then magic.”

“Obviously.”

Waving his wand through a complicated series of motions and muttering a spell under his breath, Albus Dumbledore pulled up a three-dimensional chart of the wand movements and power flux colorations of the spell Granger had cast. Severus was scooping some troll goop into a sample vial with small pushes of a sterile probe when he heard the older man gasp in shock.

“What is it?” Severus demanded, spinning around and readying his wand, clutching the vial in his other hand. Albus was still reviewing the spell diagrams, having teased apart four spells from the
confused and twisted magical traces.

“Severus, how do you read these?” he asked in a slightly quavering voice. Stepping around to view it from the same orientation, Severus looked at the indicated set of results, starting with the one on the left and ignoring the overpowered banishing spell Albus had pushed to one side.

“Water conjuration. One of the simplest of that class. Not a combat spell. Aguamenti. Within a First Year’s grasp, though it has an odd power tick here...”


“Hmm. Odd, but a results shift allowed by the spell. It is usually at least slightly muddied or brackish unless one concentrates properly. Same for the third spell, but it is more muddled and slightly less saline. Possible distracted casting. But it seems she was actively seeking that result, even the first try. Any idea why?”

“Continue,” Albus said simply.

Huffing in annoyance, Severus took in the second glowing diagram, the one in the middle. It was a continuous cast. Tens of seconds at least, possibly more than a minute. It even appeared to overlap the third spell, which had to be a mistake. Long for a Firstie, but within Granger's absurd magical core stores. The framing was normal for a Transfiguration, but something was a little off... The effect was explicitly indicated in a by-the-wand style that Hogwarts didn't teach. Odd. Students at Hogwarts weren't taught significators, though that information was in the library and was still taught in schools like l'académie de magie Beauxbâtons. Plausible.

Interesting. It was headed with a single wand marking. A circle with a line straight through it. No, something was wrong. This wasn't a wand guided Transfiguration. That was a symbol of the elements...salt again!

“Headmaster-“ he started.

Albus interrupted. “Simply review the data for now.”

It was actually an entirely different Transfiguration, one both advanced and very, very simple. The brackets, the symbol for salt, the closing statement of intent to call on the basic nature of a metallic substance itself, at a point of water boiling heat. Then she held it for a long, long time, pouring power into the spell with foolish abandon.

This was clearly modified from a novice exercise of... the art, but like Ward Building, Curse Breaking, or Spell Scribing, it was all post-Hogwarts material. In this case, not for magical power reasons, but for safety. But this was no exercise, it was more like a child lifting an anvil with arm strength alone, and for no good reason. While fighting a troll.

“She turned the salt in saltwater into...salt?” Severus said, confused.

“Elemental sodium,” Albus said quietly.

Severus’ eyes grew wide with realization. “But that is-”

“Not something we teach twelve year olds. A result reached because of mundane knowledge, knowledge of which most children from magical families would not have even an inkling. A science and chemistry education is currently uniquely Muggle, and can be begun earlier and in more abstract than Potions, which requires intensive and hands-on practical study. I would not have thought one so young... But she is Muggle-born and the smartest witch of at least her year, if not... So perhaps at
least this much came easier to her than it would have to you or I at that age.”

“Alchemy,” Severus whispered. A simple exercise in the art, but one performed on a large quantity of materials, under impure field conditions, and while actually in combat with a dangerous magical creature. All done by a child.

“Granger is more trouble than I had thought possible. You need to have a talk with the girl. Immediately.”

Albus chuckled his little laugh again, looking at the remaining traces, the less clear and unreadably scrambled signature of wild or accidental magic. “Yes, she not only has the spark of genius, but it has clearly, ah, lit a fire in her mind. She burned this troll where it stood with a mixture of simple single substance conjuration, what appears to be some rather powerful accidental magic, and amateur Alchemy – that last a description that sends shivers down my spine. But consider: she did this not for money or for fame, but for love of another so deep that she willingly risked her own life to save his.”

Removing his small, wire-framed glasses with slightly shaking fingers, he turned to blink owlishly at Severus. “My friend, I will indeed be most interested to talk with our young Miss Granger.”

Chapter End Notes

Authors note: I've read a lot of fanfic where various characters are described as being magically beautiful for various reasons, sometimes in improbable ways. I wanted to see what the process of finding a magically enhanced “look” would be like, after suggesting (in previous chapters) that most powerful magics, like the Hogwarts professors, do something similar. It also gives Hermione a very different interest from most fanfics, something both girly and nerdy.

She’s basically a hair styling and makeup nerd right now, as well as an amateur violinist and bookworm – all things that don't seem out of place to me for someone her age and personality. Never seen the first three done before myself, though I've heard about fics where she plays. Hopefully it's working and doesn't come off as an attempt to make her an OC in Hermione's clothing. Just having her like books is too single note for me.

In related news: yep, Hermione's found a true textbook on Alchemy somewhere. Harry only had pop-culture type information on it, not a real textbook. In yet another thing I've never seen in fanfic, she's going to learn real, classically flavored Alchemy in this fic. This is also something Dark Future Hermione never did. It looks like Harry doesn't know what she actually did yet, either. Should be an interesting change.

I mentioned one basic Alchemy exercise, purifying and heating a single metal to 100C. Anyone have any ideas for other simple exercise (i.e., it doesn't need to incinerate trolls) I could throw in as flavor? Anything short of lead into gold should work for this.

Review and let me know how you think the story is going. Thanks for reading.
Chapter Thirteen

“Miss Granger,” Professor McGonagall said, crossing the hospital room. “I hope you are feeling better. As you can see, I am here with the Headmaster. We have a few questions about what happened tonight.”

Hermione looked up from her book, then quickly looked down again. Harry was pretty sure she could evade most passive, wandless attempts at mind reading, but she didn’t dare risk it as tired and emotionally drained as she was now.

“Oh, of course, Professor,” she said, putting the book away on the bedside table. She focused on her hands, clutched tight in her lap.

Her head of house placed a straight-backed chair down next to Hermione’s bed. The Headmaster summoned a large, poofy, distractingly purple and gold armchair with a flick of his wand.

It was the Headmaster who started. “If you are feeling up to it Miss Granger, could you relate the events as you saw them from earlier tonight?”

Hermione nodded, then gave a highly edited version of the story. Every effort was made to stutter and hesitate at the right times. It helped that she was tremendously nervous. She suggested a slightly longer chase with a harder time finding Harry. No one should be in a position to check. Then she bit her lip and gave an exact and precise explanation of what happened with the troll in the bathroom.

“Most unfortunate. I am very sorry you had to go through something like that Miss Granger. But in putting your friend above all else you have upheld the finest traditions of your House. And I hear you are none the worse for it.”

Her eyes went to the bandage over her lower left arm and the balm-filled glove she wore on that hand. Madam Pomfrey said it would be fine. It had been...veiny and weird about fifteen minutes after her little stunt. Hermione and never even had a broken bone before. The idea that she’d maimed herself...but thinking of what could have happened to Harry was worse.

“We will find out which failings led to this and they will be dealt with.” A glance up showed the
stony face of the most dangerous wizard in Great Britain so she hide her eyes in her lap again.

He continued, but softer. “I hope this was just a very unfortunate accident. But for that, Mr. Potter would have to have been dragged into that room for some unknown reason at what would be just the wrong time. No, his was no prank, no simple rough-housing. If someone acted in my school with deadly intent, they will be found. And with the measures the staff has now taken, neither you, nor Mr. Potter, nor any of Hogwarts’ students should have worry for their safety.”

There was a short cough and Professor McGonagall spoke up. “Well then if that’s all I think Miss Granger needs her rest. It is absurdly late and though Miss Granger is excuse, some of us have class in the morning.”

The Headmaster gave a small chuckle and stood, his absurd chair vanishing behind him without even a gesture. “Goodnight Miss Granger. Perhaps we can speak more of events and how they will be best handled tomorrow.”

The sound of the hospital wing doors closing behind them was muffled by a charm to keep from distracting patients but it might as well have been a choir of bells. She’d done it. She hadn’t given away any secrets. Though it sounded like extra security measures had already been added. Likely tracking charms and spells to detect magic.

Then she remembered the Headmaster’s promise. And it’s ominous phrasing. Maybe she was in more trouble than she’d thought.

The long, dark body of Sal wound around the edge of the hospital wing to Hermione’s bed. Hermione, still unable to sleep, stared over the side of the bed as he approached. Twisting up the bed’s metal leg, Sal leaned forward and bumped his scaly nose to hers then reported back what he’d seen, their eyes locked together. Harry was being watched. The one that smelled like garlic and death was also under direct monitoring. They would warn her and Harry if anything happened.

“Thank you,” she whispered to the snake. It nodded, feeling her thanks if not understanding her words, then slithered under the covers with her.

“That tickles!” she hissed, trying to avoid making too much noise. Madam Pomfrey slept in a small bedroom just outside the hospital wing, with a door connecting the two left open so she could keep an ear out. Annoying but responsible. Strange that she didn’t have any help, but that was sort of the way of things at Hogwarts. A huge, empty castle with too few responsible adults. Something to look into. Hermione made a mental note to check before drifting off to sleep.

Hermione awoke to a tapping. It was very dark. This time of month. Moon cycle. Moonrise was...during the day. So it was. Night. Great. Well deduced, Holmes.

Groaning from continued magical exhaustion, she inched to the edge of the bed and hopped down to the extremely cold stone floor. Teeth clenched around a scream, she rapidly shuffled towards the window that was the source of the noise. Her left hand ached in the cold Scottish winter air. She assumed the hospital wing was magically heated, but it didn’t feel like it.

A pale shadow clung to the ledge outside the window. It took Hermione several minutes to figure out how to open it. And another five to go back, find her wand, and then check to see if there was an alarm charm of some sort on the narrow slit window—it wasn’t really a spell, just laying her wand against it to feel for residual magical energy. There wasn’t any spell, sadly. Hermione made a mental note to suggest better security as she unlatched and opened the window.
It was somehow even colder out there! Then her face was then buffeted by snowy white feathers.

“Hedwig, calm down!” Hermione tried to get back into bed with minimal noise. Hedwig had perched on the bedpost at the headboard, glaring at her.

“Look, I’m sorry Harry was yet again in danger. But it wasn’t my fault!”

The large bird grumbled at her and shook her head.

“Oh. Well. Sorry about taking so long with the window?”

A bark this time. Hedwig held out her leg to Hermione. It was a note from Harry, of course. Hedwig leaned down and preened at her head while she read the letter.

“Hermione, I hope you’re feeling okay. Just wanted to write to make sure you knew I was thinking of you.” Pass phrase for this month that he wasn’t in danger or being coerced, good. “It sure isn’t like summer fun,” that was the code phrase for him not doing anything until they met again, “but I’m getting a lot of questions from all the boys in the dorm. I’ve tried to tell them just enough to get them off my case.” Harry wanted her to tell the truth but not too much of it and was doing the same. “I think that’s about it. Get better soon. Love, Harry.”

Hermione stared at that last line. It was just a standard closing, but it did something weird in her chest. She didn’t get many letters, except from extended family. And that one pen pal who had gotten bored and stopped writing. And that one time she’d written a local MP to correct a completely incorrect point on historic land use in-

Hedwig barked loud, having stopped in her grooming to hold out a leg. She looked at Hermione pointedly.

“Oh. Yes, of course. Thank you, Hedwig.” Hermione grabbed some paper from her homework pile on the side table and started making her own note back, including the correct pass phrases to say she was doing fine and everything. Hedwig pulled a large clump of her bushy hair to one side and slicked it down with her tiny bird tongue. By the time Hermione finished her own message, that she was fine and didn’t miss having to sleep through Fay’s terrible snoring, and for Harry not to do anything boy like once again storm the hospital wing, her hair was in an even worse state than usual. Strangely calming, though.

She let the beautiful snowy owl out the window, securing it behind Hedwig with a frown.

The small gold ring, mounted vertically on a dark wood block on a shelf behind the Headmaster's desk, whistled with an almost silent, extremely high-pitched tweet. Hermione had absolutely no idea what it was doing or what it was for. In fact, she considered, could the older wizard even hear something that high-pitched? Maybe he didn't know it made an audible noise at all.

Throughout the Headmaster's office various other items squeaked, clicked, or hummed quietly, none of them quite loud enough to be called annoying but certainly qualifying as distracting. Hermione idly wondered if that was meant to make people slightly off-balance when they met with the Headmaster but couldn't come to any conclusions without more information.

It was the day after Halloween and she hadn't had a chance to meet with Harry in private yet. The upshot was, she was working entirely from their previous plans. And there was something weird and extra-spatial-dimensional going on with Harry's familiar. But all that was history. She needed to focus on the now. Fidgeting on the large, quite expensive looking upholstered chair, she knew she needed to stop avoiding thinking about how to handle her impending talk with The Albus
Dumbledore, the most famous wizard in the world.

Before heading to Hogwarts, Hermione had wanted nothing more than to be like the wise and powerful old man, as well known for his work on advancing magical knowledge and social rights for magical beings as he was for his martial prowess and skill in magical combat. Being in Gryffindor House was her dream, as that was where he had been while in school. Soon, she would be speaking one on one with her hero. She should be thrilled.

She was terrified. She squirmed in her seat, looking at the portraits on the walls of former headmasters. They were pretending to sleep, but she would occasionally catch one peeping out of a half-opened eye at her.

The Headmaster's fame had faded into the background in her mind when she learned what had happened to Harry, what little she'd been able to get out of him. It was all the Headmaster's fault, even if it was only the result of difficult decisions and the best of intentions. And now she had to figure out how to lie to him, without getting caught or otherwise somehow making things worse. Because she no longer trusted the Headmaster's decisions when it came to Harry.

Over the last two months, Harry had talked with her about various strategies for getting the Headmaster on their side, to help with the hunt for the soul containers and begin the fight against Voldemort's forces early. Harry had also gone over the numerous ways the most politically powerful wizard in the world could interfere with their plans if he thought Harry had gone evil or was possessed by Voldemort. Showing strange abilities and impossible knowledge would be a good way to bring that sort of suspicion down on them. Something she had just done the other night.

She was in a tight spot now, not knowing what would happen if she honestly said what she'd done. Her secret studies with Harry were not precisely illegal, but they were unusual and she had no idea what her Head of House or the Headmaster would say about that. And not even Harry knew what the Headmaster would do if he discovered Harry's time travel experiences.

They were split in opinions right now, and it wasn't something to be debated over notes delivered by owl. Harry thought the Headmaster would likely help them train to fight against Voldemort, using the knowledge from his future to find the soul containers and deal with them. The only hard part would be proving Harry was indeed from the future and not crazy or possessed or something.

She thought, however, that the magi-temporal concerns themselves were the primary threat. If the Headmaster knew of Harry's future knowledge, he might read everything from Harry's mind and then simply Obliviate both of them, under the idea that Voldemort finding out such things over Harry's scar-connection (or a silly little girl babbling and gossiping) would outweigh the violation of their minds and memories.

And that didn't even account for what would happen if the Headmaster thought future knowledge was dangerous to the timeline, or some kind of magical threat to the universe, or something else equally scary. The Hat's conversation with Harry suggested that something like that wasn't outside the realm of possibility. They just didn't know how that sort of thing was handled by either someone in the Headmaster's position or by the Ministry—in the latter case, it was most likely the completely opaque Department of Mysteries. The fact that Harry didn't know anything about them, even with his future knowledge, worried Hermione greatly.

So Hermione's argument boiled down to them not knowing enough about the threats of time travel in the magical world, or how Headmaster Dumbledore would react to Harry (and now her) having such knowledge. She thought that until they knew more, they should keep quiet and only pass on hints that they could reasonably have gained through other means.
That didn't mean she didn't believe Harry in all things. That didn't mean they didn't have others plans. And she was about to implement one of those, without consulting Harry. Hermione really, really didn't want to act unilaterally like this. For all his possibly misplaced trust, Harry was actually an adult in mind, if not in body. And if she screwed this up, they would both be in almost unimaginable trouble. And worse, Harry would be furious with her. Assuming they still even remembered each other and their friendship after such a screw-up.

She needed to be a specific person now, filled with both truths and lies made out of unspoken words. She needed to focus on the three goals she'd worked out for this meeting:

First, protect her and Harry's minds and personal autonomy from heavy-handed interference through whatever means necessary, including lies, subterfuge, and even (as if it would work) violence.

Second, so long as it did not interfere with the first goal, work on how to get information on Voldemort's current plans and future threats to the Headmaster.

And last, where it did not interfere with the first two goals, set the political stage with the Headmaster for helping to free Harry's godfather.

It might not all be possible in this one meeting, but so long as she did not mess up too badly she could start to set the groundwork. The last was the only one with immediate time sensitivity—the idea of someone suffering like that made her feel sick—but it was also the hardest to do safely. She had to trust that their developing plans with the student letters in the Daily Prophet would work.

A brush against her senses, then the door clicked open and Professor McGonagall walked in. Closing the door after herself, she then took a seat beside Hermione. “Miss Granger, I hope you are doing better now?”

Hermione swallowed and nodded, staring at her lap and concentrating on her Occlumency for both emotional control and to hide...whatever it was she didn't want people to know. She didn't know what that was now, obviously. In a few seconds, she herself wouldn't even know there was anything to hide. She only wished she had a well-thought-out plan for this meeting, but there simply hadn't been time.

“Good,” her professor said straightening the robes in her lap. “Yes. Well. I was asked by Professor Dumbledore to attend this meeting. He thinks, quite rightly, that meeting alone with a young woman isn't proper.”

Hermione's eyebrows scrunched as she considered whether a boy, or more specifically Harry, would have received the same...consideration. For some reason she couldn't quite grasp right now, she suspected he hadn't. But if Harry had been in private meetings with the Headmaster, not that there was anything wrong with that, no one would see anything wrong with that. No, it was that she was female, so it wasn't proper for her-

But her annoyance could wait, as Professor McGonagall was still talking. “After examining the bathroom and getting your statement the night of the- that night, the Headmaster was very worried. Some of the magics used were decidedly odd. He wanted to speak to you about that. But right now, I want to know in detail how you are doing now that Madam Pomfrey has released you from the hospital wing.”

Other than missing Harry, Hermione felt fine. A little tired, sure. She was feeling a little feverish and had the start of what might be a monstrous headache. Madam Pomfrey had told her to come back every day after classes, and not to do any magic outside class until she was cleared as healthy, which would cut into her practical study time something awful.
“I feel much better today, Professor. No dizziness, nausea, or sudden weakness. Thank you for asking.” Hermione hesitated. “Do you know what the Headmaster is worried about?”

The older woman's well-lined face was unreadable, her gaze on the opposite wall, and her hands clasped loosely in her lap. “The accidental magic incident was interesting to him—that is all I know of his thoughts on the matter.”

They sat in uncomfortable silence for a while. Hermione was starting to feel a little overheated and light-headed, and was having to consciously control her breathing to keep from hyperventilating. It was just a teacher, and she hadn't done anything wrong. Why was she so nervous all of a sudden?

“You are to be congratulated, Miss Granger,” the professor finally said, breaking the tension. “You and your friend Mr. Potter have been doing very well in my class. I have heard similar reports from several other professors.”

“Th-thank you, professor,” Hermione stammered out, blushing. She was surprised to still be affected by her old feelings of pleasure at being praised for her academics. That obsession she'd thought thoroughly smothered by having to deal with the serious and immediate problems she and Harry now faced. Apparently, that was not the case.

Professor McGonagall smiled over at her and continued. “Though not class related, I have also noticed your exploration of beauty charms and glamours. So far, you have done well not to allow those experiments to interfere with your classwork. I hope you continue to maintain this level of academic professionalism in the future. And be careful to avoid any human transfigurations, of course. Such advanced work should be left until late in your education, as they are very dangerous.”

“Oh, uh, yes professor,” Hermione said, searching for a more expansive response. That dental charm she'd already used wasn't technically human transfiguration any more than a hair lengthening charm was. But no need to mention that. “Ma'am, if you don't mind my saying, yours are very good as well. I haven't figured out which ones you're using, though.”

The older woman stiffened slightly. “Miss Granger, I am not using any beauty charms.”

Hermione immediately panicked and started babbling. “Oh! I'm so sorry! I thought, I mean you look fine without- but I'm sure I see the tell-tale...I was sure you...ah, sorry. I'm sorry professor, I...”

Watching Hermione trail off with a sour look on her face, Professor McGonagall sighed, then took out her wand. The younger witch hunched away, into the overstuffed cushions. This put her right arm over the arm of her chair, out of sight of the professor. By the time Hermione realized what she'd done, her wand was in her hand. Surprised at herself, she gripped it with tense fingers.

“I do not normally inform students of this, at least not before their seventh year, but...I do, in fact, use appearance altering charms. Ones which you, apparently, are able to detect merely visually. How very perceptive of you.”

“Wh-why?” Hermione asked, again without thinking. “I mean, what reason do you have to- oh, how rude of me. I'm sure it's personal. I just-”

The professor shook her head. “Miss Granger, it's perfectly alright. This isn't exactly a secret.”

She waved her wand in front of her deeply lined face (Hermione's wand hand, still hidden, twitched). The older woman's face flickered and shimmered, the illusion falling away and leaving a much younger looking woman in its place. Professor McGonagall still had the same frown, though.

“I am well past fifty years old. I have been told by my Muggle-born students that I do not look it.
Many professionals use a charm to appear older. Sometimes, much older.”

“Like the professors at Hogwarts?”

“Yes, Miss Granger, though I won't discuss with you anyone's specific use of such charms, as that is rather private.”

Hermione nodded, listening attentively.

“Age in the wizarding world culture is strongly linked to power and knowledge, so someone in an important position needs to look the part. Personally, I started using them because those only familiar with Muggle aging speeds had a hard time with a teacher who looked to be younger than some of her Seventh Year students—which was the case when I started teaching, if not today. This minor deception smooths many Muggle-born students and their parents' introduction to the magical world. It also adds a certain gravitas since I became a senior administrator at this school.”

A quick glance showed things Hermione hadn't noticed before. Her eyes flicked from unlined hands to the (previously undisguised) dense and healthy red hair on her scalp. Only the color was different now. Her memory recalled a strong gait and upright stance. Glasses sometimes, but not always used in either reading or teaching, suggesting...not corrective? Enchanted, maybe.

“When did you start teaching, professor?” Hermione asked, mind still buzzing.

“When I was in my early twenties, Miss Granger.”

“But...if you were in your twenties, and the seventh years were in their seventeenth or eighteenth years...”

The professor sighed again. “The use of magic affects the human body in strange ways, Miss Granger. I started using very advanced transfigurations and charms at a very young age.”

“I was told I was born with a really strong magical core,” Hermione said, almost in a whisper. “Were you, ma'am?”

“Hmm,” the older woman considered with pursed lips. “I was not tested, myself, though I was made aware of your situation as your Head of House. But that is not what resulted in my unusually youthful appearance as a young woman. You must be careful not to assume too much from modern Magical Core theory—it is a controversial area of medicine, and not a soothsaying method for predicting future success or even the mature magical power of a student.

“Though children are born with different inherent levels of magic, that cannot and should not be held against them. They are not somehow naturally presaged as either dunces or magical prodigies. It is also interesting to note that variations in initial core size do not follow so-called 'pure-blood' lines. The cynic would say this is one reason it is not regularly tested in First Year students. Muggle-born, such as yourself, often show higher initial levels of magical core strength than those born to magical families centuries old.”

McGonagall shifted in her seat, putting her wand back in her sleeve. “The more and the longer you use magic, the more it becomes...a part of who and what you are. Your use of it is reflected in your mind and body. Emotional stress also affects how and how much one is touched by one's own magic. My own youth was a troubled time, and I had to use magic in self-defense from a young age. As have you, Miss Granger, even before joining Hogwarts and these recent unfortunate events. I wonder how your magic will touch you, in time.”

Hermione stared at her teacher with shock. She knew.
Sad, old eyes in a much younger face met hers. “I was born with the caul, a very rare sign many old families hold to and consider indicative of a close connection to magic,” Professor McGonagall said. “Growing up with a wizarding family, I had a great deal of support when my unusually strong accidental magical expressions occurred. Once at Hogwarts, I used my natural-born abilities to push harder and further in my studies than most of my peers.”

She paused, staring down at her lap, playing with what Hermione recognized as a wedding band. Odd that she had never noticed that before.

“One of the follies of youth is the desire to remain youthful forever,” the professor said. “A belief one is invincible. Though this unconscious wish was not quite met, it did have long-term effects. As you can see.”

It added up, of course, but that wasn't the interesting part. Slowed visible aging linked to mental state had significant implications on lifespan for magicals. Implications she'd need to review later. For now, Hermione realized she needed to put away her wand and sit up because a huge presence was-

The door swung open behind them and in walked the Headmaster, dressed in a bright orange robe with little tassels on the bottom. He took in the entire room in a single glance. “Ah yes. It was a shame when you decided to cover up your natural youthfulness with premature lines and gray hairs, Minerva. I wear mine with pride now, but would not wish anyone to seek them before their time.”

Professor McGonagall pursed her lips as she turned in her chair to glare at the Headmaster.

He smiled back, walking over to sit behind his ancient-looking desk. “Always good to see your natural face, Minerva.”

“Thank you, Albus,” the professor said dryly, tapping her finger impatiently. “Likewise. However, this meeting is not regarding my appearance, nor yours. And I need to get Miss Granger to the Great Hall in,” here Professor McGonagall seemed to check an internal clock for a moment, “just under two hours for supper. Hopefully we will not run over that much.”

Folding his hands over his beard and leaning forward, the Headmaster nodded earnestly. “Quite right. On to it, then. Miss Granger,” here he turned to look her in the eyes. She met his gaze, her hands shaking slightly. “You had a very interesting night yesterday and had to spend some time in the hospital wing. I am very sorry such a thing happened here at Hogwarts. The troll was able to enter the castle through a poorly secured side entrance, one of several we have taken significant measures to secure. Please be assured that such a thing will not happen again.”

But it wasn't an accident, was it? The troll was let in by...someone. The Headmaster had said the side entrance wasn't secured well, and that it took “significant measures” to correct that issue. If a door was simply broken into or left unlatched...He also didn't call it an accident, and instead used neutral, passive language. She assumed that was because he didn't want to alarm her, or other students, with the fact that someone—a witch or wizard—let an artificially maddened troll into the school for some unknown purpose. Or rather, an unknown person with an obvious purpose.

She assumed whoever it was did not fear a “very painful death,” or at least not a three-headed dog. Hermione felt briefly that she ought to know who that was, then that feeling passed. There were only protections on that third-floor corridor that school children can detect and overcome. In fact, that seemed almost expected. Really, a such a simply spelled door, and then a dog, though large and scary looking, that will instantly fall asleep to music. And was apparently owned by Hagrid and trained not to hurt children. It beggared the imagination. She was missing something. Hermione thought the Headmaster's office seemed better guarded, just by having a password, so there had to be a reason not to simply hide it there.
As she had many closely related oddities, all connected to the Headmaster, it seemed likely that the troll, the strangely low-level protections, the package Harry had seen taken from Gringotts, and the use of a location other than his office to hide the package were related. Though not to that other mysterious attacker who had ambushed Harry.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, taking another deep breath. “Is Harry well? I had not had a chance to talk to him yet.” Her head was starting to feel hot—she wasn't sure why, but she wasn't surprised.

“Your friend and housemate Mr. Potter is fine. Though placed in grave danger, I do not believe this troll was part of a well-planned attack on him.” He was watching her closely with his flashing, brilliantly-blue eyes.

Her head started to ache. There were likely two different forces at play. Trying to hurt Harry in secret didn't work as a distraction tactic. That would only have been discovered later; if she had not-

She swallowed, unwilling to complete that hypothetical. The troll itself was a good public distraction for someone attempting to reach whatever is in the third-floor corridor. The actual attack on Harry was as sloppy as the first, a chance taken when an opportunity presented itself. The troll was prepared ahead of time, for that specific night. But the identity of the troll's master seemed less important to her than the other attacker, for some reason.

She nodded in reply. “That was my conclusion as well, sir. It is most likely that the attacker from before merely took advantage of the situation. A plan quickly formulated and set into action after the announcement of the troll's presence. Whoever let in the troll seemed to have another goal in mind. One on the third floor.”

Sitting back in his seat, the Headmaster stroked his beard thoughtfully. Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione could see her Head of House's eyebrows raised in shock.

“It seems your intelligence and perceptiveness were not exaggerated, Miss Granger,” the Headmaster said, patting his chest with one wrinkled hand. “You are, of course, correct. I cannot speak further of the security issues, as that weakens them, or about other issues with the castle. Be assured that I take the safety of everyone in this castle very, very seriously.”

The Headmaster took a deep breath. “You do your House credit with your bravely, young lady. Though I know you and other of Harry's friends are attempting to keep him safe, an effort I strongly applaud, I must still make sure you do not attempt to seek out possible perpetrators yourselves. The staff of Hogwarts are well aware of the threat and are doing their best to bring this situation to a speedy resolution.”

Hermione shifted uncomfortably, seeing the holes in the logic as soon as the words were out of the Headmaster's mouth. If he was a threat himself, she was treading on thin ice now. “I understand. What chance would we have against a skilled, full-grown magical?” Especially the Headmaster. “I will do what I can to keep Harry and myself safe, sir. But I don't understand one thing. You have apparently not brought in the Aurors or any other members of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to investigate either attack. And you have also not used your office to secure whatever the troll plot instigator was after. The situation and the actions you have taken indicate that this is not a normal thief, after Gringotts gold or a simple magic item, and you do not merely wish them to be discouraged or thwarted in their attempts.”

The Deputy Headmistress was gripping the arms of her chair, her mouth hanging slightly open, her eyes flicked back to the Headmaster as he responded. “That is accurate, though I suspect you misunderstand the wider situation. The senior staff here do not believe that bringing in more outsiders would help in this case, as the evidence of what has happened, or even that there is a threat, is
minimal—circumstantial at best. The property in question is private, and does not fall under Ministerial purview—nor would I wish it to. Unable to help us find the culprit or even solid proof of a plot, the DMLE would not be able to provide protections at a level better than Hogwarts already possesses, for either the students or the castle's merely material contents. Which again, I will not discuss with you.

“Official attention might also result in a more dangerous situation for him if they decided Mr. Potter was to be removed from Hogwarts for his own safety. Which could easily happen if the Minister for Magic learned both of Mr. Potter's previous trials with his relatives and this current situation. Facts which an official investigation would surely uncover. Mr. Fudge is greatly swayed by public perception—if he decided Mr. Potter was better kept in DMLE protective custody, it would be difficult for me to prevent such action.”

Hermione frowned. That seemed possible. But the Headmaster was intentionally distracting her from the odd choice of hiding spots for something so clearly very important. Preying on her feelings for Harry.

“I know you have great influence with Mr. Potter, as perhaps his first ever friend,” the Headmaster continued. “With your quick mind and apparently great devotion to the young man, you could unintentionally put him in a great deal of danger if you attempted to take certain actions without understanding the true state of affairs. Actions you might feel necessary to prevent some looming disaster at the cost of risking your own safety. Please, take a while to consider any such course of action. Go to your Head of House to discuss your fears if you would rather not discuss them with me, or if I am unavailable. After all that has happened, I would certainly understand if you felt hesitant to reach out to adults for help.”

Sighing into his beard, he added, “Especially as you seem to blame me for his deplorable home life up to this point. A failure I am most guilty of and regret greatly, as I am entirely to blame. I can only implore you to see fit to give us a chance.”

Well, that was about what she'd expected him to say and didn't tell her much about his intentions. She looked over at Professor McGonagall, who looked a down sadly at her lap. No clues there. Hermione was feeling trapped and cornered, unable to figure out if the Headmaster could be trusted or not. Looking up at the wise-looking old man sitting behind his ornate desk, she grew angry at the whole situation. She should be able to trust adults. She should be able to trust \textit{him}. This wasn't right.

“Miss Granger, I also wanted to speak with you about the magic you used in your admirable defense of Mr. Potter.”

She looked up again, blinking away half-shed tears of anger. “Of course, sir.”

“You used a spell to create sodium from seawater,” he said, running a hand over the top of his desk as if feeling for the grain of the wood. “That is not a standard transfiguration. In fact, it appeared to be something else entirely. Would you tell me what that spell was, and where you came across it, Miss Granger?”

How the Headmaster reacted to this meant a great deal. And it was relatively safe, she thought. “I've spent some time hunting around the empty rooms at Hogwarts, sir.” (True) “I found,” (in Harry's pile of used books), “a very old introductory guide to alchemy. I have been doing some of the most basic exercises. The ones that looked safe.”

The Headmaster's kindly face looked at her across the desk. “Ah, interesting. Finding a good book is always cause for celebration. But I sense you had practiced something like that before. Sodium from saltwater to make a boiling hot fire. Perhaps, as a measure to defend your friend Mr. Potter?”
Wow. That had been fast. But she...she had nothing to hide. “Yes, sir. I practiced it in empty bathrooms, which I know from Hogwarts, A History have the best ventilation. I also used a spare personal potion station air filter stone, just to be sure.”

The old man nodded, pleased by what he heard. “Good, very good. Still not exactly a safe exercise of the craft, but enough for limited experimentation. Combat application, though...” Here he trailed off, looking at her expectantly.

“That was foolish and dangerous, I know sir,” she said quickly, terribly embarrassed. “I...I also used it in a bathroom that time, so the poisonous gasses would have minimal time to damage lungs, but still. It almost...I could have hurt Harry! I almost hurt myself. And worst of all, it didn't work. But then there was an explosion of power, and I felt...I felt like it was completely out of control!”

“And yet, you in fact kept in control well enough that neither of you were badly injured,” he added softly.

She continued to stare at her lap, hands twisted in her skirt.

“Miss Granger, you saved a life. With the knowledge you had, you did the best you could. And it was enough. You won the day. And it is time to look forward and plan for tomorrow. But first, there is a matter I must resolve.”

She looked up, confused and with tears in her eyes again. “What do you mean, sir?”

“Might I see your hands for a moment, Miss Granger?” he said.

Hermione blinked at the non sequitur, but stood and walked over to the Headmaster's desk. She hesitated and almost stopped when he took a long ruler from a desk drawer. Images of various possible barbaric school punishments ran through her mind, but seemed to disappear almost immediately into a black hole somewhere. She was calm. If this was what it took, she would walk to her fate gladly.

He turned his chair and beckoned her around to stand in front of him. Professor McGonagall stood and peered over his desk, a quizzical look on her face.

“Please hold out both hands in front of you,” the Headmaster said, reaching for the long wooden ruler.

Hermione gulped, and a stray tear slipped down her cheek. She wasn't going to cry. She refused to cry. Pushing down on her roiling magic, she tried to tell herself that striking out with wild, wandless magic would be less than useless in this situation. It burned inside her, insistent and angry. An old, twisted anger. What right did he have to punish her? Why shouldn't she strike back, now that she had power?

Lifting her shaking hands, she looked away, reading the titles of the books on one of the many shelves that covered the office walls. Trying to forget past incidents, and the shame and humiliation. At least this time, there was no one else her age to see her senseless punishment. She always tried her best to follow the rules, but the adults never understood. Eventually, she'd given up trying to explain why things exploded or caught on fire around her, and simply tried to keep her head down and follow every rule she could find.

And once again, she'd somehow failed. She waited for the ruler to come down.

Instead, warm wrinkled hands pressed into hers, palm to palm. She could feel how they flickered faintly with power. In an instant, she felt:
His power.

Strong, male, old.


And flickering, warmth. Black coals banked but glowing. A forest blaze long burned out, but still able to leap to life in a moment.

Fire.

She jerked away and stared back at the Headmaster in surprise.

“I believe there has been a misunderstanding, Miss Granger,” he said sadly. The ruler was back on the desk, and he was holding out his own hands still, palms up. “There will be no wrapping on knuckles with rulers, or any other striking of students in this school—forevermore.”

There was a wet sniffling behind her, but Hermione's attention was entirely on the Headmaster. “I...I'm sorry,” she spluttered. “I just thought...” Then her curiosity overcame her nerves. “Forever? But how is that possible, sir? You will not be Headmaster forever. I mean, no offense...”

The Headmaster's smile was back. “Certainly none taken, young lady. Every Headmaster has a single issue that they can enshrine in Hogwarts' history. A single issue which they can enforce for all future generations.”

“But rules can be ignored or changed, sir,” she said.

“Just so. Which is why, so long as the Hogwarts founding principles are not violated, these new projects or precepts will become magically enforced within the castle walls and grounds.”

There was a noise that might have been the wiping of a nose, then Professor McGonagall spoke, and Hermione turned to see her Head of House's reddened eyes. “You should know, Miss Granger, that though we do not advertise the fact to them, no student can be...fatally injured while within Hogwarts' protections. That is one reason we are the most celebrated school of magic in the world. That protective geas was laid down by the Founders themselves and will stand as long as Hogwarts does. Any plan to severely injure is discouraged, any plot to kill is foiled. That is the power of the Founders, and why they are hailed as heroes around the world to this day.

“Each Headmaster has a right to lay down their own powerful new charms and protections, changes to the school's function or structure, or even minor geas of their own—if they have the personal power to enact them. Things such as the point system, the change to add prefects to assist in student matters, the location and protections of the dorms, and even the new lighting and plumbing systems are the projects of past Headmasters. Some Headmasters were powerful, with powerful ideas that still echo in these halls. Others, less so—or perhaps simply more subtle in their choices.”

“And yours, sir?” Hermione asked with a wavering voice, turning to the powerful old wizard seated behind the desk.

The Headmaster looked grave. “No student enrolled at Hogwarts shall fear corporal punishment ever again, in any form. Light work assignments and lines remain as punitive tools, but no teacher shall strike a student as a behavior correction measure again.”

Hermione blinked in surprise. “That seems...very minor—if you don't mind my saying sir.”
The Headmaster nodded wisely. “That is true. However, I was very careful of the exact wording and method for enforcing my mandate. It is also intent based, with strict allowance for the immediate safety of the children, and covers all adults when relating to the students—not merely teachers at Hogwarts. Thus, this geas will also serve to protect all students while they attend school...even when they return home.”

Eyes widening with recognition of the scope of the magic Headmaster Dumbledore had worked, Hermione’s jaw fell open. Not just Harry, but all her new friends were safe from that sort of abuse. She was as well, but that was less important than Harry not having to fear his horrible relatives. She struggled briefly with the concept of the power required to protect hundreds of students even after they left the warded area around Hogwarts, then gave up and closed her mouth with a snap.

“Thank you, sir,” she said simply. Her eyes were wet again, she found to her disgust. She pulled a hanky from a pocket and attempted to rectify that and other snot-based issues.

“You are most welcome, Miss Granger. I could do no less.”

They stared at each other for a long moment. Old, but still sharp, wrinkle-set blue eyes into young, clear, and brown. Hermione thought she should look away, but it didn't seem right. He wasn't going to hurt her. Something deep grudgingly agreed, and she smiled. The old man softly smiled back.

“Now, as for this,” the Headmaster said, gesturing to the ruler on his desk, “It is a little device that I enchanted for reasons that will quickly become apparent. To activate it, it is simply placed on both hands at the same time. It produces no sensation, let alone a painful one. I wish to use it to measure the possible damage done from using your hand as a magical focus the other night.”

“What? When did I do that?”

“When you used wandless magic to hold together a spell while casting another. A risky but effective technique, though one I advise strongly against using in the future in any situation but one of most dire need. Madam Pomfrey would have checked for gross tissue damage, but this device can be more subtle. And she would not have expected it or known to look for such, given your age and apparent level of training. There are treatments available if you have suffered such an injury.”

“That can happen?” she asked, clutching her left hand to her chest protectively.

“It is one reason more wizards and witches do not attempt to learn the skill, Miss Granger,” Professor McGonagall said. “Magic wands focus through magical materials, plant and animal parts configured just so. But a witch's flesh and blood is also magical—and can function for the same purpose, though imperfectly. The damage done to oneself can be quite severe, including nerve damage and loss of bone density. This can weaken and twist and one's hands permanently.”

Holding her shaking hands out, Hermione watched closely as the Headmaster placed the ruler against her palms. She noticed it had imperial units, so it must have been quite old. The wooden stick flashed all over briefly, then a dim light crept up to just below the one-quarter inch mark by her left hand. Her right palm had only a very faint glow over it, not even reaching a tick mark.

“Ah, hardly any residual magical damage at all. It was your left hand you used, Miss Granger?”

She nodded, still shaken but also relieved she hadn't somehow maimed herself.

There was a loud cry from a corner of the room and Hermione jumped, her wand slipping into her hand. The old wizard deftly caught his enchanted ruler as it fell off her hands.

“Oh, do hush Fawkes,” the Headmaster grumbled good-spiritedly, slipping the magical ruler back
into his desk. “Nothing is wrong. You can go back to sleep.”

Hermione stared in shock at the goose-sized, bright-red bird she’d somehow missed in the corner of the room. Facts she should have considered blazed through her mind. Familiar. Phoenix. Fawkes. Of course the Headmaster’s lifetime companion would live in his office—Hedwig spent most evenings and all weekend hunting Harry around the grounds and even inside the dorm rooms, swooping down to alight on his shoulder with a growling cry. The other Gryffindors seemed amused by what they thought was an overly affectionate family post owl. But strong familiars like Hedwig needed regular physical and emotional contact. Fawkes would be the same.

The beautiful bird briefly spread its wings wide, trilling a short arpeggio followed by a bright chord (it sang chords?!).

“Fine, fine,” the Headmaster said. “Come, my friend; meet Miss Hermione Granger, first of her line.”

Fawkes ruffled his feathers, then his gaze turned to her and she felt a sudden hot pressure. Somewhere in her head, alarm bells were going off. As the large bird bent down slightly, seeming to glare at her now, every instinct screamed that Fawkes was dangerous. Very, very dangerous.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s note (REVISED): This is the new end of this chapter. I’m moving things around to make the horrible start to Chapter 13 not…happen. To my story. In that order, at least. It’ll work better that way. See this chapter’s original notes in a future chapter. I will note where that happens. With a note. You’ll know it when you see it. More new content in chapter 14, which is in final proofreading now.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

AUTHOR'S VERY IMPORTANT NOTE: Please be aware that this is the second new chapter for HP:WQ. Chapter 13 has been MASSIVELY reworked, with all new material and fewer flashbacks. If you had previously read it a while ago (*cough*) then please go back and read the revised Chapter 13 now or things will be very confusing! Thank you for reading.

*edit 2019-05-29: I've made some very minor but serious edits to this chapter. See the end notes for details.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Fourteen

“Alright Harry, m’lad?” arbitrarily-labeled-Fred asked. “In for some late-night larceny?”

“Where is your better half?” process-of-elimination-George added. “She feeling better? Poor lookout if she’s here, eh?”

Harry froze in the middle of picking the lock of the school broom shed. It was guarded against simple opening charms, of course, but had a big, old padlock. He’d almost got the third tumbler set with his secret, Knockturn Alley shopping trip's illegal and very Muggle lockpick set. Not all magicals were completely without common sense.

Carefully holding the long, thin tension wrench tight (but not too tight), Harry looked around with a grimace. “Hey...gents. What will it cost me to have you take enough of your new experimental candies that you can't possibly be expected to remember this?”

“No, no,” Fred said.

“This is priceless,” George said, looking at his twin who stared back for a long beat.

They turned in sync to stare at him and both said, “We want in.”

It took a minute longer to pick the lock and five frantic minutes more to explain and prepare for his plan. They'd been suspicious up to that point but instead of being more worried they relaxed. And grinned. And reached into their pockets.

It was a cold night. Harry hovered and shivered outside the office of the most powerful wizard in the world on a “borrowed” school broom of questionable quality, under a disillusionment charm of questionable quality (cast by the Twins), with a plan of equally questionable quality. Also, he had pocket-fulls of slightly illegal fireworks.

He guessed it was fifty-fifty that Dumbledore knew he was there but there was no way he was letting Hermione meet with him alone. That McGonagall was there was reassuring, but...better safe.

Sal had told him about Hermione's scheduled meeting, slithering through the wall passages formed for the relatively recent “modern” plumbing all the way from the hospital wing to his dorm where...
he'd been pacing nervously. As asked, Sal had kept an eye out—Hedwig was a little too noticeable.

That part had been easy. Interesting but little-known fact: snakes love to spy on people and whisper secrets into innocent ears. Worse than owls about it, really, as the birds preferred delivering intentional messages.

Once Harry knew when it was going down, getting things together had been...difficult, but here he was. Right now Harry couldn’t hear what was being said but knowing Hermione it looked like she was nervous, especially after that thing with-

A fast growing magical pressure hit him and he moved without thinking. The explosive paper disenchanting strips he’d placed on the window frame activated with a lightning fast tap of his wand and a simple spark spell. Instant activation, just as he’d requested.

Spinning upside-down on the broom to avoid spellfire, he entered the room at full acceleration, trailing a handful of firecrackers. The fiery bird was heading straight for her. Tiny explosions filled the air with magical sparks. Off the boom, wand in hand, knife from boot in other, kick her chair over backward with a precise strike here, intersect path of the hostile-

Who had already stopped inches from his outstretched knife, a disgruntled look on his fiery face.

A phoenix had tried to kill her.

As a sputtering McGonagall helped her up out of the overturned chair, Hermione’s rational mind rejected that absurd feeling, recalling facts about no humans ever being reported injured by a phoenix and how she had zero personal experience to counter that established behavior. Magical fireworks, Harry’s clever distraction, continued to send multi-colored jets through the air.

Her hands shook, though, as she shoved her wand firmly back into her sleeve holster. All of the hairs on the back of her neck were standing up, and her heart was beating a thousand times too fast. Fawkes took off again from hovering in midair with an impossibly light movement and gracefully zoomed around the room again, only to alight on a side table next to where she stood.

Hermione jumped back with a gasp, clutching her hands to avoid trying to draw her wand again. Harry interjected himself between them yet again, his knife hand held out point first and his wand close to his body. She kept repeating to herself that she was safe, she wasn’t going to be hurt for any number of reasons, and even if this was to be the first phoenix-on-human attack in recorded history the headmaster and her head of house would surely not allow it.

“Fawkes!” the headmaster exclaimed, standing so quickly he almost knocked over his chair. With a casual wave of his hand the loud firework pops ceased and their source disappeared.

The gigantic bird leaned towards her and tilted its head to one side, glaring at her with one giant, black eye. She froze in place, not daring to move. Then Fawkes growled. The heat increased and her mind shut down in panic. She kept breathing, her heart kept beating, but her mind was empty and floaty. This was surely the wrong action to take in the face of immediate danger—where was the girl who faced down a troll without hesitation? But she didn't fight the feeling that nothing was exactly the right thing to do.

“What?” the headmaster asked softly, seeming to himself. She didn't dare to turn and look at his expression. “No. That is enough!” he shouted, and Fawkes finally broke eye contact and she resumed breathing again.

Holding out an arm, the headmaster looked all of a sudden tall and looming, filling up the room with
his shining presence. She squeezed her eyes shut tight and tried to ignore the sense that she could still see him through her eyelids—proud and fierce, haloed in burning white light. She opened her eyes as Fawkes turned and jumped into the air, wings flapping with strong beats that should still have been insufficient to move that quickly. Gracefully gliding around the room once, drawing everyone’s eye and Harry’s most of all, Fawkes finally landed on Dumbledore’s arm. The old man held the large bird at eye level, seemingly without effort. A staring contest ensued between them. The bird blinked first, turning away and fluffing its wings.

Sitting down heavily in his chair, the headmaster seemed to deflate. No longer an agent of ancient magic, the old man leaned his other arm against the padded armrest, still considering his familiar. The large bird shook his feathered head and fluffed his chest feathers up, casually turning to look around the room. The phoenix avoided looking directly at her.

“Harry,” the headmaster said simply. Harry started, then looked down at the steak knife he still held. He hesitantly placed it on the desk, then step back to stand beside her. The headmaster gestured casually at it and the knife disappeared.

Dispelled, she wondered? No, more likely a short-range switching spell with a known- No. He was speaking again, and she couldn’t be distracted, not now at this critical juncture.

“I must apologize yet again, Miss Granger. And to you for the first time tonight, young Harry. Fawkes is a powerful creature of fire and has certain...ideas about people based on his own unique perceptions.”

“Th-then...why...?” Hermione tried to choke out something like a reasonable question.

Dumbledore shook his head. “I will answer you questions in full, young lady, but first I would ask...have you ever experienced a strange fire? One that started without apparent cause, burned fast, and left nothing but ash?”

All the blood drained out of her face and her body felt numb as she collapsed into the chair McGonagall had just righted with a flick of her wand. She could feel Harry at her side, still ready to interpose himself between her and the phoenix. McGonagall was taking deep breaths but hadn’t said anything yet. Her hand rested on Hermione’s shoulder as a gentle comfort.

The headmaster was looking directly at her now, his eyes sharp and clear. “I ask because early accidental magic is often an indication of one's natural magical affinity. Usually, such things don’t fully manifest until the mid twenties, which is why it is not heavily covered at Hogwarts, but there are early indications. Such preferences for specific kinds of magic run in bloodlines.” He gestured to himself with his free hand. “The Dumbledore family is known for non-conjured transfigurations, and some of the more...esoteric uncast mental abilities. My brother gained great skill in private study of transfigurations, my father in certain mental magics; though from another line, albeit one distantly related, my mother could make an entire room's worth of furniture dance to a tune, and my... all of my family had such talents to various levels.”

Harry finally spoke. “I Apperated to my school’s roof and turned my teacher’s hair a weird color.”

“Hmm. Air, as suggested by motion related magics, and perhaps certain types of Charms seen as the winds of change,” the headmaster said.

Hermione gasped. “Oh! And I...”

“Yes, my guess is that you are quite powerfully aligned with fire magic, even if the first of your lineage. I have some skill in it, more since I bonded with Fawkes. This would help explain your
ability to handle a surge of wild, fire-attuned magic that might have done you great harm otherwise. Fawkes could sense another creature of fire in the room and was...eager to investigate.”

Ideas slipped into her mind and Hermione blurted them out without thinking. “Sir, what are phoenixes?” She blushed and covered her rebellious mouth with both hands, but the headmaster merely smiled and leaned back in his chair, petting Fawkes in his lap.

“They are beings of pure justice and truth. We humans are complicated creatures, conflicted and troubled. Phoenixes never are. All falseness, doubt, and worry burns away with their physical bodies every time they rejuvenate themselves in self-immolating flames. In their own way, they are much wiser than we. But only in that way. In others,” he glanced down in his lap, “they are capricious and willful birds, minding not other's privacy or opinion, misunderstanding complex things as simple because of this nature. They are also very territorial creatures of fire, and you will never find two in close proximity for long.”

“Oh,” she said quietly, mind spinning. “So it saw I was like it, strongly fire aligned. Then she-” She blinked. “Is Fawkes a she? I read that phoenixes do not reproduce sexually, and all hatch from fire itself, not the egg it presents…”

“I call Fawkes a 'he', and he has not corrected me yet. But I am male, and thus might projecting my own default concepts and those of society onto the situation. Fawkes has also not confirmed my assumption. It could be that he thinks of himself as male, or that he simply doesn't care if I am wrong.”

“Fascinating,” Hermione said, lost in thought. She shook her head and tried to return to the subject. “So what was Fawkes doing?”

“Trying to read your intentions,” the headmaster said sadly. “First with what I believe to be a threat display. Then by reading your thoughts—how well an ancient bird can understand human ideas is unknown to me, however.”

“My thoughts...my mind!” she said, shocked. “He was trying to read...my mind? That...that simply isn't right! That's a violation of...of privacy, possibly of the law, though I have read up on that part of wizarding law, so maybe an entity classed as an animal-”

“Yes, Miss Granger, it was wrong of him,” the headmaster interrupted gently. “However, he does not care for human laws when it comes to his own opinions of the correct course of action. But in this case...I somehow feel he was unsuccessful. I assume this has to do with more of that...extracurricular study you've had with Mr. Potter?”

She nodded slowly, biting her lip. Despite earlier, she felt sure that any minute now he'd forbid her, demand her books, or get angry that she'd dare to study something not on the course lists.

“Hmm. Which book are you working from, Miss Granger?”

She swallowed. “Uh, Sir James Heatherton's translation of Guarded Thoughts.”

“Ah, yes. A good if obscure introduction to the subject. It has the advantage of technically being legal to possess privately in magical Britain, if not to sell.” He looked appraisingly at her and Harry over his glasses. “I did some similar line of study myself as a young man. Useful in certain...unique situations, but be sure you do not push yourselves too hard. It is unlikely that either of you young people will injure yourselves, but any headaches lasting longer than an hour should be cause for immediate trips to Madam Pomfrey. Is that understood?”
“Yes sir, but-” was she really going to argue this after he was apparently fine letting her go with a health and safety warning? Was her middle name “Jean”?

“Yes, but why? Isn't it dangerous?”

The headmaster nodded. “But only if one is foolish and unable to follow direction. And no more so than many charms we regularly teach. There is very little chance of long-term injury, even with improper technique. For the most part, nothing is accomplished by failure at all, and failure is the most likely results in early study.”

Hermione blinked slowly, mind spinning, then nodded. “Oh. Thank you, sir. We will be careful.”

“Alchemy is much more dangerous, in fact,” he added, as if an afterthought. “Though perhaps there is a way you can safely continue to practice. Otherwise, I fear I must forbid your pursuit of such knowledge.”

Hermione winced. The headmaster sat quietly in thought, rubbing the top of Fawkes' head. Taking the chance to turn over the conversation in her head once more, Hermione slowly and intentionally relaxed her body. Knots of tension fell away and her thoughts grew still and soft. Harry licked his lips and looked at her out of the corner of his eyes, still staying silent as if afraid to interrupt her meeting even after bursting through the (still smoking) window which Dumbledore also continued to ignore along with the scorched spots on the rug.

“What do you think, Fawkes?” the headmaster asked of his familiar. The large bird hunched his shoulders. “It will mean some amount of time around her, yes. But disregarding that, what is your opinion of the young lady?” Fawkes opened his beak and a torrent of sound poured out.

It was clearly music, not just a bird call, and sounded almost classical. It rose slowly, then started skipping along in broad strokes and big staccato hops. It was brassy and clear, but had an oddly complicated counterpoint. Fawkes glowed as he sang, red highlights licking softly along his feathers. The performance lasted less than a minute, but moved her in a way that she knew she would remember her entire life.

“Well, that decides it.” Dumbledore said finally. Fawkes huffed softly, then jumped into the air and flapped over to his perch. Dumbledore stood and shook out his sleeves. “I will find a way to help you, Miss Granger. I have one in mind already but I will need to confirm a few things first.”

He smiled gently at Harry and Hermione, who both stood instinctively. “We will work this out. No one should be afraid of their own magic, much less told not to study with such innocent passion.”

The headmaster then shut the still open window with a wave of his hand and walked back behind his desk. His wand was again carefully tucked back into the sleeve of his robe. Harry, clearly sensing events coming to a head, rocked from foot to foot, flexing his fingers nervously. Hermione knew that this was the part where adults usually inflicted their punishments.

The headmaster clapped his hands and gathered their attention with his eyes. “Now that everyone is in from the cold, we can head down to dinner. Unless there is something else either of you wanted to tell me?

It seemed so casual, but his eyes were focused on Harry. And he was no longer smiling with them. He seemed almost...sad.

Harry looked at her. Time seemed to stand still. There was a pinching feeling from inside her mind and Hermione remembered everything again, her Occlumency shields falling away. The half
thoughts she’d had became whole again.

Taking a deep breath in her shock, Hermione quickly reviewed everything she had seen and heard and felt during the last fifteen minutes. She put those in a pile. Then over here was the risk profile for just the event that had happened to Harry this year. The lack of progress in getting his godfather freed from Azkaban. The even greater dangers they faced against Voldemort. The danger in the school currently. The tools Dumbledore could bring to the fight.

She compared the piles of thoughts has her blood seemed to grow hot in her veins. The picture in her mind of Dumbledore became a puppet, dancing as she tested one idea after another. Hermione winced, holding her hand across her eyes as the pressure built and built.

“Miss Granger, are you alright?” Professor McGonagall asked.

Hermione gasped again and sank back in her chair. “Harry,” she said, straining to raise her eyes to his. He looked frightened, then his eyes narrowed and he nodded slowly.

“Professors,” Harry said hands clenched at his sides. “I’ve...I’ve something to tell you.”

Both adults looked puzzled. Dumbledore settled back in his chair again. “We are all listening Mr. Potter.”

“This whole thing is my fault,” Harry blurted out.

McGonagall’s eyes lifted to the ceiling and Dumbledore’s crinkled again in a smile. “We can hardly blame you for your overreaction-”

“No, it’s that-, I-” Hermione tapped him twice on the leg with her finger. The second plan. No time travel mentions. Harry continued in a rush. “I knew the troll was going to get in on All Hallows’ Eve. I tried to avoid it but...it didn’t work. I’ve had these, these memories ever since I got my wand. When I fainted, I...”

Hermione’s hand found his. It was all now half act, true, but he did seem to need it now. Harry lifted his eyes to Dumbledore’s. “The last few months, I’ve had these memories of the future. Not everything seems to fit but so much of it does. Hermione going to Hogwarts with me, the teachers, the Sorting Hat, even some of the class lessons. I remembered things them before they happened. Years of memories. Like they’d already happened to me before.”

Confusion reigned in a sort of bookish, restrained way. McGonagall was trying to piece together her first words in what was sure to be an epic tirade about something. Harry stood shaking, one hand clenched around Hermione’s and staring at the floor, but Dumbledore simply held up one hand and everyone stilled and looked to him as he spoke.

“Well, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore said, “Such visions are not...unheard of. Though I am sure we are all interested in one thing above all others: what did you see that would cause you to both keep this a secret and to tell us of it now?”

Harry said one word. “Voldemort.”

McGonagall’s face was snow white, drained of blood. Dumbledore seemed almost...resigned.

“I wasn’t sure before,” Harry said. “I mean, I didn’t know if you would believe me. If you would help or just...but avoiding things didn’t seem to be working. So,” he looked to Hermione again. “I saw. You talked to Hermione like she was an adult. You listened. Maybe. Maybe you’ll believe me, believe us now?”
Dumbledore nodded, pushing his glasses back up his nose.

“I am sure it was his servant that let the troll into the castle,” Harry said. “And that servant is Professor Quirinus Quirrell. That’s what I saw happen in my visions.”

McGonagall was making huffing noises again, but he talked over whatever she was trying to say. “The turban on his head hides the marks from where Voldemort has directly possessed him. Soon, if not already, Quirrell will hunt unicorns for their blood, to keep himself alive a little longer...until together they can steal the Philosopher’s Stone from the third floor, the one you warned everyone against and have trapped.”

Dumbledore sat silently now, hands folded in front of him but eyes locked to Harry’s. McGonagall had given up on trying to interrupt and now slumped in her chair, clutching a broach she’d taken from under her blouse.

Harry continued relentlessly, his voice now firm and unwavering. “Is the Mirror of Erised in place yet beyond the other traps, Professor, or is it still in that abandoned classroom you set up to test to see if I was being possessed by Voldemort? That is why you made the protections for the Stone so easy at first, correct sir? Because you thought it might be either me possessed or at least...influenced by Voldemort, or that it would be someone like Quirrell after the stone but using students as either bait or pawns to bypass the traps?

“At Christmas break, you’ll discover that I am affected by the Mirror quite strongly, but also that I only see my parents in it. That makes it perfect to trap me if Voldemort takes over my mind or Imperiouses me or another student into getting it for him.”

Nodding to himself, Dumbledore gestured as if to request the rest of Harry’s story.

“I have...after everything that happened with me collapsing, I’m not sure what else changed sir. I wasn’t attacked in a bathroom...twice. That didn’t happen in my visions. Were...were you still planning on giving me my father’s invisibility cloak for Christmas?”

A drawer opened in Dumbledore’s desk seemingly by itself. With a flick of the old wizard’s hand, a silvery bundle flew across the room and into Harry’s hands.

“No one now alive knows I had that, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore said, his voice quiet and strong. “I think all together your claims hold up. And given what has happened to you so far at Hogwarts, I think maybe it would be safest to deliver this to you now rather than later.”

Harry took the floating cloak and squeezed it between his shaking hands.

“Though,” Dumbledore added, hand raised once more, “I never thought you were possessed by Voldemort. The Mirror of Erised is being stored in an empty classroom that should have been locked, though I do see the ‘test’ you described as being something I might do—including placing a charm on the room to encourage you to investigate it during a long and boring holiday break.”


“He did not die that night ten years ago,” Dumbledore said. “What Mr. Potter has said tonight is just the last in a line of evidence I have collected over the years.”

McGonagall’s frown deepened. “And Mr. Potter’s visions? You know what I think of Divination, prophecies, and such.”

At the word prophecy, Harry and Dumbledore looked at each other again. “Yes sir. I know it. The
Dumbledore seemed to deflate. “And with Miss Granger’s help I’m sure you have analyzed it front to back, and likely come to the correct conclusions. I had hoped to save you that, Mr. Potter.”

“It didn’t work last time,” Harry said, his voice hard. “You only even started telling me about what Voldemort had done by my sixth year. The last year I had at school.” Harry’s jaw clenched. “The year you died.”

“This is too much!” McGonagall said with a gasp. “No child should have to know these things. Why would this have happened? Most Seers only get glimpses of the future. Most don’t remember anything they see and only spout out nonsense riddles.”

Everyone but McGonagall twitched at that last word.

“That is what it was. Riddle’s fault. It was the wands.” Hermione broke her silence, drawing everyone’s attention. “Harry’s wand. And Tom Riddle’s. They are a matched pair. Twin core wands. Brother wands. Each with a feather from the same phoenix, Fawkes. When they faced each other strange things happened.” She focused on McGonagall. “Yes. That Tom Riddle, the Head Boy your first year.”

“That was him...goodness,” McGonagall said faintly. “I attended between 1943 and 1950. Tom was Head Boy ‘43 and ‘44. He was so handsome and charming...”

Hermione nodded at the information, but McGonagall didn’t seem to notice while lost in her memories. “He...he was the one who got poor Hagrid in trouble.” McGonagall glared at Dumbledore. “There was more to that, you said.”

“That is what I believed at the time and I still do,” Dumbledore said. “That is why I convinced Armando to employ Rubeus. This hint of odd reactions due to the wands is interesting, and might indeed be the source of these odd visions, but I would like to return to that later. I assume you two know more of what Tom was responsible for in his school days?”

“Myrtle Warren was killed by Tom Riddle,” Harry said, still clutching the cloak to his chest. “He woke Slytherin’s monster, a basilisk. Then he controlled it to attack students. Maybe he didn’t know about the protections Hogwarts gives them, as he was mostly unsuccessful. Then he caught Myrtle while the basilisk was still in the hidden tunnels to Slytherin’s Chamber of Secrets. I assume that was technically not ‘Hogwarts grounds’ so the snake killed Myrtle. You can ask her. She loves to tell the story.”

Dumbledore looked confused. McGonagall’s face was in her hands. “There is a ghost in a girl’s bathroom named Myrtle. I never put the two together...”

“Nor did I,” Dumbledore said with a sigh. “I did not even know that ghost’s name. After her death, and Hagrid’s arrest, the attacks stopped—so no official investigation ever went further. I was concerned with Hagrid’s defense and did not even think to look into possible witnesses from behind the grave.”

“Well, the same thing would happen again in our second year,” Hermione added. “Muggle-born targeted, again. I...I would have been one of the petrified victims. Ginny Weasley would almost die when Tom’s diary tried to drain the life out of her and return his shade to life. I think you know what that diary was, sir.”

At this point McGonagall was turning green and fanning herself with one hand. A whiskey tumbler
with something brown in it appeared from thin air, floating in front of her and she reached for it blindly. Dumbledore himself looked quite pale.

“Perhaps we should make a list,” he suggested, pulling a quill out from mid air. “Please, Mr. Potter. Miss Granger. Do continue.”

An hour later, everyone in the headmaster’s office was exhausted. Some from memories of what was to come, some from past regrets.

“Corruption in government will be my primary area to cover during the rest of this year and into the next,” Dumbledore said, still making notes on a dozenth piece of paper on his desk. “Voldemort’s return means, paradoxically, that we can not move on his known soul pieces too early. We should know their locations before we act, so that must wait. Mr. Black’s horrible situation will be tricky but I think with your help Harry, and a certain rat, we can make it a politically advantageous undertaking for the Ministry. Bartemius Crouch Jr. will be part of that suggested crackdown on past law enforcement failures. The Chamber will keep for now, as we do not know how the basilisk is awoken or even whether it can be safely handled at all, but I want it dealt with before the new year. I will also find time in the next year to speak to Garrick about Harry’s and...Tom’s wands. As for the other...items.”

Dumbledore looked over his glasses at McGonagall and the two young students. “I will begin the hunt immediately. I don’t have to tell anyone here that secrecy is of paramount importance. This will go from hard to nearly impossible if Voldemort discovers our task too early.”

Harry and Hermione hadn’t used the term Horcrux. McGonagall didn’t know it and Dumbledore seemed to avoid it as well.

“We suspected a huge snake Riddle had was another soul piece container,” Harry added. “But like I said, we don’t know what or where that is now. It’s likely he only made that one after he regained a body. I’m not sure he can make one while just a spirit.”

“It is a shame we only have the diary and the ring...but it was to be six of them.”

“Yes, six plus his original body,” Harry said, slumped and emotionally drained. “Now that part is resting on the back of Quirrell’s head.”

Another piercing glance from Dumbledore. “And as I stated, something for me to deal with tonight. Minerva, I will ask you to look after the students while I do this. Do a head count and ensure they are all at dinner. Then lock the doors and activate the safe room wards.”

She nodded wobbily, still in shock.

“What else,” Dumbledore said, tapping his finger against the quill pen, reviewing the list he’d made. “Oh, I will need to retrieve Severus’ old potions book. No reason to leave that lying around full of dark spells. And he will be glad to have it back, I am sure.”

“How about me,” Hermione said at a bare whisper.

“Hmm?” Dumbledore looked up from his notes. “What was that Miss Granger?”

“How about the part where in Harry’s visions I go mad with power and destroy all of England in a magical apocalypse?”

Harry winced and looked sick. They hadn’t skipped over that bit even though it had been in the
original plan. Hermione had insisted. Mentions of sacrificing someone and sending him back in time were skipped, however, as was most of Harry’s post-England personal life.

“Oh, from what you said most of that was Voldemort’s doing,” Dumbledore said. “In any case, does that seem likely to happen now that you know what you know?”

Everyone stared at him in shock.

“No?” He asked, eyes crinkled. “Well, then I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“And the dark powers from the lost Fae bargained for with blood and secrets?” Harry asked with a sigh. They had also mentioned things like the fae shapeshifter assassins and the house elves being freed to horrible results.

“That does seem like quite a bad idea,” Dumbledore said. “If the destruction of the British royal line along with the entire Wizengamot was a prerequisite for it being possible at all then, well, we should be safe from someone trying that for now.”

“And...and my murdering people?” Hermione asked in a whisper.

“That was done by someone who will never come to be,” Dumbledore said, tapping his desk hard with an index finger to punctuate his words. “That someone Harry saw: she was not you. And you will never be her. You know the mistakes made and I dare say this will derail any events already in motion that would lead to such a future.”

Hermione stared at her lap, jaw clenched, but didn’t argue further.

“Now,” Dumbledore said. “I believe we have the matter of the upcoming holidays. I will be sending all of the students home as that will be the perfect time to deal with the Chamber and the monster. The same as with Voldemort’s shade in our Defense professor, I will not abide them remaining a threat even a day longer than necessary.”

Harry and Hermione both started to speak, but Dumbledore interrupted. “It will be a dangerous ordeal in which students will not be involved. There are other Parselmouths than Mr. Potter in England.”

Hermione had a feeling he had someone in mind. Odd, that wasn’t part of Harry’s memories.

“That does leave a problem with Mr. Potter’s situation,” Dumbledore said. “I do not wish to return him to his relatives until further security measures have taken place. Therefore...Miss Granger?”

Blinking, Hermione looked up. “Yes Headmaster?”

“How do you think your parents would feel about having Harry over for the holidays?”

“Umm...well? They’ve actually asked after him in letters and are interested to meet him, but...”

“Then it is decided,” Dumbledore said, standing and pressing his hands into the desk. “Miss Granger, thank you for your assistance and insights. I will be owling your parents tomorrow for holiday plans. Mr. Potter, please leave the broom here. I will have it returned to the school shed after dinner.”

The door opened in front of them and the headmaster shooed them through, his Deputy going first. Part way down the automatically moving stairway, the headmaster coughed behind them and they looked back and up, barely able to make out his face in the flickering light from glowing magical
torches.

“Miss Granger and Mr. Potter, as these events are quite outside the realm of Hogwarts academics, I can not in good conscience award points. However, twenty points each to Gryffindor for how you handled last night's events. In addition to your honesty tonight, that was very brave of you both. I have great hopes for your futures.”

“Sir, I didn't actually-” Harry started to say.

The headmaster interrupted him, but without raising his voice. “I speak here of the way you handled yourselves, both before and after the sudden and most scary portions of your ordeal. Sometimes, dealing with the shock and the aftermath is the hardest part. Helping each other get through such things is hard and takes true bravery. Just do your very best to avoid such situations in the future, and do not let what has happened in the past, or what you think may come in the future, overshadow your present. For now at least, leave the future to the adults who are meant to prepare it for your eventual arrival.”

They stepped off the last step as it magically disappeared into the floor. Dumbledore looked down at his students with a smile while an increasingly annoyed Scottish woman glared at him. “Know that you have both impressed me with your intelligence and maturity. I will, of course, wish to speak with you again soon. I will see you again at dinner, I expect, but for now I have an...exit interview to hold with a certain member of my staff. Now, run along.”

It wasn't clear if that last was directed at the students or the still silent Deputy Headmistress. They nevertheless parted ways at the base of the rotating stairs—the headmaster heading off one way and Hermione and Harry, led by their Head of House, stumbling dazed and confused towards the Great Hall.

Harry had expected explosions, for the castle to shake, for a running battle in the hallways. There was just dinner. The headmaster joined them halfway through, but only stayed for a cup of tea and a biscuit.

The next morning, Professor Quirrell was announced as unexpectedly missing and his classes canceled for the week. According to the rumor mill, Aurors were seen in the hallway to his office later that day, but of the professor himself there was no sign.

Dumbledore opened several creaking drawers of his huge desk one after the other looking for something. Several times, he reached down up to his shoulder, much deeper than the apparent physical depth of the wooden compartments.

Hermione was back in the headmaster’s office after classes Thursday, this time without Harry’s heroics or the need of a chaperon. Fawkes was also conspicuously absent.

Finally, and with a pleased humph, Dumbledore pulled out a rolled up bit of yellowed parchment and spread it open on his desk.

“Thank you for your patience, Miss Granger. I believe this is the answer to our problem.”

“What is it?” she asked, jumping off her chair and leaning over the old wizard's desk. She started reading it upside down as the headmaster responded.

“Well, you'll have to discuss this with your parents, but in essence it is-”
“Perfect!” Hermione shouted in surprise, small hands pressing into the desk, pushing her closer to read the upside-down fine print. “Thank you so much, Professor.”

Then she blinked and slid back off the desk to stand on the floor again, head lowered and hands clasped demurely in front of her. “Sorry, Professor.”

“Think nothing of it, Miss Granger,” he said, smiling back. “Now, some of the magics we will study are technically highly licensed and controlled. Allowing you to self-study is simply not safe or legal, however—”

The headmaster took out a book, then another, then another. Hermione continued to listen but her mind was already between the musty old pages in front of her.

Hermione burst through the folded-space tunnel leading from the magical extra-dimension of Platform 9 ¾ to the mundane Kings Cross station at a run, pushing her trunk on a rickety trolley at a quite frankly reckless speed. Spotting her mother waiting nearby, talking to a tall woman with long, light brown hair, she skidded to a halt. Abandoning her trolley, she dashed into her mother's arms.

“Mum! I'm fine and I'm back!” Hermione shouted, squeezing her mother in a crushing hug. Dr. Tonks—the tall, beautiful young woman standing with her mother in the mundane-styled (if a little subdued) skirt and blouse—smiled and moved away to give them space for their reunion.

“Welcome back, dear,” her mother said, returning the hug. “It's so good to have you back with us again. We're fine as well.” She ran her hands over Hermione's once-again bushy brown hair and then stroked her shoulders.

“Oh!” Hermione exclaimed, realizing she'd been a little rude. “And hello, Dr. Tonks.”

“Hello, Miss Granger,” Dr. Tonks replied, smiling but still standing slightly apart from them. The distance meant something—everything the Hogwarts Slytherin house alumni Dr. Tonks did meant something—but Hermione didn't care to decipher it this time. Something about emotional and physical space and her reunion with her mum. It didn't really matter right now.

Ron finally made it through the barrier, his trolley almost colliding with Hermione's abandoned one. “Hey, Hermione! You left your...” he started to say, then trailed off as he saw mother and daughter, still locked in a close embrace.

Turning around in her mother's arms, Hermione waved Ron over. “Mum, this is Ron Weasley, one of my classmates. He's also in Gryffindor and a new friend of mine. Ron, meet my mum, Rose Granger.”

The gawky red-headed boy had slowed his trolley to a stop, staring between her and her mother with an open mouth. Rose Granger stood just under five and a half feet tall, and had a beautiful mess of dark brown, shoulder-length hair. It was thick and tightly curled, even more so than her daughter's, and framed the narrow, delicate face of a model—striking almond-shaped eyes with huge, long lashes; high, sharp cheekbones; and plump, emotive lips.

Hermione was used to anything male having a similar reaction to her mother, but there was still a small, uncertain, hard feeling growing in her chest. Glancing down at her mum's hands where they rested on her shoulders, their milk-chocolate color contrasting against the pale skin of her neck, Hermione started to frown, the old familiar fear surfacing once again.

“Hermione, your mum...she's...” Ron stammered, searching for the words, his face growing redder by the second. The other Weasley kids started filing through the barrier, gathering behind the
youngest son.

“Yes, what about my mother, Ron?” Hermione asked, her voice colder than the chill December air of the station. The twins were eyeing her mother as well, and their eyebrows rose at Hermione's tone.

“She's...bloody beautiful,” Ron finally stumbled out.

Hermione relaxed and sighed. “Yes, Ron. I know.”

“I mean, she's got the same hair as you-”

“Where do you think I got it from?” Hermione asked with growing annoyance.

“Sure, but she's also really pretty-”

“Yes, Ronald, I know.” she hissed. Not being that stupid, Ronald shut his flapping mouth with a snap.

“Smooth, Ronniekins,” a Weasley twin said, rolling his eyes as they both pushed their single shared trolleys past the group, moving towards the exits. Percy followed, shaking his head at the scene the youngest son was making. Hermione knew from asking earlier that the Weasleys were, as usual, going to find a quiet spot outside to call the Knights Bus for the trip home.

“A pleasure meeting you, Mr. Weasley,” Hermione's perfect mother said with a patient smile. A small, red-headed girl, Ginny if Hermione remembered correctly, was peaking out from behind the newly arrived Mrs. Weasley with a wide-eyed, confused look on her face. She seemed to be searching for something. When her mother spotted Ron, the girl frowned. She let herself to be lead along behind her mother and away from the Platform 9 ¾ entrance with obvious reluctance. The entire way across the station Ginny was still craning her neck looking around.

“Ronald Bilius Weasley!” Mrs. Weasley said with a growl, hustling up behind the so-named young man. “Are you bothering these poor Muggles?”

Both Grangers, mother and daughter, winced. Dr. Tonks continued to watch everything silently, eyes subtly scanning the station as the two females met and made brief but awkward small talk about their families. Mrs. Weasley was expansive and gushing and Hermione's mother was, as always, smooth and refined, but they had little in common to talk about. Though Rose Granger knew little of the practice of jam making (let alone magical jam making—though whether it was the jam or the process itself that was magical...), she accepted a jar. And the magical matron knew probably less than nothing of mathematical analysis (Mrs. Granger's hobby), so her mother clearly couldn't share that and simply inquired after how many redheads had been added to the total world population by one woman. The answer shocked her mother, but she gracefully (of course) didn't show it.

“Your children appear to be alive and not at all dying of any plague,” one mother didn't quite say to the other.

“Oh my yes, that seldom if ever happens in my family,” the other basically responded. “Your young lady is not at all suffering from fatal diseases and seems quite smart, compared to my cultural standards of not teaching calculus at all, and the basics of algebra only to late teens, with no formal post-secondary education to speak of.” And blah, blah, blah.

It wasn't at all interesting to Hermione, just the usual social fluff. Mind wandering to other, more important things, like magic and homework—or, best of all, magical homework—Hermione tried to ignore how Ginny was interspersing looking around the station with suspicious glances at her. Hermione felt she almost knew what the girl was looking for, but it seemed to be held just out of her
mental reach for some reason. Either the situation of half-remembering or the fact itself unknowingly impinging on her emotions made her frown at the little girl.

After escaping from the friendly Weasley matron and her brood—who went off to hail a simply impossible sounding magical bus which Hermione just had to see for herself one day—Hermione, her mother, and Dr. Tonks (non-magically) waved down a perfectly normal cab. She tried not to look disappointed. After throwing open the cab door with uncharacteristic childish abandon, she moved to the back and helped put her trunk in the boot. Hermione then jumped in the cab and sat in the middle and her mum squeezed in on her left, leaving the seat on her right empty while the doctor rode in the front.

Chatting away a thousand words a minute, asking about all the things that had happened in the neighborhood and at home while she was away, Hermione casually slipped her hand into her mum's and started tapping out a confirmation to her earlier “all safe” code word, this time in more detail using Morse code. Which she'd known since she was nine, because really, it was a very simple character sequence and took no time at all to memorize. Hermione was, of course, able to both carry on the verbal conversation and tap out her code at the same time.

Her parents hadn't been very happy with the idea of their only daughter going to a boarding school; they'd been even less happy after a few extra books she'd purchased along with her assigned school books had hinted at various magical threats. Normal people being targets of dark magic, something used by the magical government that erased memories of mundanes called a Memory Charm, and magicals using charms to look like other people was only the known tip of the iceberg, they'd decided. Taking basic precautions (at least, for her family they were basic), the Grangers had made the words “fine” and “back” a code on her returning from Hogwarts to mean their daughter was herself and under no duress. That also was the same all-safe return code from her parents if used similarly (but not exactly the same) in sentences in the reply.

Straightforward, really.

If, however, she was (grammatically questionably) “doing good” and “safe home again,” then she was in danger or being coerced somehow. In that case, her mum would have been covertly alerted to the situation and then have used some plan (that Hermione was purposefully not informed of) to get them both away. If Hermione had not given any codes, either she was being a silly little girl and had forgotten (not likely, as they knew) or the girl her mum was talking to wasn't really Hermione Granger in control of her own body and mind. Either an impostor or her suffering from a mind control curse—or, she now knew, collateral damage from a mind wipe.

As for the other side of the spy game they were only half-playing (one her parents wouldn't forget, Hermione had been sure), her mum seriously flubbing the code exchange would have resulted in a very scary flight from someone perhaps only looking like her mum. This was something Hermione had approached in a similar way to Harry's paranoid plans to escape from Hogwarts in the case of various dangers.

Her wand was tightly strapped to her arm under her loose sleeved blouse. There was a traveling cloak, a small bag of coins, a small wad of bills, a large bottle of water, and a thoroughly squished sack meal in the book bag over her shoulder. She was all ready for possible needs while making her way through the mundane world to a currently off-season, magical-run hotel resort in Brighton. Harry had told her about it, so her destination was unknown to both her parents and the theoretical non-parental person who was wearing their face and trying to pick her up at the train station. A location where she'd be able to hide and maybe have a mental breakdown for a bit, if it came to that.

A silly little game compared to what real spies did but good enough for her family's piece of mind. It
was turning out to be only partially successful at that for Hermione.

She had been so stressed out over everything all day that she hadn't been able to stay still on the train, only taking her seat when Neville had threatened (uncharacteristically forcefully) to use the Body Bind curse she'd just taught him to get her to stop pacing and wringing her hands. Then she'd almost immediately fallen into an exhausted sleep.

It had all been sort of fun in abstract before leaving for Hogwarts, talking and planning with her family, but was terrifying now that she'd been dragged into the reality of things. The magical world was dangerous. She had almost been killed once already; and her best friend had scored twice that just so far this year. To add to that, now Hermione knew about the extent of magical mind affecting magic, so she realized her family's precautions were almost worthless—she knew about them, so anyone who read her mind would, as would anyone reading her parents’ minds, and paranoid etc, etc. Given time to consider what it would mean for her mum or dad to fail to give the correct response had been worrying enough. Knowing they could have been under the Imperius curse and she'd never even know had resulted in several sleepless nights before the winter holiday break.

Even thinking about it now ran shivers down her spine. She could only hope that Dr. Tonks would successfully run the scans required to detect that sort of thing. And, she reminded herself, Imperiused people required very exact orders, precise goals or actions, and could take only one at a time.

Someone didn't wander around all the time under active control, only after the curse triggered. The power requirements went up the longer the task would take and the longer a sleeper agent might have to wait. Subduing someone once triggered would simply allow the spell to run out, eventually freeing the target. So it wasn't like her mum would be lost forever if she was under a dark mental control curse. The situation was recoverable. Hermione tried not to hyperventilate. She'd only been in the car for three minutes and was already a mess.

After her mum tapped out another response message (“fine dear love you back”), which meant very little really but was the correct counter-sign, Hermione tried to enjoy the rest of the ride. Helping to point out interesting London landmarks and other places their family had visited to an attentive Dr. Tonks helped distract Hermione, and all were safe subjects around the mundane cab driver.

“Do you have any children attending my daughter's school, or perhaps starting soon?” Rose Granger asked Dr. Tonks.

The young woman smiled back. “Actually, my daughter, our only child, is just starting on her training as an Au-” the doctor caught herself, “err, in law enforcement. Um, MDP. Just completed her, uh, A Levels this last year? Did quite well. We’re very proud.”

Everyone, including the taxi driver, turned to stare at Dr. Tonks, who appeared maybe in her late twenties at the oldest, not a mother with a daughter who was already a young adult. “I am older than I might appear,” she added, answering their surprise with another smile.

The cab pulled up to the Granger's address after what was (for that part of London) a relatively short ride. Everyone piled out, Dr. Tonks helping Hermione grab the trunk. Once inside the spacious ground floor of the London terrace house, Hermione turned to the doctor with an expectant look on her face.

Drawing a long wand made of some dark, almost black wood, the older witch started muttering under her breath, occasionally thrusting the wand in some apparently random direction, sometimes pointing at both of the other women and a space beside them. Both Grangers watched the magical display, her mother in some interest as this was only the second (or was it now third?) time she'd ever seen magic done—the first being Professor McGonagall's visit on her birthday, of course.
“And now the one from earlier, yet again?” the doctor asked, looking at Rose Granger expectantly. Her mother nodded and squared her shoulders. Dr. Tonks muttered a couple of long, guttural words that sounded like German, swishing her wand in large motions in front of her, then the black wand was suddenly pointed at her mum. It twisted and dipped just so, then stilled. Hermione counted in her head wand held in her hand next to her leg, her knuckles turning white. Everything was silent for almost three minutes.

Both women gasped and the magical tension in the room that Hermione hadn't even noticed eased significantly. Dr. Tonks nodded once, then continued with another long series of spells aimed at the local area.

After several more minutes of work, Dr. Tonks finally finished and tucked her wand back into her sleeve and addressed Rose Granger. “I have informed the Ministry department monitoring underage magic that, for this school break, they are to ignore any magic performed at this location that does not directly threaten the Statutes. This is allowed as it may be required for a student to use some minor spells for medical reasons while under my supervision. If Miss Granger's...agreement with Headmaster Dumbledore is filed with the Ministry before next summer, that will provide similar exceptions for underage magic use, provided it is not performed around any Muggles other than immediate family.

“Also, at this time, your house is clear of detectable magical traces of spells, other than some vague, months-old evidence that Hermione, a magical person, has lived here. This happens even without fully expressed accidental magic. As for the rest, Headmaster Dumbledore checked me himself before I took his Portkey to meet Mrs. Granger at this house. All of us are free of surveillance charms or...other unexpected charms.”

One of her mother's eyebrows quirked and she stared down at Hermione, who winced and started to examine her feet. “I'll explain everything, mum. I promise.”

Grinning dangerously, the elder Granger nodded in agreement. “Yes, you will. But as we seem to be safe and sound now, I suggest you introduce me to your new celebrity boyfriend.”

Knowledge tightly wrapped unfurled in a mind suddenly much more expansive. She remembered once again and Hermione's heart skipped a beat as-

Harry whipped off his father's invisibility cloak. Hermione gasped, did a double-take, then took a deep breath and started whining at her mother's teasing. He started folding the cloak into a neat and impossibly thin bundle before shoving it into a pocket in his oversized, second-hand trousers and addressing his hostess.

“Hello, Mrs. Granger. Thank you for having me over.”

“Welcome, Mr. Potter,” she said, smiling brightly.

They shook hands, Mrs. Granger accepting his perhaps overly adult gesture without blinking. Harry then looked around, feeling as awkward as Hermione now appeared to be.

“You, uh, you have a beautiful home. I'm sorry about all the nonsense getting over here. We're still not sure who's been attacking me, so it seemed like a good idea.”

“I understand, Mr. Potter, and it was no imposition,” she said, looking closely at him as he fidgeted in the entryway.

He was embarrassed by his clothes and unkempt hair, especially compared to Mrs. Granger's natural,
casual-looking beauty. The elder Granger had a very familiar and unnerving way of stripping him to the bone and measuring him up with a single glance. He’d never actually met Rose Granger before, but his little-kid instincts were now making him very nervous as he wondered what she thought of him and how shabby he looked.

Despite having clearly seen him for what he was, Mrs. Granger smiled at him again. She then offered to take their coats, not exactly a clear answer to his fears. After leading them all down the hall and into a richly decorated sitting room, she offered them seats. “We’ve heard a great deal about you from Hermione’s letters. It’s good to finally meet you, Mr. Potter.”

Harry nodded and tried to smile, but missed that expression and sort of grimaced instead. He then gave up after realizing his face’s failure and sat down on the couch.

“Good to meet you, too, Mrs. Granger. And thanks for helping out, Dr. Tonks,” he added to the tall, quiet woman, who was sitting off one side.

“You are most welcome, Harry. And please, as I’ve said before, call me Andromeda.”

Mrs. Granger was still standing by the doorway with her daughter. She gave Hermione a quick hug then pulled back again, hands rubbing fondly up and down her daughter’s arms. “Hermione, dear, do you want to show Mr. Potter your room while I sit and have a quick talk with Dr. Tonks? We can all have some tea after. You can both unpack later.”

Hopping in place with a tiny squeal, Hermione quickly grabbed Harry’s hand and pulled him to his feet. Leaving her trunk behind, packed with both her and Harry’s stuff, she raced them out of the sitting room, back down the hall, through a door, and had started pulling him down some stairs before he was properly able to react.

“Wha-,” Harry started to say.

“My room is in the basement,” she said excitedly, then she jerked to a halt as Harry stopped dead, halfway down the stairway’s carpeted steps.

“They...they have this huge, lovely house, and they're making you stay in the basement?” he said slowly, his hand starting to grip hers tighter.

Hermione looked surprised for a second, then she took a slow, deep breath, and unexpectedly smiled. Standing on the stair under his, turning to look up into his eyes, she clasped his hand in both of hers and hugged it to her chest.

“Thank you Harry,” she said softly, still smiling, “It isn't what you think. But it makes me so happy that you'd feel that way, if it were.”

Then, to his immense surprise, she pecked his knuckles with a quick kiss, turned, and started dragging him down the stairs again. Too shocked to resist, he let Hermione lead them around a curved bit at the bottom. He then skidded to a halt again, staring around the airy, open space with confusion. Hermione left him there and started buzzing around the room, talking rapidly while running her hands over the spines of various books, seemingly choosing them from the room’s numerous shelves at random.

“...and these are my mystery novels. I love this room. My parents wanted something unique, so they built this and the bedrooms as an addition to the small garden flat, which they also purchased. It’s a terraced house, obviously, and we’ve got the ground floor and now full basement, while the neighbors have the second and third floors. It’s built out under the garden, not just right under the
Harry was gawking at the walls, which were covered in bookshelves, and at the pair of soft, squishy looking overstuffed reading chairs. There was a thick carpet covering the floor and everything seemed very cozy. Looking up, he saw a huge skylight spanning almost the whole ceiling. It let in the afternoon winter sun, painting the room in a bright, cheery light.

Hermione was standing with her hands clasped behind her back, grinning at him. “My parents have a problem around magic—which I'm leaking out all the time it seems. Thanks to you Harry we've now been informed why. But they haven't exactly shoved me into a dank, manky old hole in the ground, have they?”

He silently shook his head, still feeling a little dazed.

“What do you think, Sal?” she said, moving to an expensive looking corner table that was covered in neatly stacked books. The long, sleek black and silver adder crawled out of her right sleeve and onto the stacked books.


Hermione didn't look to Harry for a translation, apparently happy with what her growing familiar link told her. “Well, Hedwig should be along tonight Sal. She is quite beautiful but far too obviously a link to Harry. Keep an eye out for her, would you?”

Walking over to a tall shelf built into the wall, Hermione put a hand up and pushed, effortlessly swinging it inward like a door. She looked over her shoulder and grinned madly at him. “Look! A hidden passage, Harry! It's just like Hogwarts, isn't it? Come on, my room is just through here.”

It was obviously a girl's room, but it was still all Hermione. More bookshelves (of course), a bed covered in decorative pillows, and what he eventually figured out was a slightly scruffy gray plush otter. The walls were covered in posters—but this was Hermione's room, so instead of boy bands, they were of things like the periodic table and the constellations. There was one of the solar system, a huge color print of that brilliant shot from the Apollo missions of the Earth from space, one of the Earth rising over the Lunar surface, a labeled diagram of the human brain, a blown-up picture of a microprocessor, and the famous da Vinci piece of the human body inside a square and circle, along with other of his detailing human anatomy and strange machines; overall, it still looked like a princess's bedroom. Assuming the princess was also a tenured professor with eclectic interests.

Hermione flopped down on the bed on her back, spreading her arms wide and letting out a long sigh.

“I wasn't sure I'd ever make it back,” she whispered.

Harry wasn’t sure she knew his keen ears would catch that, so he pretended not to hear. He looked around at some of the titles on her extensive shelves. Most were on scientific topics, of course, but there were also a lot of science fiction and fantasy novels. They looked well read.

“I want you there,” Hermione said, sitting up suddenly.

“What?” he said, not understanding.

“I want you to be there with me when I explain everything to mum and dad.”

“Oh. Okay, sure.”

Relaxing the death grip she'd had on her skirt, she took a deep breath, then let it out and smiled. A
warm breeze ruffled his hair, but when he looked around, he saw there wasn’t actually a window in her room. Instead, she had an odd, bright hole over the secret door entrance and some low air vents on the walls.

Seeing him looking at it, she said, “A mirrored light tube to the skylight in the other room. Provides natural lighting and wakes me up when I oversleep during summer hols. Oh, and I was trying to clear my mind. Sorry about the draft—magical expulsion reaction, you see.”

“No, that's okay. It's been a long day. I'm just glad you have a chance to relax.”

Hermione fidgeted some. “You know, I really am going to tell them everything. Except for your...I'm telling them you have visions. About the future. I know you wanted that information to be limited...”

Harry sighed and sat on the bed next to his best friend. The bed was huge and there was plenty of room. “I told you before, I'm fine with that. They are your parents, Hermione. They deserve to know. And Dr. Tonks knows anyway. Professor Dumbledore insisted.”

“Okay. Good. Well. I just wasn't-”

Harry put a hand on hers, where it was starting to clutch at her skirt once again. “Hermione, you're getting worked up for nothing. Your parents will understand and everything will be fine. I'm sure of it. It'll be fine.”

She snorted, but also started smiling again. “You always say that, Harry.”

“Well, it was last time, if you remember.”

Hermione stared back at him incredulously. “No one died, but it was almost a complete disaster. Things with the headmaster could have gone very, very wrong. We got lucky.”

“You make your own luck, Hermione. I thought you'd know that, being a genius and all.”

His surprised shriek when she playfully shoved him off the bed wasn't at all high-pitched and girlish.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is almost too cute. That could totally be the happy end to this story, right?
Aheh. Heh heh heh. AHAHAHAHAHA!

No.

We've got at least three long, dark chapters left to go in just year one. For those in the know creative-writing-wise, we're passing the bottom of the story circle. You know what comes next, right?

I'm going to enjoy this.

**edit 2019-05-29:** Removed mention of the locket, as this was never discovered in the dark timeline. I meant to have this be the ring but wrote it on autopilot I guess? Now mentions the ring and the rat, as I meant it to. That was it for the edits.

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