

## Hermione's Plan Inspiration

### Chapter 1, Inspiration

Sunday, June 15, 1997

"This has *got* to be the worst day of my entire life!"

Hermione Granger threw herself on her bed in despair, feeling both sorry for herself and disgusted with herself at the same time. She was alone in the sixth year girls' dorm. Parvati's parents had come to take her home right after Dumbledore was killed, and Lavender was off somewhere saying goodbye to her latest boyfriend. She was all packed and ready to go home; all that remained now was to wait for the thestral-drawn carriages to take them to Hogsmeade Station. Wait and wallow in her misery.

While she lay there on her bed she thought about her previous outburst. She had certainly had other bad days in her young life.

That day in first year with the troll had started out horribly, and she almost died, so that certainly ought to qualify as a 'bad day'. But it had definitely turned out well – that incident had resulted in her gaining the two closest friends she had ever had or probably ever would have. You could even make the case that it turned out to be one of the best days of her life.

Getting petrified by the basilisk during second year had surely been no picnic. But right before that encounter she had solved the mystery and with the information Harry had later found clutched in her hand he had gone down into the Chamber to rescue Ginny and defeat the Monster of Slytherin. So that day had eventually turned out pretty well, too.

During third year she had almost been kissed by a dementor, but she, Harry, and Sirius had been saved by a patronus conjured by Harry after the two of them had gone back in time. That statement still gave her a headache every time she thought about it. That adventure ended with the scary ride on Buckbeak the hippogriff to rescue Sirius, so she had to admit that it had a happy ending also.

Fourth year. Hermione sighed. There had been several bad times there. Harry's name coming out of the Goblet of Fire. The screaming match with Ron the night of the Yule Ball was bad, but up until then that had been a great day. The worst had been the night of the third task. When Harry was taken away as he completed the task and had been forced to watch as Cedric was killed and Voldemort reborn, then barely survived a duel with the risen dark lord to escape back to Hogwarts. What a horrible experience. She knew it still gave him nightmares. Yes, those things had happened to Harry, not to her, so technically it wasn't *her* bad day. But she certainly anguished enough about him for it to count as an awful day for her, too. Definitely in the top three.

Fifth year she had almost been killed again, this time fighting Death Eaters with Harry at the Department of Mysteries. Up until today, she would have considered that one the worst. Definitely the worst for Harry. After her injury he had watched as his godfather was killed right in front of him. Then he had been possessed briefly by Voldemort. And *then* when he had been returned to Hogwarts, on top of everything else he had been informed of the prophecy that he would have to be the one to destroy the dark lord or die trying. Hermione didn't blame him one bit for trashing the Headmaster's office after being hit with all of that in succession.

It did not escape her notice that every one of these disastrous days had involved Harry Potter in one way or another. For five years, his fate and hers had been so closely intertwined that his misery was also her misery. And in a way, that was part of the problem now, too.

For today, she had been hit with two awful blows in rapid succession. First, they had buried Albus Dumbledore, the undeniable leader of the light side of the wizarding world, and the horror of what that meant was just starting to sink in. True, his death had been several days ago, but now the finality of it hit full force. And with it the sinking feeling that without him holding the forces of evil at bay they were doomed. Of course, it was worse for Harry than for anyone else, for he had the enormous burden of defeating Voldemort upon his shoulders, now with no Dumbledore to assist and to guide him. *Dammit, it just wasn't fair!*

The tears that she had been holding back let loose now, and she paused to wipe her face with her pillow. It had hurt so much to see the grim resignation in his eyes at the end of the funeral. That was what had pushed her over the edge then, too, and she had buried her face in Ron's robes, both for comfort and to keep Harry from seeing her break down. She had to be strong for him.

But that moment with Ron had later led to the final blow that made this day worse than all others. Losing Dumbledore in itself was enough to make this a very bad day. What pushed it to the top of the worst day list, for Hermione personally, was the event that had occurred just ten minutes ago.

Right after Harry had left them, out by the lake, she had received the dreaded '*I just want us to be friends*' line from the boy she had been pursuing for a romantic relationship all year. One Ronald Weasley.

She groaned loudly as she recalled again the scene, which would be etched forever in her mind. Why? Why? Why? She managed to refrain from pounding her head against a wall, and instead collapsed onto her bed with her head in her hands. What had she been thinking? How could she

have been so stupid?!!! Hermione Granger had made the biggest mistake of her entire life, had failed the most important test she had ever faced.

She had gone after the wrong guy.

She had panicked. All of her old insecurities about herself had swayed her from pursuing what she knew in her heart would really make her happy.

She knew which guy she wanted. She knew who she was closest to, who she had felt a connection with for years, whose safety, well-being, and yes, happiness had meant more to her than anyone else's. Even her own.

It was Harry. It had always been Harry.

What had happened? It had all made so much sense when she made the decision last summer. She had worked it out so logically. She had two male friends who had been her nearly constant companions for five years. It only made sense that she would end up with one of them, and Ron was the rational choice. Harry had never shown any romantic interest in her. He had spent the last year and a half mooning over Cho. Ron had seemed interested – at least he got all jealous and sulky whenever the topic of Viktor Krum came up. She liked him a lot. They argued a lot too, but if they became more closely involved they would start getting along better, right?

Never mind that she had much more in common with Harry. Never mind that she got along better with him, that he was more considerate with her than Ron was. Never mind that her thoughts were constantly on Harry when they were apart, not on Ron. Never mind the thrill that had shot through her when she had thought that Harry would be a prefect along with her, a thrill that she had *not* felt when she had found out that it was Ron who was the prefect, not Harry.

Who was she trying to kid? What it boiled down to was that she had decided that Harry was unattainable, and Ron was available. So she had concluded that it was going to be Ron. And she had set out to make that happen. And at the same time, she admitted to herself now, she had begun to distance herself from Harry, perhaps to try to convince herself that they weren't really all that close. She began acting cool toward him when they were together, ending the hugs and other signs of affection that had become commonplace between them. She had seized on that damned Potions book as something to criticize him about constantly. She had even refused to seriously consider his suspicions about Snape and Malfoy, after five years of loyally supporting him in all of his endeavors. She had gone from being his most faithful and devoted friend to a being a nasty sarcastic bitch.

Hermione paused to wipe away a fresh round of tears as she mentally berated herself and swore that somehow she would find a way to make it up to him. And the worst part was, it hadn't even worked. She had just caught herself in time from revealing how she felt about him when she had told him how fanciable he was. And the time when he had shown that he still cared for her by coming after her in the deserted classroom after she had been humiliated at finding Ron snogging Lavender she had been barely able to refrain from throwing herself into his arms.

And what a fiasco that had turned out to be. Why did Lavender suddenly decide to show an interest in Ron at the same time that Hermione decided she wanted him? She had panicked when the beautiful blonde Gryffindor had shown up at the quidditch tryouts to cheer for Ron. How was she supposed to compete with that? As soon as Lavender had smiled at him, Ron had perked right up and forgotten that she was even there.

To her shame, she had made a spur of the moment decision to cast a Confundus hex on McClaggen, cheating to help Ron win the keeper's position. And how did that even help her with Ron? She would never be able to tell him that she had done it! Stupid, stupid, stupid! Then, to her horror, Harry had figured out what she had done. She had never been so ashamed of anything in her life.

For a while, unbelievably, it had seemed that she would win out over Lavender for Ron's affections. He had agreed to go to Slughorn's Christmas party with her. And then it all came crashing down with that horrifying scene at the party after the first quidditch victory. Lavender had won after all.

The next few months had been horrid. She had pushed one best friend away and now was refusing to speak to the other. But then Ron had tired of Lavender's clingyness and they had eventually broken up. He started being nice to her again. She was sure that this time ...

But no. He had just told her that he wasn't interested in her *that way*. *What?! Why not?* She had managed to refrain from these and the other, more bitter response, *'Well, just what exactly did it mean then when you always acted so jealous of other guys?'* She had managed to keep the encounter amiable. She needed to keep his friendship, at least.

And she needed to salvage and repair what remained of her friendship with Harry. She took a deep breath, both to try to calm down and to forestall a new round of tears. That much, at least, should be doable. Harry had never really given up on her. No matter how beastly she had behaved toward him, he had kept coming back to her, his eyes silently pleading for her to believe him, to help him, to join him in his struggle as she had done so faithfully for five years. But which she had stubbornly refused to do this year.

She lost the battle to hold back the tears and they began flowing again at the miserable thoughts of how much she had let him down. Hopefully, she and Ron had begun the process to set that to rights again when they had confronted him out by the lake a half-hour ago. She would be with him, by his side again. But that only brought back the problem she had tried to solve at the beginning of the year when she had given up on him.

Why? Why? Why? Why hadn't she listened to her heart instead of to her head? Why hadn't she told him how she was feeling, given him a chance to look at her the way she looked at him? Hermione rolled over and stared at the ceiling, but the ceiling held no answers.

How did Harry Potter come to have such a hold on her heart? What was it that had made him the most important person in her life for the past six years?

Hermione's mind had been occupied with thoughts of Harry Potter for almost as long as she'd known that she was a witch. She had been so excited when she read about the Boy Who Lived and determined from the dates in the book that he would be in her year at Hogwarts. She had been fascinated by his story and had looked forward to meeting him. Helping Neville look for his toad had been perfect cover for going from compartment to compartment on the Hogwarts Express trying to find him.

When she had finally burst into the compartment where he was sitting she had been shocked to discover that he was nothing like the image of him she had created in her mind. He was completely bewildered by everything, apparently even more unfamiliar with the magical world than she was. She had hoped to impress him with her knowledge of spells, but unfortunately had been overcome by nerves and begun babbling about anything that came into her head. From the reaction of the redheaded boy who had evidently befriended him it was obvious that she had blown it.

And yet she had found that she was unable to get him out of her mind. Despite Harry and Ron making it very clear that they wanted nothing to do with her, she couldn't leave them alone. She hung around them, being quite annoying she had to admit, trying to figure out the enigma that was Harry Potter. But even if Harry might have shown some interest in her, in getting to know her or at least listening to what she had to say, Ron wanted nothing to do with her and always managed to keep her at arms length from them. And then it happened. She had finally given up, fleeing in tears to a deserted girls' rest room, sure that her new life as a witch was ruined and that she would never ever have any friends. Only to look up and realize that there were much worse things in the world than eleven-year-old boys who insulted you. Gigantic trolls who wanted to kill you, for example.

Then he had appeared. Out of nowhere came Harry Potter to rescue her. Harry Potter, the hero of the wizarding world, but more importantly just Harry, a boy who had taken the time to find out if she was all right. It was her first ever encounter with what she would later term his 'saving people thing'. And her life had been interwoven with his ever since. After that incident she had ended up coming to know the real Harry Potter and she was proud that he considered her to be one of his most trusted friends.

By the end of her third year her feelings had started to change. She was fourteen years old now, and her hormones had kicked in, causing her to start seeing her best friend in a different way. The realization hit full force when they rode Buckbeak to rescue Sirius. The tingling sensation that shot through her body as she budged up behind him and put her arms around him quickly overcame the fear of flying that had been her initial reaction. From then on she knew.

When the Hogwarts letters prior to fourth year had mentioned dress robes, she had immediately deduced that there was some sort of formal dance or dinner in the offing. She had carefully selected her robes at Madame Malkins and was very happy with how nice they looked on her. This would be her chance to show him that she was a girl, and make him realize that she could be more than a 'best buddy'.

The *Daily Prophet* story on the Tri Wizard Tournament by that disgusting Rita Skeeter linking Harry and her romantically, despite being a complete fabrication, had been a potential breakthrough. She had taken the high road, not responding to the comments of her fellow students, good or bad, and carefully *not* denying it either, hoping that it might get his mind thinking in the right direction. Parvati and Lavender had gone crazy grilling her about it, trying to find out what the real story was. But even though she was spending so much time with him, even staying up until 2:00 AM helping him learn the summoning charm, the idea seemed never to have crossed his mind.

When the Yule Ball had finally been announced, she had immediately begun trying to figure out how to get him to ask her. But her clever plan to casually suggest that he could take a friend as his date was derailed by Ron's stupid declaration about not ending up with a pair of trolls. From then on it was all about getting the best-looking girl they could find. Which, of course, excluded her from consideration.

Not that it mattered anyway, she eventually determined. Harry had been smitten by Cho Chang, and had his mind set on asking her, if he could only get up his nerve. She was disappointed that he would fall for nothing more than a pretty face, but she shouldn't have been too surprised – he was only fourteen after all, and emotionally stunted from living with the Dursleys. And so Hermione had said yes when Viktor Krum had surprised her by asking her to be his partner for the ball – just as friends, he had assured her. Besides, going with Viktor would help her get revenge on Ron for his troll comment. She was certain that he wouldn't be able to get a date and would end up asking her, and then she could haughtily decline. She even taunted him a little about Eloise Midgen starting to look better.

The revenge had quickly turned sour, however. First, it turned out that Cho had turned Harry down, and Hermione might have been able to go with him after all! Then, Ron had asked her in the most insulting manner possible. She had angrily turned him down and stomped off to her room. Her misery was complete a few minutes later when Parvati came up into the dorm, gloating that *she* was going to the ball with Harry Potter! How was that fair? Parvati got to go to the ball with *her* Harry!

Despite all of that, there had been some good parts to the Yule Ball. The look on Harry's face when he first saw her in her dress robes was priceless. And since the two of them were both at the Head Table, and she managed so that she was sitting right across from him, they spent a pleasant meal together. She had been quite enjoying herself – until Ron made a mess of everything with his jealousy and accusations. The night had come to a nasty end with the screaming match in the Gryffindor common room.

They had eventually recovered from that scene, and she and Harry had grown closer than ever by the end of the year. She had gathered up her courage and actually kissed him goodbye (on the cheek, but still ...) at the train station just as he was leaving with his horrible relatives. And she had greeted him a month later with a crushing hug. But he still hadn't gotten a clue as to her feelings, or given any indication that he returned them. Instead, she had to watch his relationship with Cho Chang develop until they were officially going together. Even though they had broken up by the end of the year, she began to despair that he would never return her feelings. And so she had given up and made the decision to turn her attention to Ron, supposedly her safe, fallback alternative.

A decision that she now regretted more than any other.

But it was too late now. Now she wouldn't have either one of them. Ron had turned her down and Harry was taken. She had been delighted when Harry fell for Ginny. It had seemed like the best possible outcome at the time – if she ended up with Ron and Harry ended up with Ginny they would always be a close part of each others' lives. One Big Happy Weasley Family. But now Ron was out of the picture. And Ginny wasn't about to let go of Harry now that she'd finally caught him. No, there would be no romantic relationship for Hermione, not with anyone else either, at least not any time in the foreseeable future, since she would be spending all her time with Harry and Ron until Voldemort was defeated. She fell back on her bed and sighed, tears totally spent now, and stared up at the ceiling once more, trying to find the strength to go back out there and act like the past year had not happened, that the trio was together again and ready to charge off on another quest.

From the next room over, a door slammed, then bounced open again as an angry fifth year witch stormed in, followed by two of her roommates.

“Break up with me will he?” shouted a voice that Hermione instantly recognized. “He thinks he can break up with me?”

Another voice added in surprise, “He broke up with you? No one does that! You’ve always been the one who decided it was over.”

The original voice replied, slightly calmer, “Oh, it’s not over. He’ll come back. He’ll come crawling back when he sees what he’s missing. I’ll see to that.”

Hermione rolled over and sat up quickly, her heartbeat quickening and her mind racing. *OK. Maybe this day isn’t so completely horrible after all.*

She sat there listening intently for a while, waiting to see if she could hear anything about what Ginny’s plan for getting Harry to come crawling back to her might be. There was no further conversation on that subject from the next room, however, as the occupants busied themselves with last minute packing. No matter. She was pretty sure she knew what Ginny had in mind. She was also pretty sure, since she knew Harry a lot better than Ginny did, that it wouldn’t work the way the younger witch wanted it to.

Hermione, of course, had finished her packing even before the funeral, so she got up and began pacing back and forth, thinking about what to do with this new information. She needed a plan. She needed to make herself indispensable to Harry. She needed to show him the he could rely on her for anything. And besides regaining his trust, which was after all still the most important thing, she also needed to regain their closeness. Their easy familiarity where taking hold of his hand or casually hugging him was perfectly normal behavior between the two of them. Then, and only then, could she hope that it might grow into something more. And to reach that point, she somehow had to make him see that his trusted companion was also an attractive woman. That would be the difficult part.

Hermione stopped her pacing and sat down at her desk, snatching up a quill and some parchment from her bag and began to plan what needed to be done.

#### Find and destroy the Horcruxes

Go through any materials Dumbledore may have left behind

Research Horcrux creation and possible destruction using resources we haven’t tried yet

- Restricted section of Hogwarts’s library?
- Headmaster’s/Professors’ private collections?
- Grimmauld Place library?
- Ministry? Unspeakables in Dept of Mysteries?
- Knockturn Alley?
- Goblins?

#### Destroy Voldemort

Train with Harry to learn more, and more powerful, spells

Look into ways of boosting magical power

Consult with Aurors re battle tactics. Moody?

Figure out what the ‘power he knows not’ is

#### Find a place to live and train after we leave Privet Drive

#### Keep Harry focused and on track, but don’t let him get discouraged

Work out a schedule that works for all of us

Encourage, but don’t nag

Stay positive

Focus on the progress we’re making, not on how far we have to go

#### Make sure Harry takes some time to have fun and enjoy himself once in a while

After some deliberation Hermione added one more item.

#### Help Harry get over Ginny and fall in love with me

Hermione charmed the last item on her list so that only she could see it. She then sat back and regarded what she had written. There was so much to do. How could they ever accomplish that in a summer, or even in a summer and the next school year? And Harry would be anxious to get it done as quickly as possible, before any one else was hurt. She knew very well that he would take every death personally, blaming himself for not putting an end to it quickly enough. There had to be something ...

“What we need,” she said slowly as the solution dawned on her, “is more time.”

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## Hermione's Plan Setting Things in Motion

### Chapter 2, Setting Things in Motion

"Harry, Ron," Hermione called out to her friends while hurrying down the stairs from the girls' dorm. "Take my trunk to the station. I need to go talk to Professor McGonagall before we go." Before they could respond she was past them and heading for the portrait hole. "I'll catch up with you later. Save me a seat," she called over her shoulder as she disappeared through the portrait hole. She didn't catch their reply, but she knew pretty much what their response would be. Ron would look at Harry and mutter something about her being 'mental' and Harry would shrug his shoulders in amusement. Then they would do as she asked and wait for her to explain when she rejoined them.

Hermione hurried through the empty corridors of Hogwarts and soon found herself standing by the gargoyle guarding the office of the Headmistress, suddenly realizing that she didn't know the password. "Professor McGonagall!" she called out, hoping that the Headmistress was in and would hear her. Nothing happened and Hermione suddenly felt rather foolish, standing out here in the corridor shouting for the headmistress.

"Miss Granger, what are you doing here?" Hermione spun around to see McGonagall approaching her down the corridor and the foolish feeling dissipated as one of relief washed over her.

"Professor, I need to ask you for something, and it's quite urgent," Hermione blurted out, conscious of the short time she had before the Hogwarts Express was due to leave. McGonagall looked at her sternly, then motioned that she should accompany her into the office.

Pausing at the gargoyle, McGonagall barked out 'Sloth Grip Roll' and the wall parted and the stairway appeared. Hermione fought back a smile. McGonagall was well known for her passion for quidditch, so it only stood to reason that her password would be a quidditch term. McGonagall noted Hermione's reaction and the ghost of a smile crossed her own lips. "I considered using 'Green-eyed Seeker' but I thought it might hint at favoritism for a certain friend of yours." This time Hermione was unable to contain her smile.

When they had arrived at the top of the circular stairs and entered the office itself, McGonagall was all business again. "What can I do for you Miss Granger?"

Hermione decided on the direct approach and took a deep breath. "I need another time turner."

-ooOoo-

Since the Hogwarts Express was carrying only about half the normal number of students due to so many having left the school prior to the funeral, Harry and Ron had managed to secure a compartment all to themselves. Just as the train was starting to pull away from Hogsmeade Station Hermione burst through the door and plopped down on the seat across from them, breathing heavily. Both boys quickly jumped to their feet and helped her stow away her things, then waited for her to catch her breath.

Not very long, however. Impatience finally overtook Ron and he demanded, "Okay, so what was that all about?" Hermione grinned at both of her friends. That was so in character for them. She could see that Harry was as curious as Ron, but was being a bit more polite about it. Before she said anything she pulled out her wand and cast silencing and privacy spells. They could not afford any interruption during this conversation.

"Well," she began, "I was thinking." She noted the smirk that Ron exchanged with Harry at that unsurprising revelation but ignored it. "About all the things we have to do this summer. I started making a list ..." The smirk was replaced with a groan from Ron. Harry just nodded thoughtfully. It was apparent that he had expected that sort of thing from her. "If you'd just let me finish," she huffed at Ron, more for form's sake than from any real annoyance, "I was making a list of all the things we have to do in order to accomplish our ... let's call it our mission." As she was speaking she withdrew the list from her pack and they moved next to her, one to each side, to look over her shoulders. "When I finished I realized that we had a tremendous amount to do and not very much time to do it in." She looked up at Harry. "I know how impatient you probably are to get this done as quickly as possible." He acknowledged her assumption with another nod. "So," she finished, as they looked back at her expectantly, "I asked McGonagall for a time turner." She finished in a rush, and waited for their reaction in breathless anticipation.

They did not disappoint her. "Bloody hell!" She could have predicted that response from Ron. She was more interested in seeing Harry's reaction, though.

"Hermione, have we ever told you that you're brilliant?" Hermione let out the breath she had been holding, relieved at his acceptance of her actions.

She beamed back at him and shrugged, then dropped her head demurely. "Once or twice."

Harry smiled back at her broadly; she looked back up at him and their eyes held each others' for an instant. Then Harry glanced over at Ron nervously. Hermione knew exactly what had just gone through his mind. It had just been a friendly smile, but he didn't want Ron to take it the wrong way. He probably assumed that she and Ron were together now. That was something she would need to get cleared up as soon as possible. She

put that thought aside and began telling them the details of her meeting with McGonagall, and explaining the items on her list.

"I just told her that we had important things to do and not enough time to do them in. I left the impression that there would be no way we could come back in the fall if we didn't get them done. She asked if this had something to do with what you and Dumbledore were working on and I thought it would be all right to tell her that it did." Hermione broke off here and looked at Harry anxiously for confirmation. She didn't want him to feel manipulated or that she was making too many decisions.

Harry seemed to sense her worry and gave her arm a little squeeze as he nodded. "Good thinking. You needed to convince her how important it was but didn't really give anything away that she hadn't already figured out."

Relieved, Hermione continued her tale. "I think the thought that we might not return in the fall settled it for her. Of course, the fact that I used one responsibly for a whole year was a key point in our favor." She paused again and both boys motioned that they understood and that she should continue. But she knew Harry wasn't going to be happy about the next part. "The problem is that they are only handed out by the Ministry." She winced at the scowl that instantly darkened his face. When he saw her reaction he softened a bit and gave her an apologetic look. She shook her head to indicate that she understood that his scowl hadn't been directed at her. "However," she continued quickly, "it's not as bad as it sounds. Time turners are controlled by the Unspeakables in the Department of Mysteries so we might be able to get one without the rest of the Ministry finding out." Harry relaxed. All three of them knew what a disaster it would be if Scrimgeour, or worse, Umbridge found out what they were up to.

"Even so, how are we going to get in there to ask for one without anyone noticing?" asked Ron.

Hermione turned toward him. "McGonagall has a friend there that she's going to contact for us. His name is Croaker. If he's agreeable, she'll try to set up a meeting with him somewhere outside the Ministry building." Harry and Ron both looked relieved at that information. "One other problem though," Hermione mentioned, turning back to Harry. "I read last summer that all of the time turners had been destroyed during our battle there with the Death Eaters." Harry nodded grimly. That had been a night he would rather forget, but it was etched permanently in his memory. The sight of that Death Eater cycling between infancy and adulthood after they had smashed the time turners had been creepy, but was insignificant compared to some of the other horrors he had witnessed that night. Not the least of them being the near death of the witch before him. Hermione's hand on his shoulder brought his thoughts back to the present. She knew what exactly where his mind would have gone when she brought that night up, but she pressed on. "So we don't even know if they've made any more or not. McGonagall was hopeful that they had, though."

With nothing more to discuss on the issue of time turners for the moment, the trio directed their attention back to Hermione's list.

"You were really thorough with this, Hermione," marveled Harry, sending a warm feeling of happiness surging through her. Not only was it nice to hear that he appreciated her, but it was also great just to be here talking and planning like this with Harry and Ron. It was as if the previous year hadn't happened and the three of them were facing another challenge together again just like old times. "When did you have time to work all this out?"

Before she could answer, Ron interjected, "You're even giving us some time to have fun and enjoy ourselves? Blimey, Hermione, what's come over you?"

Hermione was in too good of a mood to let this bother her, and playfully swatted at his arm. "I like to have fun sometimes, too," she protested. "Even I don't like to work *all* the time." Out of the corner of her eye she saw Harry's eyebrows rise and realized that her banter with Ron could be construed as flirtatious. She really had to figure out a way to clue him in about her and Ron's relationship, and soon.

Ron wasn't finished teasing, however. "And you even wrote a note to remind yourself not to nag us? Who are you and what have you done with Hermione Granger?"

Hermione put her hands on her hips and gave Ron a stern look. "It just says I'm going to try to avoid nagging Harry. It says nothing about nagging you, Ronald." She was rewarded for this snappy comeback with a wince from Ron and chortles from Harry. She backed up and put her arm around Harry's waist and cocked her head at Ron in a 'so there!' pose. After a second of complete silence all three burst out laughing.

After several more minutes spent discussing Hermione's list she spoke up again. "I have some more ideas about what we need to do first, but right now Ron and I need to go out on patrol." Harry looked puzzled for a moment, then shot Ron a knowing grin and told them to have fun on patrol and that he would have a bit of a kip while they were out.

As soon as they were in the corridor Hermione pulled Ron aside and spoke to him in a low voice. "Ron, would you do me a favor? As soon as you get a chance, please tell Harry that the two of us aren't romantically involved. It feels so awkward with him thinking something is up whenever I smile at you or every time we happen to be alone together."

While it was a reasonable request, Ron was surprised at the urgency Hermione was showing. It was a misunderstanding that could be easily cleared up, but didn't seem like that big of a deal. Then he looked at her thoughtfully. "Are you sure there isn't some other reason?"

Hermione bit her lip nervously, then looked up at Ron and decided to confide in him. "You see, Ron, if all this turns out the way I think it will Harry and I will be spending a lot of time together and ..." She paused, letting the implication sink in.

"And you're thinking of trying to start something with him?" Ron offered.

"Did you hear about him and Ginny?" Hermione asked, avoiding the question temporarily.

"Yeah," Ron responded. "He told me while we were waiting for you."

"Look," Hermione explained, "I've spent six years spending all of my time with you two. It only makes sense that I might get together with one of you and, well, you said you weren't interested." Ron remained silent, mulling over her revelation. "Would you be okay with it if it did happen?"

"I'd be a real prat if I objected," Ron pointed out, "since Harry didn't seem to have a problem when he thought we were together." Hermione sighed in relief, but Ron wasn't finished yet. "On the other hand, it seems I should show some loyalty to my sister."

Hermione paused for a moment while she pondered this reasoning. She hadn't expected Ron to take Ginny's side, but now that he pointed it out, it made some sense. But what about the fact that she was his best friend? Ron was aware of her consternation and quickly clarified his position. "Hermione, I want what is best for Harry. I'm not sure who would be better for him, you or Ginny."

Hermione's hand rose to her mouth to stifle a gasp, as her eyes began to moisten. *How could Ron say that after all they'd been through together?*

"Hermione, I know you care a lot for Harry, probably more than anyone else. But Ginny cares for him too. And you gave him quite a bit of grief this year. Even when you're getting along, you can be a pain sometimes. You're not always the most fun person to be around, you know, and Ginny made Harry laugh. He was pretty happy while he was with her." Hermione desperately wanted to object, but she knew that what he was saying was absolutely true. Just as she started to respond Ron held up his hand to silence her. "So I think those two items I pointed out on your list are pretty significant. Can I assume those are there because you're aware of this and are going to try to change?"

Hermione could only nod silently and wonder how much this was part of the reason that Ron had decided that *he* wasn't interested in her. She redoubled her resolve to lighten up and show her fun side more often. Ron then shocked her by pulling her into a hug. "Hermione, it hasn't always been gloom and doom with us. I've heard you laugh, and we *have* had fun together. I want you both to be happy and I think the two of you could get on smashingly together. Just try to remember what I've said, okay?" Hermione nodded again, the tears that had been threatening gone now. Ron pulled back and a different, more grateful expression crossed his face.

"Hermione, I want to thank you for telling me all this, and also for considering me first. Go easy on him, though, he's got a lot of other stuff on his mind right now."

"Don't worry, I will. Thank you Ron, it really means a lot to me."

"Where are you going now?" Ron asked as Hermione began to head down the corridor away from their compartment.

Hermione turned back to smile at him. "Well, Ron we *do* have a patrol to make."

-ooOoo-

Harry had dozed for a while, but he had too much on his mind to be able to rest for long. He was sitting looking out the window as the scenery of northern England flew by, wondering what was in store for him this summer, when the door to their compartment burst open and Ron stormed in.

"That little tramp! I can't believe her!" Hermione followed him in trying to calm him down but inwardly thinking that this was working out better than she could possibly have hoped. Harry was on his feet in an instant, ready to intervene in another one of his friends' quarrels. Hermione noted the flash of anger on his face and realized that he was under the impression that Ron's words were directed at her. A little thrill shot through her at the thought that he would leap to defend her honor so quickly, even against his best friend.

"Calm down Ron. It wasn't that bad. She's just broken up with Harry and she probably just wants some comforting."

"Hermione, she was practically sitting in his lap!"

"Whose lap?" Harry now had a pained expression on his face as he had worked out whom they were talking about. At this Ron suddenly seemed to realize that this might not have been the greatest way to let his best friend hear about what he had just witnessed.

"Err ... Colin Creevy." Ron winced expecting Harry to blow up, but Harry only stared straight ahead with a pained look on his face. Hermione tentatively reached out to put a comforting hand on his arm. After a few more moments, Harry dropped his head and returned to his seat with Hermione remaining by his side and taking the seat next to him. Ron sat down on the bench across from them as the uncomfortable silence stretched out.

Hermione knew exactly why Ginny was cuddling up to Colin Creevey, and why the younger girl had made sure that she and Ron had seen it. She was trying to make Harry jealous. *Right, you know all about that tactic*, she thought guiltily, recalling the McClaggen episode at Slughorn's party. She firmly pushed that thought aside – they were going to forget about that whole disastrous year's experience and start fresh.

"Hermione's right," Harry eventually concluded. "I broke up with her. The whole thing couldn't have been very pleasant for her. She has a right to do whatever she wants now, and if that means she needs another guy ..." He shrugged and turned his head to look out the window again.

"And what about you?" Hermione persisted. "What about your feelings?"

"I'll be all right," Harry responded, turning back to her. He managed a small smile for her. "Look, I know you're worried about me and I appreciate it. Really, I'll be fine. I'm sure you'll have plenty of things to keep my mind occupied." As Harry looked away again, Hermione caught Ron's eye and gave a small shake of her head, letting him know that despite how Harry's last remark might be interpreted, she had no intention of taking advantage of him in his current mental state. Ron relaxed and leaned back. After a bit more silence, Hermione returned to their previous discussion of their plans, and received grateful looks from both of the boys for turning everyone's thoughts away from Ginny.

"First of all," Hermione began, "we need to know what our assets are. For example, an extended period of training is going to be expensive. How much money are we going to have available to us?" Ron grimaced at this topic and Hermione decided to address his concerns head on. "Ron, we know you aren't wealthy and you won't be able to contribute anything financially. But that's okay. We all have different things to offer and all three of us are going to need to accept that. I'm not going to get mad if there's something you can do that I can't and Harry's going to have to accept that there are things that we are going to be doing for him. Are we clear on that?" She waited until both boys nodded, Ron rather reluctantly.



"Now, my parents are relatively well off, so they could help us out some, but what about you Harry?"

"I don't really know. I only know that there's always been money in my vault when I needed it. I haven't even been to Gringotts since third year," he reminded them.

"Well, I was also thinking of the inheritance you got from Sirius. Do you have any idea how much that was?"

"No idea. I just reckoned it was only the house," Harry admitted.

"No mate," Ron broke in, interested in this topic in spite of his misgivings. "The Black family was pretty wealthy."

"Just so." Hermione went on. "I was thinking that since you aren't really very comfortable with the idea of benefiting from Sirius's death ..." She paused, looking at Harry for confirmation of her assumption. He nodded that she was correct. "... that we dedicate all of Sirius's money to be used to fight the war. Sort of as a way of honoring him."

Hermione wasn't sure how Harry would react to this suggestion, so she was quite pleasantly surprised when he reached out and hugged her. "That's a great idea, Hermione," he rasped out. She realized that he was having trouble controlling his emotions and having his head buried in her bushy hair was enabling him to hide his face from Ron. She responded by putting her arms around him and pulling him tightly to herself, not letting go until she could feel him regaining control of his breathing.

She glanced over at Ron to gauge his reaction to Harry's sudden display of emotion. Ron frowned for a moment at their embrace, but it soon dissolved into a look of understanding as he realized what was going on. He rose from his seat and leaned forward and patted Harry on the back a few times, then sat back down. "I think that's a great idea, too, Harry. I think that's what he would have wanted. And to know that the Black family fortune was going to help defeat the dark lord – well, I think he would have thought that was brilliant. One last great prank to play on his family."

Hermione shot Ron a grateful smile and Harry soon regained his composure and pulled back from her. "You two are the greatest," he managed, while wiping his face on his sleeve.

"So," he continued at last, "do we try to meet with Bill and find out how much I have?"

"No, I think he's still in the hospital," Ron pointed out. "But I think you could send Hedwig to Gringotts to request a meeting with the goblins. They'll probably be willing to sit down with you and talk about it if your account's large enough. I remember Bill mentioning that the wealthy families all had their own personal bankers." Harry and Hermione both agreed. Hermione was impressed at the maturity Ron was showing as he put aside his feelings about his relative poverty to offer his knowledge on the subject.

"Okay, I'll do that as soon as I get home," Harry agreed. "Oh, and as long as we're setting up meetings, I think we should talk to Fred and George." Hermione's forehead crinkled in thought for a moment, then she nodded in understanding. Ron, who had expected her to object to having any dealings with the two pranksters, expressed surprise. "I think that their clever minds could come up with some interesting items that would be effective weapons, offensive or defensive," Harry explained. "You saw how Malfoy used that instant darkness powder. Imagine the possibilities of a portable swamp, for example, in defending a position."

Once Ron saw what Harry was thinking, he became quite enthusiastic about the possibilities. Hermione added 'Meet with the twins' to her to-do list.

Looking out the train window, Hermione saw that they were approaching London. "One more important thing we need to decide before we go any further," she pointed out. "Where are we going to go once we arrive at King's Cross? I assume you're still planning to go to your aunt and uncle's Harry?" He nodded glumly. She could see he didn't really want to, but felt an obligation to follow Dumbledore's wishes. "How much time do you plan to stay there?"

"I'm not really sure. I only spent two weeks there last year before he picked me up. But it was a month the year before, and even longer than that the previous summers."

"It seems to me that it's less and less every year. Probably you'd not need to stay any longer than a week, wouldn't you think?"

Harry's mood brightened considerably. "That's brilliant, Hermione!" He gave her an appreciative smile, which she returned. Then he frowned again. "One problem though – I know you guys said you'd stay with me, but ..."

Ron broke in. "Mate, there's no way we're letting you stay there by yourself. Don't even think about it." Hermione also shot Harry a glare. She thought they had gotten past this.

Harry held up his hands in defense. "No, no, don't get me wrong. I'd love to have you guys stay with me. But I don't think the Dursleys would go for it. Ron maybe, but definitely not Hermione. They'd never stand for me having a girl stay in my room, and I doubt they'd let her use the guest bedroom."

Hermione was crestfallen. After all her efforts it looked like she was going to be left out. She had to admit that Harry was probably right, but that didn't make it any easier to take. Harry saw her distress and moved to try to comfort her. "It's not that I don't want you around, Hermione," he said as he put his arm around her. "Can't you come by during the day sometimes?"

Realization suddenly dawned on Hermione. "Of course I can. Why didn't I think of that before?" she announced enthusiastically. "I can apparate back and forth every day. That way I can spend most of the day with you guys, but I can also spend time with Mum and Dad. That will work out perfectly." She looked up and was relieved to see that both Harry and Ron were delighted with this solution, and her worries that they didn't want



her around vanished.

"I'll just need to get Mum or Dad to drive me over for a visit," she mused, working out the details as she spoke. "Once I know where it is I can apparate there any time I want, directly from my house to yours." Harry then decided that it would probably be better if he went home with his relatives by himself and explained what they intended, and Ron could join him the next day. Glad to have that settled, the trio began collecting up their things as the train pulled into the station.

Of course it was too good to last. All of their well thought out planning started falling apart as soon as they entered the station. Molly Weasley stated that she needed Ron at home, to help get things ready for the wedding. When Ron and Harry pointed out that it would only be for a week, she said she would consider it, but that Ron and Ginny had to come to the Burrow for now. Harry decided not to mention that he had broken up with Ginny, and that he hadn't invited her to join them at Privet Drive. When Ginny came off the train walking very closely next to Colin Creevey, Harry avoided looking in her direction, choosing to go with Hermione so she could introduce him to her parents and explain what they were planning.

As they approached the Grangers, Hermione dropped her things and raced up to give each of her parents one of her trademark hugs. She noticed Harry hanging back with a wistful smile on his face, clearly happy for her reunion with her parents, but probably regretting that he didn't have any family of his own to welcome him. After releasing her parents, she returned to Harry and dragged him forward. As she was doing so, she wondered where the Dursleys were, but put that thought out of her mind for now.

"Harry, this is my mum and dad, Dan and Emma Granger. Mum, Dad, this is Harry Potter," she announced as handshakes were exchanged.

"Oh?" Emma asked, raising her eyebrows, "is he the one you ..."

"Harry's my friend, Mum," Hermione interrupted, heading her mother off before she could ask anything embarrassing. "My *best* friend for six years."

"Of course, we already knew that," replied Emma, recovering smoothly. She had been aware that Hermione had intended to be able to introduce them to a *boyfriend* when she returned home this year. Apparently that hadn't worked out. "Hermione's written about you often. It's so nice to meet you again." Dan agreed with her, while eyeing Harry thoughtfully. He seemed like a pretty nice kid. And his daughter had always spoken glowingly of him. Emma continued making small talk with Harry, and they eventually concluded that they had only met him once before, prior to Hermione's second year. Hermione watched all of this nervously. She really wanted her parents and Harry to get on well together. A plan had been forming in her mind for a way they could maximize their use of the time turner, and it was essential that Harry gain her parents' trust in order for it to work.

In fact, Harry and the Grangers were getting along fabulously. The Grangers were very pleasant and down to earth people, and Harry could see some of Hermione's traits in them. There was absolutely no comparison between them and the Dursley's in his mind, and he interacted happily with them. For their part, the Grangers were very impressed that a sixteen year old boy was so interested in talking to them and hearing what they had to say. He was friendly, well-mannered, and seemed quite content to be standing there visiting with them. And neither of them failed to notice that he and Hermione were quite fond of each other, from the looks and smiles they exchanged. They did wonder, though, why he didn't seem to be in any hurry to find his own family. After all, he hadn't seen them for nearly ten months.

Before they knew it, Harry and Hermione found that they were the only students left in the station. Harry had been looking around discreetly during their conversation, and had noticed two things. Remus and Tonks were standing a polite distance away, keeping an eye on him, and the Dursleys were nowhere in sight. Hermione, seeing what he was doing, caught his eye and the two of them silently came to the same conclusion. The Dursleys were not coming to pick Harry up. The school had probably sent an owl to all the parents to alert them that their children would be coming home two weeks early, and the Dursleys had likely refused to even let it into the house.

After realizing this, Harry motioned Remus and Tonks to come over, and Hermione introduced them to her parents. They began discussing their options, one of which was for Harry to take the Knight Bus back to Privet Drive. None of them were thrilled with that idea, since Harry would prefer to stay out of the public eye right now.

At this point Dan Granger broke in. "Where do you live Harry?"

"Little Whinging, in Surrey," Harry replied.

"We could drop you off on our way home," he offered, glancing at Emma and Hermione for confirmation. "Surrey is right on our way." Emma agreed that of course they could take him, it would be no problem at all. Hermione tried to keep relatively calm, but inside she was ecstatic. This couldn't possibly have worked out any better. She, and especially her parents, would be able to spend a bit more time with Harry, and she would be able to find out exactly where Harry's house was. She couldn't help the smile that broke out on her face, and it only grew when Harry happily accepted her dad's offer.

"Well then, let's get out to the car and get going," Dan announced, and the four of them picked up the students' luggage and other possessions and headed out of the station.

Hermione couldn't help taking Harry's hand and giving it a little squeeze as they walked out to the car, which elicited a shared smile between the two of them. So far everything was going according to plan.

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## Hermione's Plan Getting to Know the Grangers

### Chapter 3, Getting to Know the Grangers

Harry's eyes widened as he got his first look at the Grangers' car. It was a Mercedes 600 sedan, the top of the line. Harry didn't know much about cars, but it was obvious that this was a much nicer car than anything his Uncle Vernon had ever owned. Harry helped Dan load his and Hermione's trunks in the boot of the car before joining Hermione in the back seat. Emma, who was quite taken with Hedwig, insisted on keeping the beautiful snowy owl in the front seat with her and Hermione held Crookshanks on her lap. Harry and Hermione took turns scratching the half kneazle behind the ears, which Crookshanks appeared to regard as the right and proper order of things.

Dan and Emma resumed their conversation with Harry while they navigated through the streets of London, and he quickly relaxed and began to open up even more with them, as they coaxed stories from him of his and Hermione's adventures at Hogwarts by prompting him with items she had written in her letters home. They both found it amusing that Harry's version of the stories tended to emphasize Hermione's role more while Hermione's original tales had focused on Harry's exploits.

The relaxed feeling that Harry was enjoying came to an abrupt end when Dan suggested that Harry use Emma's cell phone to call his aunt and uncle and tell them he was on his way. Dan and Emma shared a glance when they noted this, a glance that gradually changed to a look of alarm as they witnessed the conversation that ensued when Vernon answered the phone. They watched Harry cringe as they could hear Vernon loudly berating him for the inconvenience he was causing, even though he had spared them the trip to London to pick him up this year. They could also see the worried look on their daughter's face and they recalled that she had told him that Harry's home life was rather difficult.

As health care professionals, the Grangers were required to be alert to indications of child abuse in their patients, and Harry's body language was exhibiting all the warning signs. They were both sickened by the change that had come over the friendly, well-mannered boy that their daughter thought so highly of, and eventually Dan had seen enough. After pulling over to the side of the street, he reached out and beckoned to Harry for the phone.

"Hello, Mr. Dursley? This is Dan Granger speaking. I'm sorry? I beg your pardon, but I'm not sure what you mean by freaks. No sir, I assure you that my wife and I are just as normal as you are." Only Hermione heard Harry's muttered, "a lot *more* normal" as he slumped back into his seat.

"I hope you don't mind that we offered Harry a ride home from the train station. I thought it would be more convenient than him having to call you to come all the way into London to pick him up. Yes, it was no problem, we're happy to do it." The others in the car could see Dan force himself to hold his tongue when Vernon said something about how he should have left that worthless freak at the station.

"Look, the reason I wanted to speak to you is to see if it would be all right with you if my wife and I took Harry out to dinner before we brought him home." Hermione perked up upon hearing this, and she noted happily that Harry did also. Apparently Vernon agreed with Dan's suggestion (probably grumbling that it would be one less time he needed to feed the freak, Hermione thought) and the phone call was quickly concluded.

Dan turned to look at Harry. "Is that all right with you? I didn't mean to be presumptuous."

"No, that's great Mr. Granger," Harry quickly reassured him. "I'd love to go to dinner with you."

Dan paused briefly before continuing. "I hope you don't mind my saying so, but your uncle is one of the rudest men I've ever spoken with."

Harry snorted. "Oh yeah, if it has anything to do with me. I suppose he can be perfectly polite to people he wants to get in good with. As far as he's concerned, that would only be someone with money or power; that's all he's impressed by." Looking around at his surroundings, Harry continued, "I bet this car would get his attention, though."

Dan and Emma shared another glance. Emma's university degree had been in psychology and she could figure out some of what was going on here. "Harry," she asked, "would I be correct in assuming that the clothes you're wearing aren't necessarily by choice?"

Harry drew back a little, on the defensive, but then relaxed as Hermione's hand sought out his to offer some reassurance. Everything he had observed so far about Hermione's parents led him to believe that this question was out of concern for him, and was not intended to be unfeeling. "That's correct Mrs. Granger. All my clothes are hand-me-downs from Dudley when he's outgrown them or worn them out, and he's ... well, he's the size of a small whale." Harry's attention was on Emma, so he didn't notice the anger that was building up in Hermione as her eyes narrowed. "I guess these aren't really suitable to wear to anyplace nice for dinner, are they?" His face fell as this realization struck him.

Hermione couldn't hold back any longer. "Harry, I don't care how you're dressed and neither do Mum and Dad!" She shot a glare at each of her parents, challenging them to disagree, and they both immediately shook their heads.

Emma quickly broke in before Hermione could get too carried away. "No dear, that's not what I was getting at. It seems to me that keeping Harry dressed in shabby clothing is just a way that his family uses to make themselves feel superior to him. I think that a bit of shopping might be in order

before we take Harry home.” She looked to her husband for confirmation of her idea, and received it. “Dan could use a sport coat to go with what he’s wearing, and I’m sure you could use a nice summer dress, since you’ve probably outgrown some of your old ones. And I certainly wouldn’t mind getting something new. What do you say, Harry, would you let us treat you to a nice shirt and a pair of slacks?” Harry hesitated. “Then we can all drop in on your relatives and perhaps let them know what a nice dinner we’re going to have.”

Hermione could tell that Harry was feeling guilty about her parents spending money on him, and broke in. “Remember what we agreed to Harry, about accepting things? Dad can help you pick out a nice outfit. This is something my parents want to do for you.”

Harry couldn’t find any fault with that logic, and before he knew it they had stopped at a shopping center along the motorway to Surrey. Harry and Dan went into a men’s clothing store, while Hermione and Emma browsed the selections of women’s stores. Hermione eventually selected a simple white sleeveless dress, with a V-neckline that was cut lower than anything she had previously owned. In fact, Emma had been correct that she had outgrown most of her old dresses – not in the sense that she had gotten much taller, but that her figure had filled out significantly in the last three years. The dress had an even deeper V-cut back, which precluded her wearing a bra with it, but it was of a stretch knit fabric that gave her enough support. It was longer than she would have liked, but it would do for now and she would be able to shorten it when she got home. The dress conformed snugly to her upper body before flaring at her hips to a full skirt. She was quite hopeful that Harry would like it.

When the four of them joined up in front of the stores the two teens were momentarily frozen speechless. Dan had helped Harry select a closely fitted dark green dress shirt and a light gray cotton-blend pair of trousers, which also fit perfectly. Hermione had never seen Harry in anything but baggy clothes or loose wizarding robes and it was a real eye-opener. She knew that Harry had grown up in recent years, but the broad-shouldered, narrow-waisted, tight-bummed hunk in front of her made her knees go weak. For his part, Harry seemed to be having trouble taking his eyes off of Hermione’s torso.

Emma quickly bailed Harry out. “You know, I think that dress needs a necklace, don’t you Harry?” thereby giving him a reason for focusing on Hermione’s neckline. “Perhaps a locket or a pendant?” This reference caused Harry to involuntarily pull the locket he carried everywhere with him from his pocket and hold it out, staring at it with his mind a thousand miles away.

“Harry, is that ...?” gasped Hermione, now also broken out of her trance. Harry suddenly realized what he was doing and nodded silently, staring at the golden trinket in his hand. “I... um... I really don’t think so,” Hermione managed, giving in to a small shudder. Even though it was a fake horcrux, it would be too creepy to wear it knowing what Harry and Dumbledore had gone through to get it. Harry, realizing her discomfort, quickly put the locket back into his pocket.

Emma wasn’t sure what the significance of this piece of jewelry was, but could tell that it was distressing to both of them. “It’s not the right color anyway. Silver looks much better on Hermione than gold,” she declared while moving them towards a jewelry counter.

Hermione found herself standing next to Harry perusing the displays when her eye was caught by a beautiful jade pendant on a silver chain. Harry, who had been watching her, quickly reached out and picked it up. “How about this?” he suggested. “Let me buy it for you.”

Hermione protested just as Harry had done previously, but eventually gave in when he argued that they were getting something nice for him, so he wanted to get something nice for her in return. She finally accepted when he allowed her to count it as an early birthday present. Dan quickly agreed to let Harry pay him for the pendant as soon as he could get some money exchanged.

The rest of the evening went by all too fast as far as Hermione was concerned. When they arrived in Surrey, they first stopped off at Privet Drive, ostensibly to drop off Hedwig and Harry’s trunk, but also to show off for the Dursleys. Vernon and Petunia couldn’t stop gaping from the moment the Mercedes pulled into their driveway, all the way through the introductions to the impeccably dressed Granger family by their nearly unrecognizable nephew, right up until the foursome’s airy waves as they set off to the most expensive restaurant in town, which Dan happened to mention the name of just in case they needed to get in touch. For his part Dudley never took his eyes off of Hermione, which eventually caused a glaring Harry to move to block his view, which in turn generated a satisfied smile from the young witch.

At the restaurant, Hermione kept a close eye on Harry, subtly helping him out with everything. She was fairly certain that he had never been out to eat before in his life, and she could see the gratitude in his eyes for her not letting him embarrass himself. The dinner was fabulous, and their amiable conversation of before continued. She could see her parents gradually becoming more and more impressed with Harry. Unfortunately, all too soon as far as she was concerned, they were eventually back at Privet Drive, where she decided to walk Harry up to the front door.

“Good night, Harry. I had an incredible time. I’m so glad you could come out with us.”

“Me too, Hermione. It was unbelievable. Please thank your parents again for me.” He looked reluctantly at the door to the now dark house. “Will you be coming by tomorrow then?”

“Sure. Call me when you’re ready for me. Do you still have my number?” Harry nodded, and Hermione gathered up her courage, leaned forward, and kissed him on the cheek. “Okay, see you tomorrow.” With that, she spun around and hurried back to the car before her pounding heart caused her to pass out.

As Dan pulled out of the driveway, they all waved to Harry who was still standing, somewhat in a daze, on the front porch, then sat in silence for a bit as he headed back to the motorway to continue on home, Hermione absently stroking Crookshanks’ back. Eventually Dan quipped, “It’s been a while since I’ve been through this, but isn’t it supposed to be the guy who gives the girl a goodnight kiss on her porch, rather than the other way around?”

Hermione was glad it was dark in the car, so her parents couldn’t see her blush, and she could only manage the standard teen response. “Daaaaaad!” (A/N If I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard that from one of my daughters ...)

-ooOoo-

Dan and Emma Granger were, to all appearances, a successful professional couple who lived in a well-to-do neighborhood, drove nice cars, and took long, expensive vacations when they could arrange the time off from their practice. They were faithful members of their local church, got on well with their neighbors, took a moderate interest in their local community, and kept up with the latest developments in their field. The only thing the least bit unusual about them was that they were practicing nudists, but they didn't make a big deal out of it. They rarely visited a nudist club, but mostly confined their clothing free activities to their own home and the resorts they visited at warm weather locations. Other than that pastime, which wasn't that unusual in Britain or in Europe in general, they were just a regular, normal pair of dentists living regular, normal lives – who just happened to have a daughter who was a witch.

This, of course, made them quite a bit different than their neighbors. Acquaintances who knew not to come into their back yard uninvited, and who didn't mind having to wait while they threw on a robe before answering the door, could not be counted on to be so open-minded if they had learned about their daughter's 'gift'. And so they had been living with the secret for nearly seven years now, ever since the strange letter had arrived on their daughter's eleventh birthday.

For the last several years though, it was becoming more and more obvious that it was a dangerous world that their daughter had become a part of, and somehow she was now caught up right in the thick of it. Most implausibly, she had been part of a group of school children that had captured some of the most dangerous magical terrorists in the country a year ago. They also knew that the reason their daughter was so deeply caught up in the danger in her world was her friendship with the boy they had just spent the afternoon and evening getting to know better. Of course, their natural instincts as parents were to get her as far away from him as possible, no matter that he was one of the finest young men they had ever met. They also realized, though, that they had no chance whatsoever of doing that. She had made it very clear, by both her words and actions, that she would follow him anywhere, and indeed, had already done so.

Thus their discussion, as they removed their clothing upon their return home, centered on how they could best aid these two teenage warriors, by any means possible. After some time spent reviewing all that they had learned this day, Emma went to talk to Hermione and ask her to join their discussion.

Hermione entered her room which she hadn't seen for nearly six months, her mind spinning with everything that had happened that day, most particularly the latter part involving Harry Potter and her plan to win his heart. While she pondered, she began to disrobe, removing the white dress that had been such a success, quickly stripping down to her knickers. At this point she paused as she stood in front of her mirror, and gave herself a critical evaluation.

What she saw was a body that had significantly matured from that of the twelve year old girl that had been rescued by two boys from a troll in a girls' bathroom. She had a developed a decent pair of hips and a nice slender waist, and though she didn't know it, a bum that guys would think was cute if they ever got a glimpse of it. Her breasts were of average size, which meant that, like most teenage girls, she thought they were too small. As she studied them, she wished, not for the first time, that she was curvy like Lavender. Her voluptuous blonde roommate certainly never had any trouble getting boys to notice her. Hermione did acknowledge, though, that she was bigger than Parvati or Ginny (Cho too, come to think of it), which meant *that* feature, at least, wouldn't be an issue with Harry. Of course, those three girls were all very pretty, with beautiful long hair, and had no trouble attracting boys. Unfortunately these were definitely *not* Hermione's strong points.

As she studied herself in the mirror, she decided she should shave her legs. (It had been fortunate that Harry's eyes never got down that far this evening, and that her dress had been relatively long.) Shaving would be a relatively simple matter, as one of the benefits of sharing a dorm room with Lavender Brown was learning lots of personal care charms. Lavender had been horrified that Hermione didn't shave her legs during the school year, but Hermione never saw the point, since her legs were always covered by the school robes.

As she used her wand to do the hair removal charm, Hermione reflected on being a child of nudists, adjusting to living in a dorm with two other girls. Due to her background, she had grown up without being the least bit self conscious about her body. In the Granger household it was perfectly normal to walk nude from the bathroom to the bedroom. While Parvati had come from a conservative Indian family, and had been shocked at this behavior, Lavender had definitely turned out to have some exhibitionistic tendencies. (Hermione recalled having to watch her play tonsil hockey in the middle of the common room with Ron and wondered, again not for the first time, just how much of Lavender's charms Ron had been favored with. Now however, she found that she didn't really care that much.)

Eventually, after hanging around with Lavender for six years, Parvati had loosened up enough so that she no longer dressed behind her bed hangings, and was comfortable enough to walk around in the dorm room in her underwear, or emerge from the bathroom in only a towel. Between that, and Lavender's displays, and Hermione's casual attitude toward nudity, the sixth year Gryffindor girls' dorm was the stuff that adolescent male fantasies were made of.

As she finished up her legs, Hermione sighed as she reflected that things had been pretty tense in that dorm this year, with Lavender being jealous of Hermione's relationship with Ron, blaming her for their breakup. Just like Cho the year before with Harry. How unfair, she grumbled in her mind; she got all of the blame but none of the benefits, since neither boy had moved on to *her* after the breakups that she allegedly caused.

Once her legs were done she decided that she should also trim her bikini area, since she would likely be wearing swimsuits this summer. Hermione recalled reading an article in one of her mum's magazines last summer about something called a Brazilian bikini wax. It sounded rather painful and she was very glad that she could do this magically. She removed her knickers and was once again carefully performing the charm when her mum knocked and entered the room, while pulling on a robe, which she left hanging open in front.

"That looks like a pretty useful spell," Emma commented. As was not uncommon for nudist women, she kept herself clean shaven.

"Sorry, Mum, it only works for witches," Hermione smiled back over her shoulder, not the least bit concerned at her mother's presence in the room, or the way either of them were attired. Emma grinned ruefully and watched her finish.

"You know, now that you can do magic at home, perhaps you can take on a bigger share of the chores," Emma teased.

"Sure Mum," Hermione replied. "Definitely the cleaning, but you probably still don't want me in the kitchen. Using magic will no doubt mean that I can just burn food that much faster." Emma grimaced, but had to agree. They had finally given up trying to make a cook out of Hermione, now trusting her to do no more than boil water for tea.

Hermione finished and straightened up, regarding herself once again in the mirror with a wistful expression. Emma, guessing what was on her mind, came up behind her and put her hands on Hermione's shoulders in understanding.

"Mum, how do you get a guy?"

"Harry this time?" They had had a similar conversation during the Christmas holidays regarding Hermione's lack of success with Ron. Her daughter nodded glumly. "Well, I don't think you should invite him over and jump naked into the pool with him." As she had intended, that got a smile out of the girl. "I think you have to just do what you can to get him to notice you in that way, without going overboard or turning into someone you're not." Hermione nodded. She had gone down that path this year and wouldn't do that again. "You want him to fall for you, not some fake version of you. In the long run that won't work. But that doesn't mean you can't put your best side forward. That dress you wore tonight certainly got his attention. And it wouldn't hurt to invite him over for a swim. With an appropriate swimsuit of course."

"Appropriate?"

"Something with both a top and a bottom. At least at first." Hermione blushed brightly at this suggestion and Emma laughed, with Hermione eventually joining in. Emma gave her daughter a quick hug and then released her as Hermione reached for a robe. "Actually, the reason I came in here was to tell you that your father and I are going into the hot tub and wondered if you wanted to join us."

Hermione considered for a moment. "Is the pool warm?"

"Yes, we made sure to have it ready for you. You're always so pale when you come home from school we thought you might want to get as much sun as you can." Hermione snickered. Northern Scotland was not the greatest place to work on a tan.

"Okay, then I'll swim for a while to work off some energy and settle down a bit, then I'll join you."

The Grangers' house was not quite large enough to be considered a mansion, but was impressive nonetheless. The drive led up to a large porch with a covered entryway, then continued around to the side of the house to a garage which was expansive enough to hold two cars and a boat. The front door to the home opened up to a grand, two story entryway dominated by a large circular stairway leading up to the bedrooms on the second floor. The front of the house had a large formal living room and dining room off of either side of the entryway, which were used primarily for entertaining business associates.

A set of double doors led to the rear of the house, which contained a kitchen equipped with all the latest culinary gadgets, along with a breakfast room, immediately behind the dining room, and an expansive family room behind the living room. This area was the part of the house that the Grangers actually lived in most of the time. The garage opened into the kitchen and beyond that was a laundry area. On the other side of the house, beyond the family room was an office used for their dentistry practice. The basement contained a well stocked wine cellar, an exercise area, and another fully finished and soundproofed space that had been intended as a recreation area for Hermione's friends when she became a teenager, but now sat unused.

The upper floor contained a master bedroom suite and three other bedrooms. Hermione's bedroom had its own bath, and the two guest bedrooms shared a bath. The rear of the house opened into an enclosed porch, reached from the family room, which contained a jacuzzi style hot tub. This porch led to a pool deck, which surrounded a heated pool that had a retractable covering, so that it could be used for more than half the year. The back yard was surrounded by a privacy hedge, and contained a beautiful assortment of trees and shrubs, as well as lovely flower gardens. In the far back was a tool shed, used primarily by the landscaping service. The landscaping service had been selected particularly for their discretion, having several nudist households on their client list, and only worked during times when the family was not using the pool.

Hermione followed her mother down the stairs, through the family room and out onto the porch, where her father was waiting for them, just finishing adjusting the hot tub and removing the cover. As her parents disrobed and entered the bubbling water, she continued out onto the pool deck, discarded her robe on a lounge chair, and dove into the pool.

Hermione swam in the pool for fifteen minutes, luxuriating in the feel of the warm water flowing over her nude body, a feeling she was unable to duplicate at Hogwarts. The prefect's bath was close, but not quite large enough to swim in. While she swam she sorted through what she wanted to ask her parents. When she finally joined them in the hot tub, she was in for a pleasant surprise.

"Honey," Dan began. "We've been talking about your situation with Harry, and we want to tell you that we are willing to do whatever we can to help you. But we're not sure exactly what that might be. While we'd like to leave the country with you to keep you safe, we know that's out of the question for you. Is there anything we can do?"

Hermione would have hugged them if it wouldn't have been so awkward, sitting there nude in the hot tub, so settled for reaching out and squeezing each of their hands in gratitude. "Well, I do have an idea that I want you to be a part of. Do you remember me telling you about the time turner I used my third year?" They both nodded, eager to learn more. "I asked McGonagall if we could have another one to use to get us more time to train. If we can get one, we'll need a place where we can repeat days over and over, without running into ourselves, someplace with a lot of different rooms. I wondered, if you are planning a holiday this summer, if ..."

Dan and Emma realized where her thought process was going even before she finished the question. "A resort area," they both chimed in. "With a long string of hotels, so that you could move along to a new one each time you repeated a day," Emma continued.

"Actually, we *have* been planning on taking a holiday this year," Dan added. "We tentatively scheduled the first two weeks of July. Let us look into some possibilities and we'll see what we can come up with." Hermione nodded, relieved that her idea had gone over so well, and settled back

against the wall of the hot tub, letting the water come up to her neck.

Finally relaxed from the effects of the hot water, and after nearly falling asleep in the middle of a conversation, Hermione headed off to bed and the long day that had begun far away in a totally different world, in despair and dismay, ended with hope and anticipation.

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## Hermione's Plan Initial Preparations

### Chapter 4, Initial Preparations

Monday, June 16

Hermione woke to the sound of a phone ringing. Sitting up and looking around, she was shocked to see that it was 8:00 already. Her parents had probably already left for work, and therefore she was the only one in the house to answer the phone. Thinking quickly, she picked up her wand.

"Accio cordless phone!" In seconds the telephone receiver came soaring through her open door and she caught it, and managed to press the 'Talk' button before the answering machine kicked in. "Hello, Granger residence."

"Hi Hermione, how are you this morning?" She couldn't stop the grin that lit up her face upon hearing her best friend's voice. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Harry got to the purpose of his call. Ron had sent a message with Pig that he would be coming over sometime after noon, but Hedwig had already returned from Gringotts with the message that the goblins would like to see him that morning, and had scheduled an appointment at 9:00. Would she like to come with him?

"Of course. How are we going to get there?"

"Well, I thought I'd floo from Mrs. Figg's house."

"I don't think you can floo into Gringotts. And my house isn't connected to the floo network."

"Okay, do you want to apparate over here and then we can apparate together to Diagon Alley?"

"I'm not sure that's wise. I've never side-alonged anyone and you shouldn't be apparating without a license either." Hermione pondered for a moment. "How about Fred and George's? You could floo there and I could apparate there."

"Okay, that works. But we need to work out how to side-along. We'll need the flexibility. We can't count on being able to floo everywhere."

"I suppose you're right. See you at the twin's shop at 8:45, then." They exchanged goodbyes and Hermione disconnected the phone. She checked the clock again and decided she had to hurry if she were going to shower, dress, and eat before she left, and hastened off to her bathroom.

-ooOoo-

George met her at the front door and let her into the shop, which didn't open until 9:00, just as Fred was helping Harry out of the floo. Harry quickly explained their errand, and Fred suggested that they wear concealment robes if they didn't want people to recognize them. Harry and Hermione exchanged looks and silently agreed, which caused Fred and George to share a grin.

"You guys are almost as good at that as we are," Fred commented as George headed to the back of the shop for the robes."

"What's that?" Hermione asked.

"Communicating without speaking, by just exchanging a glance. It shows that your minds are in tune with each other." Hermione nodded as Harry frowned thoughtfully. It was true; they did often know what the other was thinking without saying a word.

"Here, you go, top of the line," George announced as he handed them a medium and a small size cloak. "They have hoods you can pull up when you don't want to advertise who you are, but your face isn't covered enough to make someone suspicious. And there's a mild Notice-me-not charm on them, but it's not strong enough to set off spell detectors."

"No Harry," Fred interrupted as Harry began to ask the price. "You know your money's no good here." Hermione put her hand on Harry's arm before he could object, silently reminding him of his agreement to accept help. Harry relented, and asked the twins to send one to Ron also. He also let them know that the two of them wanted to speak with them later, and he and Hermione headed out the door towards Gringotts.

The pair arrived at the wizarding bank just as it opened at 9:00, and when they announced themselves to the goblin at the door they were immediately ushered to a desk in the rear of the lobby. There a familiar looking goblin greeted them.

"Hello, Mr. Potter, my name is Griphook." Harry now realized why this goblin looked familiar. "I have been instructed to take you to your banking representative, Bladrock. Also, it is my assignment to escort you down to your vaults whenever you have need to visit them. Just come to this desk when you arrive at Gringotts." Harry nodded, wondering if he should mention that he recognized Griphook from his first visit to Gringotts, and also if it was a coincidence that he was dealing with him again. Before he could say anything, they found themselves led into a private conference room,



where another goblin motioned the two of them to sit down.

Harry and Hermione found, to their surprise, that Griphook's use of the plural word 'vaults' had not been accidental. In addition to his regular vault, he now had the Black vault, and would also have access to the main Potter vault when he turned seventeen. They paled when he was informed that the total value of the Black family estate was twenty million Galleons, although most of that was tied up in investments and property. 'Only' two million was available in ready cash. "Ten million pounds," Hermione whispered to him in awe after instantly doing the mental conversion. "I guess we don't have to worry too much about running out of funds."

In addition to Grimmauld Place, the family's main residence in London, he owned a country estate in northern England and two other houses, one in Birmingham and one in Edinburgh. There was also an oceanfront cottage near Brighton. Bladrock also informed him that the Potter estate included some properties as well. Besides the main house and land around Godric's Hollow in Wales, the estate also owned rental units near the university in Cambridge, which Hermione immediately decided would be perfect if they wanted to go undercover as college students. Harry had never realized that the cottage in which his parents had gone into hiding and been ultimately killed was on a small secluded site, well away from the manor house. The Potter estate was only half the size of the Black estate, but was still significant. The combined estates, Bladrock informed Harry, made him one of the bank's ten largest depositors.

Harry asked if there was a way of buying things without carrying bags of Galleons around, such as with checks like he had seen his Aunt Petunia use. Bladrock responded that he could simply sign for things at the larger shops and establishments in wizarding areas such as Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, where his name would be on a 'preferred customer' list.

Hermione then inquired about the possibility of accessing funds from muggle banks. Bladrock responded that Harry could have his choice of a credit card and an ATM card. At Harry's puzzled look, Hermione promised to explain the difference later and told Bladrock that they would take one of each. Harry then insisted that he make that two of each, with one for him and one for Hermione.

Bladrock concluded by informing them about other services the bank provided. One of those was obtaining muggle identification papers, such as driver's licenses, passports, and the like. Hermione immediately told Harry that he should have both a passport and a driver's license. She had both of those already, and they would be necessary if they were going to be spending a lot of time as muggles. She sternly let him know that he would not be actually driving a car until she made sure he knew how, and that she would teach him. Harry grinned and commented why not, she taught him just about everything he already knew anyway. This earned him a mock glare and a punch on the shoulder. Hermione hesitantly asked if they could make Harry a year older on his passport and driver's license. Bladrock gave her an evil grin and assured her that anything was possible for the right price.

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When they returned to Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes they managed to get Fred and George alone in the back workroom while Verity, their sales clerk, kept an eye on the few early morning customers. The twins were thrilled with Harry's suggestion that they branch out into items that would be useful in a battle, citing the example of the shield hats that they were already producing for the Ministry. Harry suggested that they make some in the style of muggle style sport caps that would look more natural, and they readily agreed. He also wondered if their headless hats might be modified to be a reasonable substitute for an invisibility cloak or a disillusionment charm.

"So, what next?" asked Hermione as they pulled up the hoods on their cloaks and exited the twins' shop. It was just after 10:00, and they still had most of the morning left before they had to be back to Little Whinging to meet up with Ron. She thought briefly about taking Harry's hand as they walked toward the Leaky Cauldron, but decided that might be pushing it too fast. She wanted to give Harry some time to think about how much they had enjoyed their time together the previous night.

"I think I should get a cell phone," Harry suggested. "Uncle Vernon complained this morning when I called you that I better not make a habit of it because he wouldn't stand for me running up his phone bill."

"That's a good idea," Hermione agreed. "I should get one too, then we can contact each other any time we want." She glanced at him briefly, trying to gauge his mood, then made another suggestion. "I think this might be a good chance to do some clothes shopping for you."

Harry groaned, but she could see it was mostly for show. Guys were expected to hate shopping, after all. "Okay," he conceded, "but only if we buy something for you too. It's only fair." Hermione didn't mind that trade-off at all. As they emerged onto Charing Cross Road from the Leaky Cauldron, she hailed a cab and directed it to take them to Knightsbridge, where she spent the next hour introducing Harry to the wonders of Harrods and Harvey Nichols.

Shopping with Harry was a dream. He'd never been able to buy clothing for himself before, so it was a new experience for him and he still had the eagerness of a first-timer. He basically needed everything, and the financial information he had just received meant that they had an unlimited budget. Finally, he trusted her judgement implicitly. The only thing he balked at was the swimwear. He thought he would be more comfortable in the baggier trunks that went halfway down to his knees, but Hermione insisted that the tight briefs would be better to swim in. He couldn't imagine exposing himself like that but she assured him that all male swimmers wore suits like that or even briefer.

Eventually they compromised and bought two of the kind she liked and one of the type he suggested. After a while Hermione had to begin using discreet shrinking charms to enable them to carry all of their purchases. When it was time for her to pick out something for herself she selected two tank tops, one T-back and one spaghetti strap style, and a pair of shorts and a miniskirt to go with them. She was quite pleased with the way Harry perked up when she came out of the dressing room to model them for him. He even cheekily asked if he could help her pick out a swimsuit. She saucily replied that she already had plenty, but that if he was nice to her they could go shopping again next week and she would let him help her pick one out then.

After an hour spent shopping, Harry persuaded her to apparate back to Privet Drive. She was still reluctant, but he explained that if they side-alonged, the Ministry would not be able to tell who apparated whom, even in the unlikely event that someone happened to see them. First he side-

alonged her back to his house, then had her try it on him. They began with short distances of just a few feet, then back and forth from one room to the next. When they finished, she was perfectly comfortable with it, and even popped him from his house to hers and back again.

Once they finished it was time to go to Mrs. Figg's house over on Magnolia Crescent to meet Ron, who would be coming by floo. Harry caught him as he came tumbling out of her fireplace and helped him dust himself off while Hermione gave him a quick hug. Harry introduced them both to Mrs. Figg (and her cats) and they stayed a while to visit before returning to the Dursley's house. On the way Harry explained the situation with his relatives.

"I told them that you were both of age and could legally do magic," he began. Ron immediately got a delighted grin on his face, which caused Hermione to frown as Harry continued. "So they are going to be very nervous around the two of you, and if we're lucky will avoid us as much as possible. But here's the thing – you can't actually do magic here."

"What! Why not?" Ron had clearly been looking forward to getting some payback on Harry's behalf. For her part, Hermione gave Harry an inquiring look.

"Don't you know how the Ministry detects underage magic?" Harry asked. They both shook their heads, Hermione somewhat annoyed with herself for not having the answer. "They can detect that a spell has been cast, but not who cast it. So when Dobby did that hovering charm here five years ago I got blamed and got the warning notice. Any magic done here will be assumed to be done by me, and as I'm still underage, I'll get in trouble."

"But that's ... that's so wrong!" Hermione's irritation quickly turned to outrage as all of the ramifications of that revelation occurred to her. If that was true, only muggleborn students (or muggle-raised ones like Harry) would ever get underage magic warnings. In all other cases any magic detected would be presumed to have been performed by parents and would be ignored. It was just another example of the blatant discrimination against muggleborn wizards and witches by the magical power structure.

Ron, however, didn't realize what was going through Hermione's mind and was puzzled about why she was so upset about not being able to do magic at Harry's house. "Don't worry about it Hermione," he said. "Sure it will be inconvenient, and I was really looking forward to hexing those worthless ..." he stopped short at the murderous glare Hermione was sending his way.

Harry quickly interrupted what looked to be shaping up as another row between his friends and tried to change the subject. Hermione could tell that he had some idea of what was bothering her, and vowed to take this topic up with him later, but forced herself to calm down for now. Harry's Aunt Petunia was not in the house when they arrived, nor was Dudley. Apparently Harry was correct in his assessment that they would be trying to avoid his 'unnatural' friends. They settled down at the kitchen table while Harry fixed them lunch. Hermione noted the surprised look on Ron's face, and guessed that it might be because Harry was doing the food preparation instead of her. Once again she bit her tongue, not wanting to get into a discussion with him of the appropriate roles for men and women, or admit to her lack of culinary skills.

Harry frowned as Ron explained that while his mum had let him come over today, she expected him around the house most of the time as they had 'a million things to do' to get ready for Bill's wedding. Things were in an uproar just then, with the uncertainty about Bill's condition. The wedding was scheduled for a weekend in July when there happened to be a full moon, and they might have to move it up. For now, Bill was being kept in St. Mungo's through Friday, which was this month's full moon. They would know for sure after that.

Harry had been staring at the table in thought, and looked up as Ron finished his explanation. "What about a house elf?" he suggested. Ron's face brightened up at this as Hermione's eyes narrowed in exasperation.

"A house elf! Harry James Potter! I can't believe you would suggest that the Weasleys get a slave!"

"Hermione, think about this for a minute. What about Winky?"

"But she's free! Why would she want to be a slave again?"

"Because she's miserable. She wants to be with a family. It's been three years and she still misses them. You know Dobby told us she's still drinking, even if it's not as much as she used to. Why not ask her if she wants to go work for them? Wouldn't it be better if she was happy working for the Weasleys than being miserable at Hogwarts?"

Ron stayed quiet, having already been the recipient of one of Hermione's 'looks' today. His head swiveled back and forth as he followed the continuing exchange between his two friends, who, while they were in a passionate disagreement, were not getting angry with each other. Hermione was keeping herself under control and Harry was calmly making his points. Neither was even close to stomping out of the room, which was usually the way arguments ended at the Burrow. The most amazing thing was that Hermione actually seemed to be coming over to Harry's point of view.

Suddenly Hermione's shoulders slumped and Harry was right there, putting an arm around her in consolation. He knew how difficult it was for her to give in on this issue, and the way he responded, showing concern rather than rubbing her face in his victory, made her love him all the more. *'Why can't it be like this when I argue with Ron?'* she asked herself. *'Because you and Ron don't have the same kind of connection that you and Harry do,'* was the answer. If only she had realized that sooner, so much grief could have been avoided. She shook her mind away from this thought as Harry and Ron discussed how they would introduce Winky to Molly. Harry shot a look her way as he reminded Ron that they would have to pay Winky, and she managed a small grateful smile.

Once they had dispensed with that topic, Hermione outlined her time turner plan. Ron was somewhat dubious about the idea of staying at muggle resorts. Hermione was more concerned about Harry's reaction, but he seemed okay with it. He pointed out that they didn't even know for sure if they could get a time turner yet. Hermione explained that travel arrangements took time to make, and she wanted to do some preliminary checking into availability and he agreed that made sense. Then Hermione suggested to him that he check in with McGonagall, and Harry sent off Hedwig while they filled Ron in on that they had learned that morning at Gringotts.

Suddenly Hermione jumped up from the table. Something Harry had said about his inheritance from his parents had reminded her of something she had vowed to do. "I want to see the cupboard," she demanded. Harry grimaced and Ron had a confused look on his face. "The cupboard under the stairs," Hermione said angrily, turning to Ron, "where Harry's despicable aunt and uncle forced him to live for the first eleven years of his life."

"That was for real?" Ron asked, turning to Harry in shock. Harry nodded grimly and Hermione thought he was going to refuse to show them, but now Ron was as adamant as she was and he quickly gave in. He trudged out to the hall and gestured to a small cupboard door under the stairs. Ron and Hermione stood there a while, stunned at how small it was. Finally Ron stepped forward and pulled open the door. Hermione choked back a gasp. There, crammed into the tiny space about four feet wide and six feet deep, was a small cot and a vacuum cleaner, some brooms, and a dust mop and a few other cleaning supplies.

"Bloody hell!" This was all Ron could manage, and Hermione couldn't stop the tears that started streaming down her face. The thought that a small boy, especially *this* small boy, could be forced to live in such a place was unbearable. She sobbed and threw her arms around Harry's neck and buried her head into his shoulder. He awkwardly patted her on the back while looking sheepishly at Ron. Ron just stared back, not knowing what to say. After an uncomfortable silence, Harry led Hermione back to the kitchen and Ron followed.

"Look Mate," Ron began hesitantly, "I'm sorry. I know it doesn't make any difference now, but I am. I wish you could have had the kind of life I had when you were growing up. You deserved better. But you know what? Even despite the way those freaks treated you, you turned out to be the greatest guy I ever met, and the best friend a guy could ever have." Harry couldn't say anything, but merely nodded his appreciation. Hermione, who even though she had sat down was still clinging to Harry with her head against his shoulder, turned and gave Ron a grateful smile through her tears. She had never been as proud of him as she was at this moment.

"Me too, Harry," she managed finally. "Everything Ron said is absolutely true. After this week we'll leave here and you'll never have to look back. Whatever they did is behind you now and if Ron or I have anything to say about it they'll never mistreat you again." She reached her hand out to Ron and he grasped it and gave Harry a solemn nod. Ron reached out his other hand to Harry and the trio sat there, united as best friends and totally dedicated to each other. In time the conversation turned to more pleasant topics, and the cupboard under the stairs was put aside.

As the afternoon wore on, Ron began to think about supper. "Why don't you two come over to my house for dinner?" suggested Hermione. Ron looked uncomfortable at that suggestion, and Hermione realized that he was already struggling with the whole muggle lifestyle. Harry noticed this too.

"I don't know, I think maybe we should just stay here for today. Maybe some other time?" Hermione could tell that he was somewhat torn. He liked her parents, but was also sensitive to Ron's discomfort.

"Okay, no problem. I really should check with my parents first anyway," Hermione agreed. "So, what other ideas do you have? I assume neither of you are thrilled about eating with the Dursleys." The looks on both of their faces confirmed that assumption.

"How about if we order pizza?" Harry offered. That led to a completely blank look on Ron's face, and Hermione couldn't help laughing.

"Don't worry, Ron, you'll love it. Let's have a look at your phone book, Harry and see what's available around here." In no time she had found a pizza place that delivered to Little Whinging and after some discussion Harry ordered two pizzas, one for Ron and one for him and Hermione to split. He also decided to introduce Ron to muggle soft drinks, and ordered a two liter bottle of Coke to go along with it. For his part, Ron was fascinated by Harry's cell phone.

Soon Harry's Aunt Petunia returned, and she was visibly relieved when Harry told her that they had ordered pizza and would be eating in his room, and wouldn't be joining them for supper. Harry quickly introduced Ron and Hermione, and Hermione wondered why she trembled at meeting Ron until she recalled the hilarious tale of the visit of the Weasleys to Privet Drive three years earlier. The trio broke away and hurried up to Harry's room before anything unpleasant could happen.

Hermione was proven correct; Ron loved the pizza and Coke. She decided that she really should return home to eat supper with her parents, since she had been gone all day, so she ate just one slice and left. She had spent the whole day with Harry and knew he wouldn't mind having some time alone with Ron.

Since there was still some daylight present, Hermione slipped out of her clothing and headed for their pool. After a few relaxing laps she climbed out and rested on one of the lounge chairs, happily reviewing the day. The process of rebuilding her relationship with Harry was going even better than she had thought possible. He had accepted her re-entry into his life as though nothing had happened. And perhaps to his mind, it hadn't. After all it had been she who had pulled away from him, not the other way around. He had never given up on their friendship. After a few blissful moments of imagining him lying beside her on the next lounge chair, as wet and naked as she was, she had another idea, and summoned her new cell phone.

A few minutes later she was talking to Harry. "Hi," she greeted him, feeling somewhat naughty that she was talking to him while in the nude. "Just thought I'd check out the cell phones. Do you want me to walk you through how to program in my number?"

"Nope, I think I can handle it," he replied. "But I think Ron would really like to give this a go." Hermione fortunately remembered Harry's description of Ron's last attempt to use a telephone, and held the receiver well away from her ear while her red-headed friend shouted a greeting. Eventually she and Harry got him speaking at a normal volume. She laughed when they revealed that Ron had already finished her half of the pizza. They concluded by agreeing that Harry would call her again in the morning and she disconnected the phone just as her parents came out onto the porch.

At supper that night, Emma and Hermione discussed vacation options. Hermione explained that she didn't want anything in Europe, since they couldn't take the risk of anyone recognizing Harry. That probably also ruled out the States. Emma suggested one of the Caribbean islands or the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico. There were many options that would suit their needs, such as Seven Mile Beach on Grand Cayman Island, or Aruba,

but there were three locations that stood out because of their lower cost and abundance of unpopulated interior jungle – Jamaica, Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic, or the Cancun – Tulum corridor in Mexico. Jamaica had the advantage that the local language was English, but they eventually decided on Mexico. Besides the large number of resorts along a long stretch of beach, there were also the interesting archeological sites which would offer an educational experience as well.

The disclosure of Harry's financial situation put Dan and Emma's minds to rest about how they were going to afford a multi-week resort stay. When Emma asked her when exactly they wanted to book the trip, Hermione admitted that they weren't sure yet if it was going to work, although even without the time turner a two week vacation sounded enticing. The complication of the wedding date was another factor, even disregarding the time turner question. Emma cautioned her that they shouldn't wait any longer than the end of the week. She and Dan needed at least a week's notice to make the final arrangements for other dentists to cover their practice, although they had scheduled no appointments for the first two weeks of July in anticipation of taking some sort of holiday. Hermione hoped that they would hear from McGonagall and Croaker soon.

After another relaxing evening reading out by the pool, followed by a quick dip in the hot tub, Hermione went to sleep dreaming of her and Harry lying side by side on a pair of lounge chairs on an exotic tropical beach. In appropriate swimwear, of course.

-ooOoo-

Tuesday began with another phone call from Harry. "Hi Hermione. Would you like to go look at some books today?"

"Sure, what did you have in mind?"

"How about the library at Grimmauld Place?" Harry explained that Remus and Tonks had come over to see him, and informed him that they needed to do something about Grimmauld Place. With Dumbledore gone, and Snape's betrayal, the Fidelius Charm needed to be renewed, with a new secret keeper. Since Harry was the owner, he needed to be involved, since you couldn't put a Fidelius Charm on something that wasn't yours in the first place. Hermione chuckled at the thought of all the mischief that could be caused if that were possible. The Weasley twins, for example, might have made a fortune by putting all the school toilets under the charm and then selling the secret to desperate students.

"Sure, Harry, that sounds like a great idea," she responded enthusiastically. Harry then told her that he thought they should do that in the afternoon, when Ron was around, and Hermione agreed. "So, what do you want to do this morning, then?" she inquired.

"I don't know, maybe just sit around and study?" he suggested. Hermione marveled at that offer. Harry really was changing, if *he* was suggesting to *her* that they study! On the other hand, she doubted he would have made that suggestion if Ron had been there. Still, she couldn't think of a more enjoyable way to spend the morning than studying with Harry. Unless?

"I have another idea," she responded. "How about if you come over here and we study sitting out by the pool."

"You have a pool? Wow, that would be great. Um, what should I wear?" Hermione knew what he was really asking, and decided she shouldn't push him.

"Just wear a pair of shorts and a tee shirt. You can bring one of your new swim suits in case we decide to go for a swim." That would leave it open for him to wear the suit he was more comfortable in, even though she wanted to see him in one of the other ones. But there would be plenty of time for that later. "Do you think you can apparate here?"

"You better come and get me. I wasn't really there long enough yesterday to get a good look at the place."

Hermione quickly put on a pair of shorts and a tank top and in a few minutes she was at Privet Drive where Harry was waiting for her, attired as she had instructed. "Hey, you look pretty good," she commented. She had never seen him in shorts before, and the tee shirt fit his chest very nicely. She knew she was going to have trouble concentrating on studying today, and wondered (hopefully) if he would also.

Harry looked down at himself self-consciously, then raised his head back up and took a good look at her. A bit longer look than normal, she thought. "Thanks," he stammered, "you too." She put her arm around his waist and seconds later they were in the Granger family room.

"Whoa, that was a different way to side-along," Harry commented.

"I thought it would be more fun that way," she teased. Harry gave her a curious look but she just took his hand and led him out onto the porch towards the pool. Harry immediately noticed the hot tub.

"Do you use that often?" he asked. Hermione thought about how much she should reveal about her family's clothing preferences, then answered.

"Yes, but I don't think you'll want to try it today."

"Why not?"

"Because we only use it in the nude. And I doubt that at this stage of our relationship we're ready to be quite that familiar with each other." Harry stared at her, wondering if she were putting him on. But she just gave him a little smile and continued out to the pool.

Hermione pulled out her wand and summoned some spell books from her room, causing Harry's eyes to go wide, followed by a comment. "I forgot. We can do magic here, can't we?"

"Yes. Ironic isn't it? I'm of age, but I can't do magic at your house. You're not of age, but you *can* do magic at my house." She paused for a moment, then continued. "You could come over here every morning to practice if you want. We even have a space down in the basement we could fix up to use." Harry agreed with that idea, and they settled down by the pool to review her spell books.

After a while spent in comfortable silence Harry spoke up. "Hermione? Ron told me last night about you and him."

Hermione looked over at him and smiled, trying to keep her relief from showing. "That's good. I didn't want there to be any misunderstandings between us since we're going to be spending so much time together."

"But are you all right?" Harry asked with concern. "I mean, it seemed like you were pretty set on getting together with him last year."

Hermione smiled again. This concern for her was just another example of why she loved him so much. "No, I'll be fine. I've thought about it quite a bit and I think it's for the best. We don't always get along all that well with each other, you know." Harry failed to suppress a grin at that statement. Ron and Hermione's rows were legendary in Gryffindor House. "I would hate for us to go with each other for a time, then break up with a nasty fight that would leave us not being friends. The two of you are my best friends in the world, and I don't want to lose that."

Harry nodded, processing this information in his mind. "Okay. But if there's anything I can do ..."

Hermione's first thought was *'Oh Harry, if you only knew what I wanted you to do!'*, but she managed to keep it under control and answered calmly. "Well, a hug now and again would be nice."

Harry grinned at her again. "You got it."

After a brief pause, Hermione continued the discussion in a different direction. "What about you? Are you all right about Ginny?"

"I'm doing okay. It wasn't really for that long," he answered with a serious tone, referring to the length of time they had dated. "It was a strange feeling, actually. Like I was living someone else's life. Almost like a dream. I've always wanted to be normal, and when I was with her I felt normal, like just another bloke with a girlfriend. I didn't have to think about all that other stuff." His eyes had gone into a faraway gaze, and now he returned and looked over at Hermione again. "And you have been keeping me busy to keep my mind off of her, like you promised." Hermione bit her lip and said nothing. Then Harry grinned and added, "come to think of it though, a hug now and again *would* be nice."

A bright smile blossomed on Hermione's face as she got up and walked over to his lounge chair. He smiled also as he stood to meet her and she raised her right hand in mock solemnity. "I, Hermione Jane Granger, hereby promise to hug Harry James Potter at least once a day." She wrapped her arms around his back and turned her head as she pressed it to his chest. In turn, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders and dropped his head to rest on top of hers.

"And I promise to hug you back." The two of them stood there, holding each other with the comfortable, comforting kind of hug that is exchanged by two best friends. At least for now.

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## Hermione's Plan Final Preparations and Bon Voyage

### Chapter 5, Final Preparations and Bon Voyage

(Still Tuesday, June 17)

The weather was overcast all morning so they decided to forego swimming that day. Just before noon they returned to Privet Drive and Harry started fixing something to eat while Hermione walked over to Magnolia Crescent to collect Ron from Mrs. Figg's floo. While they were eating Remus and Tonks arrived and they joined the teens for lunch. Harry informed them all that he had ordered Kreacher to check out the Black mansion that morning and that the disgruntled old house elf had reported that no one had been on the premises since the previous summer. Hermione managed to suppress her annoyance at learning of Harry's giving orders to his house elf; that had been essential information and that was the easiest way to get it, after all.

"How are we getting to Grimmauld Place?" Harry asked Remus.

"I'm not sure," the aging Marauder confessed. "Perhaps the Knight Bus. I don't like the idea of flooing into an unknown situation, it's a long flight by broom, and you two can't apparate," he explained, nodding at Harry and Ron. "We could try to side-along you but that's pretty tricky." Harry and Hermione exchanged puzzled glances at that last comment.

"It is?" Harry asked. "Dumbledore did it with me several times last summer and again last month. It didn't seem like that big of a deal."

"Dumbledore was a very powerful wizard, Harry," explained Tonks. "It's more of a challenge for an average witch or wizard." Harry and Hermione exchanged sheepish looks, which Tonks picked up on immediately. "All right, what have you two been up to?"

"Uh, last month when we left the cave, Dumbledore was really weak, so ... I side-alonged him back to Hogsmeade." Remus and Tonks just stared, unable to speak, so Harry continued. "And, well, yesterday I showed Hermione how to do it and we've been side-alonging each other between our houses. Oh, and also to here from Diagon Alley."

"You ... she ..." Tonks was at a loss for words as she looked back and forth between Harry and Hermione. Finally Remus chuckled and nudged her.

"And you wouldn't believe me when I told you he could conjure a Patronus at the age of thirteen."

"Hermione can conjure one, too," Harry immediately added, with his usual reluctance to be considered unusual. Tonks just held her head in her hands for a time, shaking it back and forth, while Ron frowned thoughtfully at his two best friends.

Once the adults had accepted the pair's ability to side-along (and Tonks decided to ignore the fact that Harry didn't have a license yet), they agreed to apparate to Grimmauld Place. Harry and Hermione wanted to try taking Ron between them, as a trio, one holding each of his arms. Tonks started to object that this wasn't possible, but Remus stilled her with a hand on her arm and a quick look. The triple apparation went off without a hitch and in no time the five of them were standing on the street between Numbers 11 and 13.

Remus and Hermione explained to Harry that he, as the owner, had to be the one to cast the Fidelius charm. It took him quite a while to manage the complex charm, and they had him practice it on smaller objects until he got it right. He eventually caused a quill to disappear, followed by a notebook, making Hermione the secret keeper for each. She immediately decided that the notebook would make the ultimate private journal. For the house itself Remus agreed to be the secret keeper and Harry told him he could share it with the Order, all except for Mundungus (and Snape, of course).

As they were finishing up the casting of the Fidelius charm, with Hermione hovering nervously nearby, they heard a shout from the drawing room. Remus quickly shared the secret with Hermione and Tonks, who had temporarily forgotten where they were, and the four of them hurried along the hall past the house elf heads to the drawing room. There they found Ron, staring at the Black family tapestry on the wall in confusion. Remus whispered into Ron's ear, which cleared up the confusion, and then the tall redhead also remembered what had caused his excitement. Beckoning everyone to join him, he pointed at one of the names on the tapestry. The golden thread glinted brightly, seeming to taunt them.

*Regulus Alphard Black 1961 - 1980*

Harry slapped his forehead. "Regulus Black! RAB! Of course."

Hermione was thinking the same thing. "I can't believe I didn't figure that out before!"

Tonks narrowed her eyes and frowned at the three students. "Would you lot like to explain what's so important about my dead cousin?" Hermione and Ron looked anxiously at Harry. It was his decision what to tell, and so far he had been reluctant to share that information with anyone, not even McGonagall.

Haltingly, he described how Dumbledore had been searching for magical objects belonging to Voldemort, and showed them the locket that they had recovered from the cave where Dumbledore had been poisoned. He then explained how this locket was a fake, and that the original had already been taken by the mysterious RAB. Remus and Tonks agreed that the scenario made sense, since they knew that Regulus had been a Death Eater, and had been killed after breaking away from the dark lord for unknown reasons.

Ron and Hermione then made the connection between Harry's fake locket and a locket they remembered finding when they were cleaning the old mansion two summers previously. A quick search, however, failed to turn up any trace of the genuine item. Hermione was anxious to begin looking at the books in the library so they decided to put off the locket search for another day.

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The trio quickly fell into a pattern. Harry and Hermione would spend the morning together, usually studying at her house, but sometimes running errands. They would go back to Privet Drive and meet Ron after lunch, and they would do things involving all three of them during the afternoon. Hermione would go home for supper with her parents and Harry and Ron would hang around Little Whinging until it was time for Ron to return to the Burrow in the evening.

On Thursday they had their long-awaited meeting with McGonagall and Croaker. The owl from McGonagall did not mention the Unspeakable, but merely stated that their request to visit Hogwarts had been approved for that morning. Harry came over to the Grangers' house right after breakfast, then they both apparated to Hogsmeade Station and walked to the castle.

Visiting Hogwarts during the summer was a strange experience. With no students around, the castle seemed gloomy, even on a sunny morning. Hagrid saw them approaching and they stopped and chatted for a bit, then halted once again and paid their respects at Dumbledore's tomb. Hermione stayed silent for a while, knowing Harry's thoughts would be on his fallen mentor, not wanting to intrude on his memories.

Hagrid, of course, was under no such restraint. "He was really fond of yeh, Harry, yeh know. You too, Hermione. He always said yeh were the bes' thing that ever happened ter Harry." Hermione's cheeks grew pink from the unexpected praise, but Hagrid didn't notice and Harry didn't comment on it. He merely shot her a look of gratitude, accepting the validity of Hagrid's declaration, as they made their way towards McGonagall's office.

They were not surprised to see an unknown wizard with McGonagall, or that she introduced him as her friend Mr. Croaker from the Department of Mysteries. He skipped the pleasantries and got right down to business.

Hermione's initial impression of Croaker was that he was one of the creepiest people she had ever met. She found herself wondering if all Unspeakables were like that. He was a small, wiry wizard, about as old as McGonagall she estimated. That would make sense, since she had said he was a friend of hers, as it would mean that they might have attended Hogwarts together. Then she recalled that Tom Riddle had also been at Hogwarts with McGonagall, just a year ahead of her, and wondered what Croaker's relationship with the future dark lord had been like. He also had a piercing gaze, which was what made him seem creepy, she decided. After spending some time with him, she also decided that his paranoia would give Mad Eye Moody a run for his money.

She also noticed that Harry didn't seem as uncomfortable with Croaker as she did, possibly because he had had the misfortune to encounter quite a few more creepy things than she had. In fact, he was sitting there quite calmly, having locked eyes with Croaker almost immediately and neither of them had moved for some time. With mounting alarm, she wondered if Croaker had him under some kind of spell, then it occurred to her that the Unspeakable might be performing Legilimency on him. Her well-honed protective instinct towards Harry screamed at her to do something, but out of the corner of her eye she caught McGonagall giving a small shake of her head, cautioning her to hold back and let the uncomfortable tableau play itself out.

Eventually both wizards relaxed, and Croaker finally spoke. "Whoever taught you Occlumency was worthless, Potter. You have some natural aptitude at it, but you haven't got a clue about how to do it properly." The look on Harry's face at this pronouncement made both Hermione and McGonagall flinch, but Croaker held firm. Then he turned to Hermione. "What about you, Miss Granger?" Suddenly she found herself reliving some of her most embarrassing memories, and she instinctively reacted to push him out, but as soon as she forced one memory out of her mind, another one popped up to take its place. She finally resorted to reciting Arithmency formulas in her mind, focusing with all her might on the complicated equations until she felt the pressure ease up.

"You have some natural talent, too, Miss Granger," he conceded grudgingly, "and at least you haven't had anyone mucking it up. You both still have a long way to go, however." He then turned to scowl at McGonagall. "What on earth was Albus thinking, letting these two get this far without developing proper mental shields?"

The new Hogwarts Headmistress met his scowl with one of her own. "I do not think we need to go into that at this time. The important question is, can you help them?"

Croaker turned back to the two students. "I'll have a book on Occlumency and Legilimency sent to you. It's the best one ever written, but it's been out of print for more than 200 years. The powers that be in the Ministry decided that it was too dangerous for people to know about, which is why you can't buy it anywhere." This stifled the objection Hermione was about to raise, that she had been searching for such a book for more than a year without success. Croaker went on. "But it seems to me that the two of you are in a lot more danger not knowing how to do it."

Seemingly regarding time as a precious commodity not to be wasted, the old wizard turned immediately to the subject of time turners. "Miss Granger. Minerva tells me you have already had experience with a time turner. Tell me the law regarding them and the reason for it."

Hermione answered without hesitation. "You can only go back to take actions that you were not involved with initially. In other words, you can not go back and change anything you know already happened. The reason is that you can't make it so something doesn't happen if the fact that it didn't happen would mean you wouldn't have gone back to change it. That's called the Time Traveler's Paradox." Hermione vividly recalled Dumbledore's warning when they were about to go try to save Sirius, *'You must not be seen!'* That had been quite a simplification; it was much



more complicated than that. "It's more a law of nature like Newton's Laws of Motion than a law you can get arrested for," she added to Harry.

"And what is the consequence of breaking the law?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "You die. More precisely, you cease to exist in that timestream. You are returned to your original time either unconscious or comatose, depending on the severity of the violation." She swallowed hard. "Possibly dead."

Croaker turned to Harry and snapped. "You have something to add to this, Potter?"

Harry had been about to question what Hermione had said, so now voiced his misgivings. "What about when we went back and saved Buckbeak? And what about the Dementors?"

Hermione's answer once again was immediate. She knew that their chances of getting another time turner would depend on her ability to convince Croaker that she knew what she was doing. "It was Dumbledore who suggested that we go back, and he knew that Buckbeak hadn't really been executed. He was doing something that would ensure that something he already knew had happened, actually did happen. And when you cast your Patronus to save us, you weren't changing anything either. You were also doing what you already knew had happened."

Croaker nodded soberly at Hermione's explanation and continued to regard the pair of students intently, trying to take their measure. Finally he spoke again. "The two of you caused quite a stir in our department a year ago. No one could believe that six students could have possibly held out against twelve Death Eaters for that long. And the more we pieced the story together, the more it kept coming back to you two. Every Death Eater that was taken out was hit by one of you. Also, you were the ones who destroyed the time turners, correct?"

"Yes, sir, and we're very sorry about that ..." Hermione began before Croaker waved her off.

"What happened after that?"

"Right after that Hermione got hit with a curse from Dolohov and fell unconscious," Harry recalled somberly. "Neville determined that she was still alive, then we carried her back to join the others. At that point nearly everyone but me was injured and I tried to lure the Death Eaters away from them."

"And that's how you and Longbottom ended up in the Death Chamber," Croaker stated. Harry simply nodded and Hermione found herself reaching for his hand in comfort. She knew the next part still gave Harry nightmares.

Whatever test Croaker was giving them, they had apparently passed because he sat up abruptly and turned to McGonagall. "All right, Minerva, I think they are responsible enough and understand the seriousness that's involved. Also, they obviously have experience with the risks and acted properly the last time they used one." Turning back to the teens he asked, "This is only for the two of you, then?"

Harry and Hermione shared a nervous glance. "Well, there's our friend Ron, too," Harry corrected. This led to another piercing gaze from Croaker.

"Fine, but him only with one of the two of you, and you will be the only ones who will handle the device." Harry and Hermione quickly nodded their agreement to this condition.

At this, Croaker reached into his robes and withdrew an hourglass that was much larger than the one Hermione had used third year. It was about 20 cm long and 10 cm in diameter, and had a dial on the side with four settings:  $\frac{1}{4}$ ,  $\frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\frac{3}{4}$ , and 1. "This is our newest and most advanced model. A full turn will take you back one day. You can also set it for some fraction of a day using the dial. My understanding is that you'll want to go back much farther than the hour or two that you did with your other one."

Hermione had stepped forward and was examining the time turner closely. Harry hovered over her shoulder, letting her take the lead since she was the one with experience with the magical device. "So the minimum on this is six hours?" she asked. Croaker nodded. "Is there a maximum?" was her follow-up query.

"We aren't sure, but I wouldn't recommend more than a week," came the reply. Hermione nodded thoughtfully. That would work perfectly for what she had in mind.

Then she thought of another important question. "What is its capacity?"

"It should easily handle the two of you and your luggage. If each of you puts an arm around the other it will take you and whatever you're holding onto with your other hands."

"How about all three of us?" she persisted.

"That might be tight. It depends on how big he is. You wouldn't be able to carry anything, and you'd have to hold each other pretty closely. I hope you're all good friends." The little man smirked with that last comment. Harry and Hermione merely exchanged a small smile. *You could say that!*

After taking care of a few more details, Croaker left and the pair of students turned to McGonagall. "I don't suppose you two have changed your minds about confiding in me about what you are doing, have you?" Harry shrugged, then shook his head slowly, eyes downcast. Hermione bit her lip to keep from saying anything. Her opinion, which she had shared freely with Harry, was that they needed all the help they could get. But she wouldn't dream of disagreeing with him in front of the Headmistress.

"Let me make a suggestion then," offered McGonagall. "When the Headmaster's portrait awakens he may have something to say to you. I will contact you when that happens and we may have more to discuss at that time." Both Harry and Hermione readily agreed with this.

"Now, then, I have one more request for you today," the Headmistress continued. "Miss Granger suggested that there was a possibility that you two

or probably I should say you three, might not be returning in the fall.” Harry shared a look with Hermione, then nodded. “I would like to have the opportunity to persuade you otherwise. No, not now,” she said hastily as Harry started to respond. “I have only held this position for a few days, and I want to think some things over, as well as have time to attend to some details. But I intend to have a proposal for you, and I would like your assurances that you will at least consider what I have to say.” Hermione let go a deep breath in relief as Harry assured McGonagall that they would certainly hear her out, and that he greatly valued her wisdom. They parted from the office cordially, and after a quick trip to the library (Hermione just couldn’t bring herself to be at Hogwarts without spending at least some time at her favorite place) they left the castle to head back to Hogsmeade and apparate home.

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When Ron showed up at Privet Drive on Saturday he had some very good news. The full moon had been the night before and Bill had come through with no problems whatsoever. Nothing had happened at all – the Healers who were monitoring him had detected no signs of even a partial transformation. He had been released that morning with a clean bill of health. Ron grinned as he related how Fleur had very quickly whisked him away for some private time alone together as soon as he had arrived home and Molly had had a chance to fuss over him a bit.

That meant, Ron explained, that the wedding was back on as originally scheduled, and everything was set for July 19. Now that that was cleared up, they decided that the trip to Mexico would be from July 1 through July 15. Hermione explained that flight and hotel packages were less expensive for midweek time slots, and also more available on such short notice. She also reminded them that the trip back would be an overnight flight, so they would get home on Wednesday morning, the 16th.

During this discussion Ron was getting distinctly uncomfortable. Hermione was the first to pick up on it.

“What is it Ron?” she asked. “I have the feeling you’re not too sure about coming along on this trip.” Ron nodded and Harry looked over at them both in surprise.

“After I thought up this plan I started worrying about that, too,” Hermione explained. “You and I have lived in muggle houses all our lives, Harry, but Ron hasn’t. I’m not sure he’ll be able to get along in a muggle resort.” Ron nodded, but Harry had a puzzled frown. “For example, what do you do when you walk into a dark room?”

“Hit the light switch,” was the immediate response from Harry. She turned to Ron.

“What’s a light switch?” he asked, then shrugged. “Usually the lights come up automatically. If they don’t, you pull out your wand and turn them on.”

“That’s the problem,” she explained, turning back to Harry. “And even if he did get used to simple things like that, he will still have difficulty blending in with muggles. Remember the Quidditch World Cup and all the problems the wizards were having. Just walking down the street would be a challenge for him to not stand out noticeably.” She hesitated, then went on. “And not to be insulting, Ron, but we’re going to be spending a great deal of time, probably hours and hours each day, reading and studying.”

Ron winced. “No offense taken. That’s not exactly my idea of the way to spend a summer. But Harry’s not a ball of fire when it comes to studying either.”

“True, but he has been able to buckle down when he needs to. And frankly, I think it will be easier if it’s just the two of us,” Hermione responded. “When the pair of you are in a room together there’s more temptation to goof off.”

Ron grinned. “She’s got us there, mate.” Hermione turned to Harry anxiously. This was one of the key points in her plan. She needed him to go along with this. And it wasn’t just to get him closer to her. His life depended on his being able to put all his effort into studying and learning spells. But he didn’t look too happy. She fervently hoped it was because he would miss Ron, and not because he was less than thrilled about the prospect of spending all that time alone with her.

Meanwhile Ron had been looking thoughtfully at Hermione. She had the idea that he was working out all of the ramifications of this decision. “Look,” he finally declared. “I think I’d really rather stay in a magical house than tough it out living like a muggle for weeks and weeks. But you two promise to show me everything you learn, right?”

“You bet, Ron.” Hermione couldn’t help giving him a quick hug in relief. They both turned to Harry for his reaction. He looked back and forth between them, then shrugged. “Well, I guess I can put up with Hermione by myself.” Then a small grin broke out on his face. “It will be a relief not to have to listen to the two of you bicker with each other all summer,” he teased. Hermione grinned back and decided to give him a hug too.

Once that was settled, Ron changed the subject. “So, where are you going to go once your week at Privet Drive is up, Harry? You know you’re always welcome at the Burrow, but ...”

“But there are a few too many red-haired females there,” Harry finished. That got a chuckle out of all three of them. Harry would not be comfortable around Ginny for a while, and Molly could get somewhat overprotective with Harry. While he welcomed her mothering sometimes, it was likely to be a problem for what they were planning on doing this summer.

“We should spend some time at Grimmauld Place picking out books to take, and you could also stay at my house for a few days until it’s time for us to leave,” Hermione suggested. “Ron can still join us in the afternoons at Grimmauld Place, and we’ll probably need to make some trips to Diagon Alley, and so forth.” Harry nodded as he considered her idea. “And staying at my house would give you a chance to get to know my parents a little better before we go.” Harry agreed that was a good plan, and they decided to go to Grimmauld Place until Friday, then go to the Grangers on the weekend when her parents would have more time to spend with them.

The discussion next turned to the Horcrux search. As Harry described the traps and spells that Dumbledore had to get through to get to the locket, Ron mentioned that it sounded like what Bill did in his job as a curse breaker. Harry wondered if they could get Bill or someone like him to help

them. Hermione agreed that that was an excellent idea, as she had always been concerned that Harry was going to try to do too much on his own, and any help they could get would be all the better. Harry decided to talk to Bill about it the next time he saw him, but Hermione pointed out that it was unlikely that he would get a chance to do anything until after the wedding.

“And after the honeymoon,” Ron added, raising his eyebrows suggestively. Hermione responded with a well-placed elbow to his ribs.

-ooOoo-

The week at Grimmauld Place passed without major incident, although there were some rather nasty jinxes on some of the darker books in the library. Hermione had learned a detection charm that enabled them to identify these jinxes without setting them off, and with Remus's help they managed to disable most of them. Ron spent most of his time searching the mansion for any signs of the missing locket, and Harry split his time helping each of his friends. By the end of the week they had found no evidence of the Horcrux, but Ron vowed to keep looking while Harry and Hermione were away. On the other hand Hermione had picked out a pile of books to take with them that included more than half of the entire contents of the library.

It was obvious they would need magical trunks to haul all of the books to Mexico, and Fred and George told them about a shop that sold the multi-compartment wonders. There were many styles to choose from, but in the end they ordered two that were custom made. Hermione brought along one of her parents' suitcases, with a retractable pull handle and wheels, and requested that they look just like it on the outside. Inside they each had three compartments hidden at the bottom of a normal looking space. The regular space would be filled with layers of clothing that wouldn't arouse suspicion at airport security.

One of the hidden compartments in each trunk was nothing but rows and rows of bookshelves. The second compartment in Harry's trunk was for storing other items ranging from cauldrons and potions ingredients to magical weapons, and in Hermione's trunk it was a practice room. The third compartments were small living spaces. In Harry's trunk the living space had a few comfortable chairs, a table, and a small kitchen. Hermione's had a bedroom with two beds and two desks and a private bath. On their final trip to Grimmauld Place they loaded the books into the trunks and were all set.

-ooOoo-

On Friday evening Harry moved his things to the Grangers' and the next few days were spent relaxing and preparing for the trip. One of their errands the week before had been taking Harry to the eye doctor, and they picked up a new pair of glasses and some contact lenses that he was eager to try out. Another shopping trip was also required, as both teens needed to beef up their summer wardrobes. Emma had been correct that few of Hermione's summer dresses still fit her, so she bought several new ones, as well as a few more miniskirts and lots of tank tops and shorts.

She also wanted to get some more bikinis. During the past week when she and Harry had swum together in the Granger pool she had worn either one piece or fairly conservative two piece suits, but she knew the suits worn by the women at the tropical resorts where they would be staying would be more daring. Harry cheekily reminded her of her promise to let him help her pick some out, and he jokingly selected a tiny string bikini for her. His jaw dropped when she actually bought it, although she refused to let him see her try it on, saying she wanted it to be a surprise.

Hermione had already explained about her parents and their practice of nudism. She had been relatively confident that Harry wouldn't think poorly of them, and by extension her, when he found out. He was, after all, one of the most open-minded people she knew. Of course, he would have to be what with all the strange creatures he'd met in his life. He didn't disappoint her, giving her that familiar shrug after she finished with the revelation and he had thought about it for a bit. She hastened to assure him that they would stay clothed around him for the most part in order to make him comfortable.

He did notice them in the hot tub once or twice in the evenings, and even sat out on the porch one time talking with them while they were immersed in the bubbling water. Hermione decided it would be for the best if she herself refrained from using the hot tub in front of him.

The weekend went by quickly, with the Grangers and Harry continuing to get to know each other better and getting more comfortable with each other. Emma and Dan had a private talk with Hermione about sharing a room with Harry and their expectations regarding her behavior. Hermione explained to her parents how they would be booking rooms with two beds and that she would conjure up a privacy screen to put between them and they were satisfied with that arrangement. It was a measure of the trust that they had in their daughter, and the high regard they had developed for the character of the young man that had captured her heart that they actually found themselves hoping that she would win him over during their extended stay abroad.

-ooOoo-

Before they knew it Tuesday had arrived and they were on a plane headed to Mexico. It was an eleven hour flight from London to Cancun, but they gained six hours with the time difference so it was still before noon local time when they landed. It was a strange parting as they hugged each other before getting into cabs to their separate hotels. For Dan and Emma it would only be a couple of hours before they saw the teens again, but for Harry and Hermione it would be many weeks. While the Grangers headed down the coast toward Tulum, the young witch and wizard were off toward the first of the Cancun beach high rise hotels on their list.

One of the advantages of choosing Mexico in general and the Yucatan Peninsula in particular for this journey was that the restrictions on underage magic were much looser. Since the Yucatan was so remote from the rest of the country, and the local magic users were largely autonomous native tribes, there was virtually no monitoring of spells at all. The pair wasted no time in magically unpacking and suddenly found themselves alone together in a hotel room. Hermione was eager to explore the hotel, and Harry had never been anywhere even remotely like this, so he readily agreed to follow her lead for the rest of the day.

After a pleasant but tiring afternoon that was capped off by a long walk along a gorgeous beach they stood and watched the sunset before returning to the room to shower and change for dinner. They opted for an early meal since the time change was catching up with them and they were rapidly

wearing down.

Hermione was absolutely in her element. She loved going places and learning things, and she was eager to share everything with Harry. At first Harry was swept up in the bubbly enthusiasm that was pouring out of Hermione, but as dinner wore on he began to withdraw a bit, steadily growing more pensive. When they returned to the room, he went out onto the balcony while Hermione busied herself straightening up some things, trying to give him some time to ponder whatever was bothering him. Eventually she went out to join him, finding him standing at the railing and staring out over the moonswept sea.

"Hey there," she said softly, trying not to disturb him too much. "Is everything all right?"

He turned his head to acknowledge her, then turned back to looking out at the ocean as she joined him at the railing. It was a warm night, and the ocean breeze felt lovely against her face, blowing her hair back softly. It was the perfect romantic setting, but she knew they were far from being able to enjoy it in that manner.

"I guess," he answered at length. "I mean everything seems perfect but ..." Hermione said nothing, waiting patiently for him to put his feelings into words. "But when I think about all this it just seems so crazy. How did all of this happen in just two weeks? I feel like I'm totally out of control, just hanging on for the ride." Hermione nodded and took hold of his arm, giving a sympathetic squeeze.

"I know what you mean," she said hesitantly. "And it's mostly my fault I admit. I just got this idea and ran with it. But I tried so hard to make sure you were okay with everything all along and ..."

"No, you did fine," he interrupted before she could start apologizing. "You were amazing the way you planned it all out. That's exactly what I need you to do." She perked up and smiled broadly at that, although he couldn't see it as he continued gazing out over the water. "It's just that ... look, where were we just a month ago? You could hardly stand to be in the same room with me sometimes and now we're living together in a hotel room for who knows how long. What happened?"

Hermione bit her lip, trying to keep herself under control so that her voice was calm when she answered. It was important that she communicate this to him as clearly as she could. "Harry, I am so, so sorry for how I acted last year. The last day, the day of Dumbledore's funeral, I sat down and thought hard and long about what I was doing. I decided that I had been pushing you away all year and I realized how horribly wrong that had been. I vowed then and there that I would do everything in my power to get back to the close relationship you and I used to have before ... well before I went all crazy." Sometime during this confession Harry had turned to look at her and it was clear from his face that he was astounded by what he was hearing.

"And it's been working, don't you think?" she asked anxiously. "I mean, we've been getting on just great, right?"

"Well, yeah, we have," Harry agreed. "I mean, I've always enjoyed being with you but I don't think I've ever enjoyed it as much as I have the past two weeks." Hermione felt a warm glow wash over her as her face broke out into a brilliant smile. "But why ... why did you change?" Hermione's smile now faltered and she looked down, shaking her head. She just couldn't answer that, not just now. Fortunately Harry didn't press her.

"Well, I guess you're allowed," he continued. "I mean, I know I was pretty difficult to be around all fifth year and you never gave up on me. So I wasn't about to give up on you either. And to tell the truth, I reckoned it was my fault."

"Why?" Hermione was stunned. She knew Harry often blamed himself for things but she couldn't for the life of her figure out how he thought that he was at fault this time.

"Well, I figured that you were pulling away from me because of something I did. I thought it was either because you got injured so badly at the Department of Mysteries or you were backing off because of the prophecy."

Hermione couldn't bear to hear this, and her guilty feelings for the way she had acted returned tenfold. She threw her arms around his neck and cried, "No! No Harry! It wasn't anything like that. You can't blame yourself." He responded by putting his arms around her and rubbing her back softly.

"Hey, hey. Calm down. It's okay. It doesn't matter whose fault it was now." Hermione regained control and pulled back slightly but not so much that he had to let go of her.

"Look, what do you say we forget these past two years and go back to the way we were fourth year?" she suggested.

"You mean back when you were the only one who believed in me? When you helped me all year with learning stuff for those tasks?" Hermione nodded, smiling once more.

"You and me against the world."

"You got it."

-oooOOOooo-

A/N Originally I had intended to end this chapter here, but I couldn't resist tacking on this last bit.

-oooOOOooo-

Wednesday, July 16

In the town of Ottery St. Catchpole, at the house known as the Burrow, a tall red-haired boy was waiting, anxiously watching the lane outside the

kitchen window. This was the day Harry and Hermione were due back from their trip, and Ron couldn't wait to see them again and hear about their adventures. Finally he saw a male and a female figure appear out of thin air and begin walking up the lane toward the house. Without a second's hesitation he raced out the door to meet them.

Hermione broke away from Harry's side as soon as she saw Ron barreling out the kitchen door, and ran toward him as well, meeting him halfway with one of her crushing hugs. By the time she let him go, Harry had joined them and embraced Ron in a hug of his own before they separated and Ron stepped back for a good look at them.

To some extent they were hardly recognizable. Harry, who had been pale all of his life, had a nice tan and was wearing contact lenses. He had also grown two inches and added at least twenty pounds of muscle. Furthermore, Ron couldn't believe how much older and more mature he looked. Hermione had matured as well; she also looked older and her body had filled out somewhat too, although not as obviously as Harry's. She had gained about ten pounds and was now much stronger physically, the additions most noticeable in her torso, but also in her arms and legs. Her once skinny legs had filled out nicely, but her hips had slimmed down slightly. Her waist was as trim as ever. Her hair had lightened considerably, now a light brown with golden highlights running through it, and she had a darker tan than she had ever had in her life.

"I can't believe how much different you two look!" exclaimed Ron. "How long were you gone, anyway?"

"A year," Hermione answered promptly. "We repeated each week twenty-five times."

"Bloody Hell!" Ron then looked directly at Hermione. He had noticed that she and Harry had been holding hands ever since they had ended the hugs. "And what about your other, um, plan?"

An enormous smile broke out on Hermione's face and she raised her left hand and murmured a countercharm. Fading into view on her fourth finger was one of the largest diamond rings Ron had ever seen.

"BLOODY HELL!!"

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# Hermione's Plan

## A Year in Mexico, Part 1

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### Chapter 6, A Year in Mexico, Part 1

Ron's eyes bugged out as he gaped at Hermione's engagement ring. She and Harry had been to Gringotts first thing after they got back that morning, and to their delight, Harry had been able to enter the Potter family vault, even though it was not July 31 yet. Apparently the vault's wards recognized that he was actually a year older than the calendar indicated, due to his year of using the time turner. There they found what Hermione regarded as the perfect engagement ring. It had been the one James gave Lily and was a large diamond flanked by smaller twin emeralds. There was a note with it that said James had picked out that design because the emeralds reminded him of Lily's eyes. Of course, to Hermione they reminded her of Harry's eyes. It was also meaningful to her because Lily had been a muggleborn and had been a lot like Hermione in many other ways as well.

Finally, Ron regained his senses. "So, mate, how did she finally get through to you?" Harry shared a knowing smile with Hermione and responded. "Well, seeing her in a bikini was a good start." This brought another confused look to Ron's face.

Hermione tried to explain. "It's a type of muggle swimming costume, Ron." This caused his confusion to clear up somewhat.

"Oh, I know what you mean. Yeah, those swimming costumes look pretty good, don't they? Especially when they're wet. I remember when Fleur came out of the lake after the second task ..." Harry and Hermione shared another look. He really didn't have a clue.

"How about if we show him what we mean?" suggested Harry. Hermione was reluctant to expose herself to Ron in that way, but part of her wanted him to see what he was missing. "I could transfigure what you're wearing if you like," he offered, with a gleam in his eye.

Hermione rolled her eyes and punched him lightly. "I'd better do it. You're likely to forget the top." Again, their eyes exchanged a shared memory. A flick of her wand and her shirt became a bikini top, another flick and she was wearing the matching bottoms. Harry noted that it was relatively modest for a bikini, not at all like the suits she had been wearing during their trip. For his part, Ron would have been impressed by the casual non-verbal spell, were it not for the girl on display before him.

"Hermione!" he yelled. "You're practically starkers!" He darted a nervous look at Harry, fearing that he would take exception to his mate seeing his fiancée so exposed. When Harry only grinned, he chanced another look at the girl he would never again think of as 'one of the guys'. "Bloody hell, Ginny's underwear covers up more than that!" Harry and Hermione's eyes caught each other again, with Harry giving a small shake of his head to convey the message that *no, he had no personal knowledge of Ginny's underwear*. Before they could ask Ron just how it was that he was so familiar with his sister's undergarments he continued. "Merlin, that looks more like what Lavender wears." At this proclamation he suddenly realized what he had just revealed and he turned bright red and looked away from Hermione, not willing to look her in the eye after blurting that out.

Having shared a room with both of the girls mentioned, Hermione knew that Ron's pronouncement was quite accurate. Molly would never let Ginny wear the kind of bras and knickers that Lavender favored. Ron's consternation gave Hermione an opportunity to transfigure her clothing back while Harry burst out laughing at his flustered best mate. Hermione couldn't help her own broad smile. While the revelation of how far Ron's relationship with Lavender had gone would have greatly bothered her once, those days were far behind her.

Once everyone had settled down, Ron still wanted to know the story of how his two best friends came to be engaged. In response, Hermione pulled a notebook out of her pack and began flipping through the pages. Noticing the puzzled look on Ron's face Hermione remembered that he couldn't see the notebook. "Ron, I'm looking through the notebook that Harry put the Fidelius charm on," she informed him. "It's now my journal in which I recorded everything we did." Even though Harry was in on the secret, she decided that at least for now, Ron had no need to be able to read her journal.

Once Ron had been told what was going on, he still couldn't see what her hands were doing, but at least now he understood why. Then he groaned and declared, "Only Hermione Granger would keep notes on how she got a bloke to fall in love with her."

"Hush Ron," she chided in amusement. "That's not the only thing I kept a journal for. What with repeating the same weeks so many times, we would have gone mad if we didn't keep track of exactly what we had done when." She shared another smile with Harry as she added, "It may have been the most important thing, though."

"Before you get started, how about if we find a more private place," Harry suggested. As the trio started walking around the house Hermione heard a movement in the bushes by the front walk. Glancing quickly over at Harry, she saw that he had heard it too. After a moment's thought they relaxed and shared a brief nod and Hermione noted the time. Ron led them around to the back of the Burrow and out past the shed in which the Weasleys kept their brooms for quidditch and the three made themselves comfortable on the ground. Harry sat up against a tree with Hermione in front of him, leaning back into his arms, while Ron sat cross-legged facing them, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands.

-oooOOOooo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 1, Day 1

*We got off to a bit of an awkward start this evening. First we had this long conversation out on the balcony ...*



Then, when we were ready to turn in, I conjured a screen to go between the two beds, as we had agreed. It's just like the ones Madame Pomfrey conjures in the Hospital Wing, and I've watched her do it often enough. So, we went to our respective sides and started to undress. I had removed my blouse (I was wearing a camisole style tank top with it) and had just unzipped my skirt and stepped out of it when I heard a gasp and choking noises from Harry's side. I grabbed my wand from the nightstand and spun around, but then I caught a glimpse out of the corner of my eye and realized what had happened. There was a large mirror on the opposite wall over the dressing table. I could see right into Harry's side and he could see into mine! He was standing there with his mouth open, staring at me in my camisole and knickers. (Good thing I hadn't taken the camisole off, there was nothing under it!) When he saw me looking at him (and he was looking pretty fine himself, having removed everything but his briefs) he went bright red and turned away.

Well, first I took care of the mirror. I used a charm on it that made it opaque. I'll have to remove it every morning and put it back up every night. Then I walked around the screen to confront Harry. The poor boy couldn't stop apologizing. I told him to turn around and look at me. I pointed out that this wasn't that much different than seeing me in a bikini, and it actually covered up more than a bikini would, and what he was wearing wasn't that much different than what I would see him in on the beach. I explained that we're going to be sharing a room for this trip and we can't be bothered if we get a glimpse of each other's underwear. I finally got him to agree with me and he relaxed a bit. I finished by giving him a hug and even got him to hug me back. He even loosened up enough to joke about this being the first time he had ever hugged a girl in her underwear.

*I'm cautiously optimistic that this is going to work.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 1, Day 3

*I got up my courage to hold Harry's hand while we were walking out to the beach this afternoon. (We'd practiced spells all morning, and decided to do our afternoon studying on the beach.) When he noticed he gave me a questioning glance but I just smiled back and shrugged. We are supposed to be here as a couple after all. But he took **my** hand on the way back!*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 1, Day 7

*This has been a successful week so far. My new bikini has definitely got his attention. The bottom has string tie sides and the front covers very little. Actually, the back covers very little, too. And the top has the smallest triangles I've ever had on a bikini – well, since I started to develop at least. Even better is the fact that I brought along several of this style. (evil grin!) This one is mint green and the color suits me very well. (Cool color pastels generally look best on me – and black, but I'm going to wait until I have a better tan to wear my black one.) I saw a very cute white one in a shop here, but I need to be really tan for white to look good on me. Plus, it wasn't lined and Harry's definitely not ready to see me in a wet, white, unlined bikini.*

*I'm almost certain that he looks at me as much as he looks at all the other girls. And there are some real knockouts here. The only way I could see a bikini bottom being any smaller than mine was if I wore a thong. There are a couple girls here with them and they look really cute. I'm not sure I'm brave enough, though. One step at a time.*

*I've also got him trained with the sunscreen already. As soon as we get to the beach or pool and I lie down he's right there spreading it on my back. The first day he freaked out when I untied the strings to my top while I was lying on my stomach, but he's used to it now.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 2, Day 2

*Harry has gotten up the courage to start wearing the brief swimsuits I got for him. There are plenty of other guys here who wear them so he decided he wouldn't feel too self-conscious about it. None of the other guys look as good in them as Harry does, though! I've overheard some other girls talking about them. The American girls call these suits Speedos even if they're actually a different brand. Mostly they complain that the older guys shouldn't be wearing them, but they're sure not complaining about Harry. He's also wearing his contact lenses nearly all the time now, so his gorgeous green eyes are more prominent than ever. Eat your hearts out girls, he's mine!*

*Harry's noticed the looks some of these girls give him, and it makes him stay closer to me when we're out at the beach or pool. I'm certainly not complaining about that!*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 3, Day 6

*Living with Harry has gone so much better than I had dared to hope. We get along so well together. We've become very comfortable teasing each other and laughing about it instead of getting upset. (That's something I often had problems doing with Ron.) Even when we disagree we discuss it respectfully until one or the other of us is convinced. And the best thing is that it isn't always the same one who gives in. Even if this doesn't go any farther, at least I've got my best friend back! (But we get on so well together, I could live with him the rest of my life, if only he could see it that way!)*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 5, Day 4

*Harry has noticed that there are a few women at each resort we stay at that sunbathe topless. There are about half a dozen this week. After giving them a suitably close inspection (although not more noticeably than any healthy male would) he asked me what I thought of the practice. I reminded him of my parents' sunbathing habits, and that I was perfectly comfortable doing it myself. I pointed out to him that my mum was probably topless on a beach right now. (I didn't say this, but not only is she topless but we might even be on the beach next to her. This time thing is really freaky. To think that there are at least a dozen other Harry and Hermiones all along this beach at the same time is mind boggling.) Anyway, to get back to his question – I also let him know that I didn't want to make him uncomfortable, so I wouldn't take my top off unless he let me know he was all right with it. He acknowledged that he didn't think he was right now, but maybe after he got used to other women doing it.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 7, Day 5

*Sometimes I think I like dinner time even better than beach time. It's so much fun going out to eat with Harry. I've brought along some great summer dresses, and a couple of miniskirts, and Harry likes them all! His eyes really bugged out the first time he saw the blue one. It's stretchy and tight and fits me snugly all over, particularly around the bust (and cut pretty low besides) and it's the shortest one I have. It only goes halfway down to my knees.*

*But the best part is that we have wonderful conversations. We never seem to run out of things to talk about. We keep looking up and finding that we're among the last ones in the restaurant. I think that's so important in a relationship. I could never spend my life with someone I couldn't talk to.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 8, Day 2

*Harry has really changed in some ways this summer. He's become much more serious about things, especially about working. Today he apologized to me for the way he's been in the past. It started with a discussion about studying ...*

"This is ridiculous," groaned Harry, as he closed his book in frustration. "There's so much stuff in these books that I already should have learned. What have I been doing for the past six years?"

"Well, to be fair," Hermione pointed out, "you have had quite a few more distractions than the average student over that time period. And we do have plenty of time for you to catch up now."

"It's not just that," Harry countered. "You've been involved in most of those distracting events as much as I have, and you haven't let that keep you from learning the things we were supposed to learn. And a whole lot more besides." Hermione nodded somewhat self-consciously to acknowledge the compliment. Before she could reply he continued. "I've been such an idiot. All those years I spent so much time goofing off with Ron. How many times did you try to get us to study more or do our homework? Learn the spells we needed to know? I mean, other than fourth year, when did I ever seriously buckle down and work hard to learn stuff?"

"Well, there was the Patronus charm. You worked pretty hard to learn that on your own."

Harry merely snorted. Her example just proved his point. Unless faced with an immediate threat to his life, Harry had essentially been a slacker throughout his time at Hogwarts.

"And it's not only that we ignored you when you were trying to get us to do our work. We treated you terribly. We complained about you, made fun of you, argued with you. We never appreciated you enough. How many times did I ever thank you for everything you've done for me?"

"Harry, you don't need to..." Hermione began automatically. But inside she was feeling a sense of vindication. She had definitely felt that her efforts had gone unappreciated for quite some time and it had hurt quite a bit.

"Yes, I do. You deserve better from us than what you got all these years. I'm sorry. And thank you." He looked up and noticed the moisture gathering in her eyes, that she was trying unsuccessfully to blink away. He stood up and moved toward her and sitting down next to her on her lounge chair, gathered her into a grateful hug.

"You're very welcome. It's nice to hear you say that," she said, sniffing slightly. "I admit I've sometimes felt that you regarded me as something of a nuisance or an irritation, although I got that much more from Ron than from you."

Harry frowned. "That's another thing. I've sat by and just gone along with him far too many times, let him influence me into doing things I knew weren't right. Remember that time with the Firebolt? I was annoyed with you, but he was the one who wouldn't let it go. Even Hagrid saw it. He criticized us for the way we were treating you. Said he was disappointed that we didn't think our friendship with you was more important than broomsticks or rats. After that I was ready to go find you and make up, but Ron wouldn't have it. He still wanted us to go on not talking to you."

"And the next year was even worse. He turned against me and you spent all that time with me helping me out, and I never showed you any gratitude at all. As soon as he and I made up I was right back to ignoring you again. You were trying to help me with the egg and all I did was go waste my time rereading a quidditch book. What was wrong with me? Then at the Yule Ball ..." Harry just shook his head. "You looked so beautiful and you were so excited and having a great time. Ron and I did nothing but sulk and ignore Parvati and Padma. Then when you joined us he started going off on you and I just sat there and let him ruin your evening. I didn't defend you at all! I knew he was dead wrong and you were right. I should have

shut him up right away. Just like so many of your arguments. I should stick up for you more. You're right most of the time after all. What kind of friend am I?"

Harry paused and looked at her again. Hermione just sat there stunned. *Where was all of this coming from so suddenly?* She had been wishing that she would hear him say all of these things for so long. This time she threw her arms around his neck for another hug, not trusting her voice.

"What was I thinking?" Harry mused, half aloud and half to himself. "Why didn't I even ask you to dance with me? My best friend, and looking so incredible? I'm sure I would have much rather danced with you than Parvati." He pulled back and looked up at her. "For that matter, why didn't I even think of asking you to go to the ball with me after Cho turned me down? We could have gone as friends. Of course by that time you already had a date."

"Harry, don't beat yourself up like this," Hermione finally managed to break in. "That's all in the past, now. Yes, you acted immaturely sometimes, but what can you expect with the way you were brought up? It naturally took you some time to develop some social skills." She took his hands in hers and smiled at him. "But I really appreciate that you feel this way now. It makes everything we've gone through seem more worthwhile."

Harry shook his head again, still troubled. "But what I don't understand is, why did you put up with it? Why did you let us treat you that way for so long? How did you manage to stay friends with us all that time?"

"Oh Harry, it wasn't all that bad! We had lots of good times together too." But she could tell that Harry still wasn't convinced. Finally she resolved that if he could come clean about this and be so brutally honest she should do the same. She took a deep breath and began.

"Harry, I'm sure you remember Halloween of our first year." Harry nodded. "And you remember why I was down in the bathroom in the first place." He nodded again, wincing slightly this time. Ron had insulted her terribly. Hermione could tell that Harry was again mentally berating himself about yet another example of him keeping quiet when he should have said or done something. She could still remember the hurtful words, as though it were yesterday. *'It's no wonder no one can stand her. She's a nightmare, honestly.'*

"See, Harry, I never had any friends before I came to Hogwarts. I don't want to suggest that my life was anywhere near as bad as yours, but I was shunned by other children. I was sure that when I came to Hogwarts and was with other children like me that it would be different. But after two months it was no better. That nasty comment from Ron was the last straw. I was convinced that no one would ever like me and that I would be lonely for the rest of my life. I just wanted to curl up and die. But when that troll came into the bathroom I realized that wasn't just a figure of speech. I really thought I was going to die." She shuddered at the recollection and Harry put his arm around her for a soothing hug.

"But then you came out of nowhere. A boy who didn't even like me, who thought I was annoying at best, risked his life for me by jumping on the back of a troll. Ron, too. And then you both became friends with me, for real. You saved my life, and not just from the troll. How could I ever give up on that friendship? It was all I had." Hermione was sobbing into Harry's shoulder by now, and he clutched her tightly to himself trying to comfort her.

"You'll never have to give me up, Hermione. I'll never let you go. You'll always be one of the most important people in my life." The two of them continued to hold each other, both realizing that the bond between them was now stronger than ever.

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 10, Day 1

*This week's resort is quite a bit different than the other ones we've stayed at. It's adults only (17 and older; good thing I had the goblins add a year to Harry's age) and the atmosphere is much more sexually charged. One result of that is that a lot more women are sunbathing topless, both at the beach and at the pool. Harry seems to be getting more comfortable with it, so I think this might be the week for me to give it a try ...*

As Harry and Hermione made their way out to the beach the next afternoon, tired from a tough morning of training and ready to relax, she noticed that Harry was aware of the large number of topless women. And he noticed that she noticed. As she dropped their towels on two lounges near some very shapely ladies, she caught his eye and cocked her eyebrow questioningly. He gave her a shrug which she took to mean *'Okay, I guess.'*

As nonchalantly as she could, but with a mass of butterflies swarming through her insides, Hermione untied her bikini top and pulled it off over her head, then sat down on the lounge chair. She reached into her beach bag and pulled out two books, handing one to Harry, then leaned back, rested the book on her stomach and began reading. Or at least pretending to.

The main difference between Hermione pretending to read and Harry pretending to read was that Hermione remembered to turn pages occasionally. After fifteen minutes she spoke up. "You've been on that same page for a quarter hour now. That must be a very complicated spell." Harry responded with a sheepish grin which, as usual, made her heart flutter. "It's okay for you to look at me," she allowed. "You don't have to pretend not to."

"Yeah, well, this is quite an adjustment for me," he admitted. "It's taking me longer than I thought it would. At least I'm pretty sure I'm not going to pass out now, which I wasn't at all certain of for the first five minutes." He cracked a smile at that, and she giggled, which made the smile widen.

"Is there anything you want to say?" Hermione persisted.

"You mean like, 'Wow, Hermione, you have a really nice pair of ...'" he trailed off, gesturing at her chest.

"Um, not precisely that, no," Hermione managed to say in a calm voice, even as the voice inside her head was screaming *'Yes, exactly that!'*

This exchange did have the effect of calming Harry down a little. "Okay, here's a question. Some of the other women here, their skin is really white where their, um, bikini tops go ..."

"Tan lines," Hermione clarified.

"Yeah. But your ... well yours are already pretty tan. And I'm pretty sure you didn't lay out without a top while we were at your pool together. I think I would have noticed." He managed a smirk at her with this comment, and she grinned back in return.

"There are several reasons for that, actually," she replied, launching into the more comfortable activity of explaining something to him. "I made a few trips to a tanning salon during the week before we left, to get a little color overall. Mum kept complaining about how pale I was. Also, the suits I've been wearing are made of a tan thru fabric, which lets some sunlight through and helps a little. And lastly, I finished it off with a little bronzer this morning as we were getting ready."

Harry was eagerly taking in this information, and Hermione blushed a little as she noted that he didn't seem to have a problem with looking at her anymore. "Oh," he responded. There was a slight pause and then he continued. "Well, they really do look nice."

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 14, Day 6

*We almost got caught today. There was a man on the beach who spotted us ...*

This week they were staying at the Club Med Cancun. It was the last hotel along the main Cancun beach, and in Hermione's opinion had the best location. It actually straddled two beaches with a rocky point in between that had a coral reef that was popular with snorkelers. There were all kinds of other sporting activities available too, but they had little time for them. Harry did try his hand at water polo a few times, as it was quite similar to being a chaser in quidditch. In addition to water polo, they also swam laps in the large pool, but most of their leisure/study time was spent, as usual, on the large sandy beach that was adjacent to the pool.

Since it was a French resort, there were relatively more European guests, and they heard German, Spanish, and Italian spoken as well as French. Of course, this also meant that quite a few women conformed to the European practice of sunbathing without a top. On their second to last day there, this led to the incident that Hermione faithfully chronicled in her journal.

"Harry, there's a man out by the water who's been staring at me for a while."

Harry looked over at Hermione who was sitting up in her lounge chair reading a book, and his eyes dropped to her nicely tanned breasts. "Gee, I wonder why," he smirked.

Hermione flushed a bit and her pulse quickened as she processed what Harry was implying. In response she reached out and hit him on the arm. "Harry, I don't think that's the only reason. There are a dozen other topless women out here, and I'm sure they all look at least as good as I do, and he's only staring at me."

Harry frowned, not wanting to agree with her statement about how she compared to the other women, and studied the man to whom Hermione was referring. "No really, I think he's one of those guys who walks up and down the beach checking out all the topless women. He's probably been staring at the others too, and you just didn't notice it before." Nevertheless, he continued to observe the offending fellow. He had long since learned to trust Hermione's instincts. After several minutes he concluded that she was right. The man was looking at her, but also seemed to have a puzzled expression on his face as he looked back up the beach toward the other hotels further north several times. Harry turned back to Hermione and nodded to her to confirm that he agreed with her suspicions.

Meanwhile Hermione had been trying to work out an explanation for the man's behavior. Suddenly it hit her. "Harry, I've got it. It's like you said, he's been walking up and down the beach looking at the topless women. He must have seen me in front of the hotel we stayed at last week and is trying to figure out how he could have seen the same woman at two different places!"

Harry swallowed the teasing remark he was about to make about how memorable Hermione was in her current attire. This was serious. "How is your wandless Confundus charm?" he murmured to her. She shook her head. "Should I play the jealous boyfriend and run him off?" Hermione smiled at that thought.

Just then a nearby French woman solved the problem for them. The man had just taken out a camera, and she stood up and stormed toward him, shouting at him and scolding him for trying to take her picture. The man, who was evidently an American who didn't understand a word of French, hurriedly retreated back up the beach.

"Come on," Hermione said, sitting up and putting her cover-up on and beginning to gather up their things. "I think we need to spend the rest of this week at the pool. This is the last hotel we're staying at along this beach where the hotels are so close together, so this won't be a problem after this week." She saw the disappointment on Harry's face. She could tell that he was reluctant to move from this location, and thought she knew why. At the Club Med the beach was topless but the pool was not.

"Let's go Harry," she teased. "I know you're enjoying being out here with the topless women, but we need to get out of sight. There will be pretty girls for you to look at by the pool, too. We'll be at another topless beach next week."

Harry managed an offended expression. "I wasn't looking at the topless women." Hermione gave him a look that clearly expressed her skepticism. Harry's gaze fell to his feet, unwilling to meet her eyes. "Just one," he muttered.

Hermione managed to contain the gasp that threatened to emerge from her mouth. She had been trying to convince herself that he was focusing his attention on her, that he was more interested in her than in the other girls. Now it appeared as though she might be succeeding. But she couldn't let him know yet what she was thinking. She let her skeptical look drop and smiled at him as he finally worked up the courage to glance back up in her direction.

She slapped him playfully on the shoulder as though to make light of his declaration. “You’re so sweet. But you know as well as I do that there are other girls on this beach that are much more interesting to look at than I am.”

Harry frowned as they walked from the beach toward the opening in the wall that separated the pool from the beach. “Hermione, I don’t know why you put yourself down like that. You’re as attractive as any girl here.”

Hermione stopped and turned to look at Harry, trying to determine if he was putting her on. “Harry, you surely can’t mean that. Look at that girl over there,” she said, gesturing toward a shapely, tanned blonde in a tiny string bikini stretched out on a lounge chair. She’s gorgeous!

Harry eyed the girl Hermione had pointed out, then turned back to her and shrugged. “She’s very pretty. You’re pretty too. She has a great figure. So do you. She looks great in that bikini. You look great in yours.” He stopped as he noticed the tears in Hermione’s eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh Harry!” she said, grabbing him in a fierce hug. “You are just the most wonderful ... Do you know that you are the first guy who’s ever told me I’m pretty?”

“Are you kidding? What about that time at the Yule Ball? You looked incredible. Certainly Viktor told you that night that you looked pretty. I certainly would have if I hadn’t been such an idiot at the time. I certainly thought so.”

“No, Viktor only said I looked nice and I told him he looked nice, just the normal pleasantries that you exchange with your date.”

“Well, then he was a fool.”

They had reached two unoccupied lounge chairs near the pool and Harry dropped their towels and beach bag just as Hermione grabbed him for another hug. This time she added a kiss on the cheek and pulled back to look at him with a grateful smile. “I just have to kiss you when you say things like that. Harry, you don’t know how much it means to me to hear you say those things. Even if you’re the only one who thinks so. Your opinion is more important to me than anyone else’s, so thank you.” While she was saying this she took her bikini top out of her beach bag, slipped it over her head and slid it inside her cover-up, and with some reaching and squirming, managed to get it on and tied up. Then she pulled the cover-up back off.

Harry just looked her and shook his head, clearly not understanding why no one else saw her the way he did. Hermione did not fail to spot the long glances he directed up and down her body while she was stretched out on the lounge chair during the remainder of the afternoon.

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 16, Day 4

*Today was the best day!*

*I’ve noticed that Harry’s been quieter than normal during the last two weeks. Ever since the conversation we had by the pool at Club Med. He’s often seemed to be deep in thought, and I’ve frequently noticed him looking at me strangely. Usually I just smile back. At first, he would become flustered but lately he’s been smiling back before (shyly?) dropping his eyes. Today, I asked him about it, and the answer was a wonderful shock ...*

“Harry, what’s on your mind?” Hermione had noticed that Harry seemed troubled all through dinner. She recognized the look – it was the expression he got when he was trying to figure something out and it just wasn’t adding up. Now they were walking back to the room along one of the lighted pathways and she decided to try to find out what was bothering him.

“Nothing. I’m fine.”

“Harry, when has that answer ever worked?”

Harry gave one of his trademark sheepish grins. “Not very often I guess.”

Thinking quickly Hermione veered off the path back to their room and onto one that would take them toward the beach, thereby extending the walk. “Please tell me.”

“I’m not sure I can.”

“You know you can talk about anything with me.”

“This is different.”

“Why?”

They had reached the beach by now and he stopped and turned to face her “I’m afraid of what might happen ...” He didn’t say any more for a while, but Hermione had a feeling that he was on the verge of letting it out. She bent over and removed her sandals, then holding them in one hand she took his hand with the other and they began walking through the sand along the deserted shoreline. Finally he spoke again.

“I’m not sure this is such a good idea, us being so close together and living in the same room and all.” He looked over at her while he was saying this and noticed the hurt look that came over her face and hastened to add, “not that I’m not enjoying it, and you’re great company, and we’re learning so much together ...”

She stopped and turned to face him again. The moonlight was shining over the water and she could see the uncertainty in his eyes. "Why then?" she asked softly.

"There's a problem." He paused, evidently searching for the right words. "Look, you know I'm rubbish at figuring out girls, right? I mean, I had no idea if Cho had feelings for me until she kissed me under that mistletoe. And with Ginny, I didn't know how she felt about me until that day she came running up into my arms and I kissed her."

Hermione's chest tightened up and she suddenly found it difficult to breathe. "Go on," she urged him. Dropping her sandals to the sand, she moved up close to him and took his hands in hers, looking into his eyes.

Harry swallowed hard. "It's just that, I'm afraid that I'm starting to be attracted to you – as more than just friends."

Her heart pounding now, Hermione leaned forward and touched her lips lightly to his for a brief instant, then pulled back. "So what's the problem?" she whispered.

"What if you don't feel the same way?"

She came forward and kissed him again, this time more forcefully. Then she leaned back with a twinkle in her eye and noticed the amazed expression on his face.

"So, no problem at all then," she murmured, and their lips met again.

By the time this kiss finished, Harry had a dazed look and Hermione found that she was having trouble standing. Once he was able to speak, Harry managed one more hesitant objection, but his heart clearly wasn't in it. "Hermione, are you sure this is a good idea?"

Hermione wrapped her arms around him, pressing her body against his as hard as she could, and pulled his head down to hers. This time she gave him the most passionate kiss she could, pouring all the feelings she had been holding inside for so long into one unequivocal statement. Finally, she ended it and looked once more into his eyes, her own eyes dancing with happiness. Her heart gave a lurch when she saw the look of sheer joy that erupted on his face, and a single word formed silently on his lips. *'Wow!'*

There was no doubt about her answer. "I think this is a very good idea."

(From the Journal of Hermione Granger – continued)

*Yes! Yes!! Yes!!! I'm so excited I think I'm going to explode!*

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# Hermione's Plan

## A Year in Mexico, Part 2

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

### Chapter 7, A Year in Mexico, Part 2

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 20, Day 3

*Yesterday it finally happened. I'm going to circle this date in large glowing rings! He told me ...*

It had been four weeks since Harry and Hermione had acknowledged their attraction for each other, and Hermione thought that life couldn't get much better. Harry was doing all the affectionate things that new boyfriends do, and they were teasing and flirting with each other constantly. And his kisses made her knees weak and her toes curl. Hermione's mood was so high that it took a while for her to notice that Harry was still giving her odd looks on occasion.

Since they had become so comfortable around each other, and so openly affectionate, she was surprised one evening when Harry nervously approached her.

"Hermione, what do you say we dress up for dinner tonight. I'll wear my best shirt and trousers and maybe you can wear your white dress?"

"Sure, okay," she replied in puzzlement. After a moment's thought she decided to just go with it. "Would you like me to wear my jade necklace too?" Harry agreed readily that the necklace would be a great addition.

His nervousness continued through dinner until finally she couldn't hold back any longer. "Harry, you've been giving me strange looks like something's on your mind. What is it?"

Harry swallowed, then sat up straighter, his posture suggesting that he had concluded whatever internal struggle had been waging in his head and decided on a course of action. "How do you think we're doing on the list?"

It took her a few seconds to figure out what he meant by 'the list'. "Well, we haven't really done much on finding the Horcruxes, but I think we have some good ideas on how to destroy them," she responded. "We have been training a lot to build up our skills, and learning more magic, and you're getting more powerful." She had no idea why he was bringing this up now, and hoped he would soon get around to explaining himself.

"What about the last item on the list?" he persisted.

Hermione reviewed the list in her mind, and realized that the last item had involved taking time to have fun. With a disappointed look about why he would ask that she replied, "I thought we were doing a pretty good job on the having fun and enjoying ourselves part. Don't you think so?"

"I mean the real last item on your list."

Hermione's eyes widened in dismay as she realized now what he was saying.

"I've been able to see through your secrecy charms for a while now."

Hermione caught her breath and her heart started beating rapidly as she fought down the panic that was threatening to overtake her. How was she going to explain that!

But instead of showing any sign of being upset Harry leaned forward across the table, took her hands in his and looked into her eyes. Startled, she became so lost in those deep green eyes that she almost didn't hear what he said next. "I just thought I'd let you know that you've successfully completed the last item."

Hermione could only stammer. "I ... I have?"

"I've fallen in love with you."

She wasn't sure how he had managed to cross the table to her, but Hermione suddenly found herself in a passionate kiss with the man who had just said the words she had been yearning to hear from him.

When he was finished she was gasping for breath, and her only thought was what she wanted to do with him next. "Harry," she almost growled. "We need to get back to the room. Now!"

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione had been severely editing most of the tale thus far, omitting all references to her being topless for example, but her description of this scene had been relatively complete. Ron grinned at Harry.

"Congratulations, Mate. Good to hear you finally figured it out. I guess you aren't as daft as you look." Harry put on an affronted expression, but it was ruined when he broke into a grin of his own. Ron then leaned over conspiratorially and murmured, evidently thinking Hermione couldn't hear

him, "So, have you two er ... you know ... yet?"

Hermione's hands shot to her hips and she fixed him with one of the glares that always made her boys cringe. "For your information, Ronald, we've decided to wait until we're married for *that* ." Ron looked properly abashed, and wisely held his tongue, but his embarrassed look soon turned to a quizzical expression directed towards Harry that clearly asked 'Why?'

Hermione couldn't maintain the glare against the amusement that forced its way into her mind, and her naughty side came up with a way to end this line of questioning. "But don't worry, Ron, we've managed to come up with some other entertaining activities."

Ron's questioning look dissolved into one of horror at the thought that he was going to get a description of his two best friends' sex lives. "No, no! That's okay. I don't need to hear any more!"

Hermione just gave him a knowing smile as her thoughts took her back to that night. She had no intention of telling him about the next part.

-oooOOOooo-

Early on the morning following Harry's confession of love, Hermione found herself gradually coming awake. She kept her eyes closed, not yet ready for the day to intrude on her blissful state, and allowed her other senses to begin to engage. Overall she was experiencing the best feeling she had ever had in her life. She was in bed with Harry, and he was holding her closely. It was heaven. She had the overwhelming feeling that this was right, this was the way it was supposed to be, lying here in Harry's arms. She wanted to wake up like this every morning for the rest of their lives. They were both naked, and the sensation of warm skin to skin contact was incredible. A part of her mind amended the previous thought. She was not completely naked, but wearing only a pair of knickers. Harry though, *was* totally unclothed, the firm evidence of this currently pressing into her backside. The same part of her mind made a note that the knickers were a good idea, as they couldn't afford any accidents right now. Both of them had agreed last night that they weren't ready to have sex yet. But as far as she was concerned, this was the optimal attire if – hopefully when – they slept together in the future.

Returning to the business of engaging her senses, Hermione noted that they were both lying on their sides, with Harry spooned up behind her, one arm holding her around the waist. His other hand was tangled up in her hair. Both of these hand positions were delightful. Hermione wiggled slightly in order to increase the skin to skin sensation, which had the wonderful side effect of causing Harry to pull her more snugly to himself. She also found that she was still tingling from their activities of the night before. Harry had ... she searched among all of the terms she knew of that were used to describe the activity they had engaged in ... touched her. That was a good description, in all its possible meanings. 'Pleased her' was pretty good too, but she decided she liked 'touched her' better. It had been so much better than the times when she had touched herself that it was beyond compare. Now she couldn't keep herself from wondering when she could get him to 'touch her' again. Allowing her naughty side to emerge, Hermione carefully (without waking him up) moved Harry's hand from her waist to her breast, which caused the tingling feelings to erupt again, racing from there down to her core and back again. She shuddered slightly as she allowed those sensations to flood over her and fill her mind before she drifted off back to sleep.

When Hermione awoke again she found herself in a different position. This time Harry was lying on his back, and she was on her side snuggled up next to him, with her head on his right shoulder and her chest pressed against his side. Her top leg was wrapped around his right leg, her top arm was on his chest, and his right arm was holding her close. She promptly decided that this was also a very good way to wake up in the morning. At that point she realized that what had awakened her was Harry planting little kisses on her forehead. She shivered as an electric thrill shot through her body, which resulted in him tightening his hold on her.

"Mmmm." The feeling of contentment just exuded from every part of her as she started tracing little designs on his chest with her finger.

"I was just thinking how great it would be to wake up like this every morning," Harry revealed softly, now aware that she was awake.

Hermione gasped at the implication of what he had just said aloud, and marveled that it had matched exactly her earlier thought. Trying to keep the flutter of her heart under control she managed a one-word response. "Really?"

"Oh! I mean ... um ... I didn't want it to sound like I was presuming ..."

She smiled and gave him a squeeze. He was so adorable when he was trying to avoid offending her. "Don't worry. I was thinking exactly the same thing."

Now it was his turn for the one-word response. "Really?" Hermione nodded her head happily, and Harry resumed the little kisses. While Hermione thought they were delightful, after a few blissful moments of reveling in the sensation she decided to step it up a notch and tilted her head back until her lips caught his, and she proceeded to let him know exactly how pleased she was with the situation.

After that demonstration she returned her head to its comfortable spot on his shoulder and they lay there quietly for a while, until Hermione decided to raise the other topic that had been dominating her thoughts.

"Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Um ... you know what we did last night?"

"Yeaaaaah?" he responded nervously.

"I just wanted to tell you that I really enjoyed it. In case you were wondering, I mean. You did it really well. I just thought maybe, you know, that you would want to know." What she really wanted to know, but didn't dare ask, was if that was the first time he had touched a girl that way. More

specifically, Ginny.

"Oh. I ... um ... that's good. You're right, I was wondering because, you know, I've never done anything like that before." Hermione squeezed him hard, and thought her face might break if her smile got any bigger.

"Well, I guess you're just a natural then," she teased. She could feel the warmth as his face went red, but didn't look up from her position on his shoulder. After a brief pause she continued. "What about ... I mean ... well, I was just wondering ... how did I do? Did I do it right?"

"Oh Merlin, Hermione, of course you did. You were brilliant."

"As good as when you do it yourself?"

"Better! Er ... um .... I mean ..."

Hermione laughed and gave him another squeeze. "Don't fret about it Harry. I've read about this, you know." As she knew he would, Harry chuckled upon hearing that and she dutifully smacked him lightly on the side. "Did you know that ninety percent of all teenage boys admit engaging in that activity?" She paused to let him process this statistic. "The other ten percent lie about it."

This got a full laugh out of Harry, and she turned her head and lifted it enough to grin at him, then settled it back down to where she had come to regard as its proper place under his arm. She was now finally at the question she had been leading towards.

"I understand that guys think about certain girls while they do that. Have you ever thought about me? Before this trip?"

She could feel his body tense up at that question, and feared that she had pushed him too far. Her finger resumed its wanderings on his chest, and she found herself holding her breath.

Fortunately, his voice when he responded was hesitant rather than upset. "Hermione, you aren't going to make me tell you stuff like that, are you?" he moaned. "How can you be such an evil witch?"

Hermione moved her hand slowly down Harry's chest, toward his waist, and then beyond, and answered in a low voice, "If you'd rather, I can be a very naughty witch."

Harry's body went tense again, this time for a different reason. Then Hermione couldn't maintain the seductive persona any longer and burst out into giggles. She sobered up quickly when Harry turned toward her and pulled her face to face with him, pressing against her all up and down their bodies. "Actually, I'm becoming quite fond of a certain naughty witch." He punctuated that statement with a searing kiss.

When he had her gasping for breath he released her and rolled back to his original position, and she snuggled into him once more, feeling as though her heart was pounding through her chest against his side. After a moment, he haltingly began his response.

"Well, at first I'd just think about any girl I knew. You, Parvati, Lavender. Probably Angelina, Alicia, and Katie more often, since they were a little older and, well, more developed. Plus I spent time with them in the quidditch locker room, and it was easy to imagine them undressing. Of course, while I had the crush on Cho it was mostly her, and then the same with Ginny."

"Oh."

"But during the last part of fourth year, when we were spending all that time together, and the summer after, I often thought of you. Especially how beautiful you were in your dress robes at the Yule Ball, and what it would be like watching you remove them. I was actually thinking then that maybe we might get together, especially after you kissed me at the train station."

"Really!"

"But then when I found out you and Ron were together at Grimmauld Place I got all jealous, and then with the Dementor attack and the trial everything was so crazy. Then you and Ron were named prefects and all I could think about was how you two would be spending time together without me and got all jealous again. Then shortly after we got back to Hogwarts Cho started acting like she was interested in me and ..."

Hermione let out a sound that was a cross between a squeal and a moan.

She pushed herself up with her hands to raise herself above him, so she could look into his face. She didn't notice Harry's struggle to keep his attention focused on her face instead of the attractive display a bit further down.

"Harry! I can't believe you were thinking that! I mean, that was the exact same time I was trying to get you thinking that way. One of the reasons I kissed you at the train station was to try to give you a clue, and I so much wanted to see you that summer but we were kept away from you and weren't even allowed to write much to you and then everything got so messed up and then Cho and ...." She was finally silenced by his lips on hers, and it occurred to her that they had much better things to do right now than talk.

As the kiss developed, he touched her again, in all the right places. It was even better than the first time.

That week was the last time that they requested two beds when they checked into a resort.

-oooOOOooo-

"Hermione?" Hermione's attention was snapped back to the present, where Ron was looking at her strangely. She could feel the blissful dreamy expression that was still on her face, and was chagrined about how it must have looked to Ron.

She cleared her throat. "Sorry, I was distracted there for a bit." She smiled at Harry, knowing he would realize exactly what reminiscence had generated that look on her face. Out of the corner of her eye she caught Ron rolling his eyes at them. Too bad, she was particularly fond of that memory. She turned the pages, looking for something else to tell him about. Perhaps the reaction of her parents ...

-oooOOOooo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 25, Day 7

*This is the last day of the first half of our training. We'll meet up with my parents tomorrow, and we're going to take the week off to spend time with them. It will be so strange. It's been half a year since we've seen them, but for them it will only have been a few hours. Their explanation at the hotel for why we're checking in separately will be that they went straight to the resort from the airport while we stopped in Playa del Carmen to shop for a bit. They will have checked into the rooms already and will probably be waiting for us in the pool area. I have so much to tell them! I'm sure that they'll be thrilled that Harry and I are together now, but I'm still nervous about it just the same. Harry, of course is in a right state. Someday I'll have him convinced that he's a wonderful person and that people like to have him around, but right now he still has some of that feeling that he's worthless and no one will like him that those awful relatives of his beat into him for all those years. I'm doing my best to make him feel otherwise, though.*

When Harry and Hermione checked into the Robinson Club, there was a message from her parents waiting for them at the front desk. They had adjacent rooms, and had already filled out the paperwork for Harry and Hermione. They just had to show their identification and pick up the keys. Dan and Emma would be waiting for them at the pool, just as Hermione had guessed they would.

They dropped their things off and changed into their swimsuits, then went off to find Dan and Emma. The resort had three sets of rooms each grouped around a circular courtyard, and their rooms were conveniently close to both the beach and the pool. The pool was a large, free-form pool with lots of nooks and crannies, so it took them a while to locate the Grangers. Finally they saw Dan waving at them, and they headed in that direction. As Hermione had expected, her mum was topless; during their walking around they had noticed many other women similarly attired. The Robinson Club was a resort that catered to Germans, with some guests from other European countries but with relatively few North Americans, which explained the swimsuit habits.

Hermione was quite proud that Harry took her mum's attire in stride, and after she gave each of her parents a big hug she set her things down on the lounge chair next to Emma and removed her own top. This got a questioning look from her mum and Hermione nodded happily. As soon as Hermione sat down Harry moved up behind her and started putting sunscreen on her back, which got another raised eyebrow and a nod of approval from Emma.

Dan had not said anything beyond the normal greetings during the hugs Hermione had given them when she first walked up, but he, as well as Emma, had been watching the teens closely. It was quite obvious from their interactions, the little smiles, the touches, the way they looked at each other, that the pair was definitely a couple now. Possibly even more. Of course, the tender little kiss Harry planted on the back of Hermione's neck while he was rubbing in the sunscreen was a dead giveaway.

"You've got him well trained, I see," Emma finally commented, in reference to the sunscreen application.

"Oh yes, he really spoils me," Hermione replied, with the brightest smile Emma had seen on her daughter in a long time. At this, Harry wrapped his arms around her waist for a quick hug, and gave Emma an embarrassed grin over Hermione's shoulder. Dan, who knew his wife was dying to get all the details from their daughter, suggested that he and Harry go off to the bar to get everyone some drinks.

"So, are you ..." Emma began.

"Yes!" Hermione squealed before her mother could even finish the question. "Oh Mum, it's so wonderful! I've been in heaven for the last five weeks, ever since he told me he loved me. I'm so unbelievably happy!"

"Are you ... taking precautions?" Emma asked delicately, her practical side coming out.

"Oh, don't worry Mum, we haven't gone that far," Hermione reassured her nervous mother. "And we aren't planning to until we're married. No, he hasn't asked me yet," she hastened to add in response to the startled look on her mother's face. "But I don't see this ending any other way."

"The way this relationship seems to be going, perhaps you should be the one to ask him," Emma teased.

"Oh mum!"

"I'm so happy for you," Emma declared, moving over to give her daughter a big hug. "The two of you certainly deserve this happiness after all you've been through together." Soon Harry and Dan reappeared with the drinks. Apparently the two of them had engaged in a similar conversation, because Harry had a relieved look on his face and he was much more relaxed. The four settled down and the adults listened for the next few hours as the teens (mostly Hermione) told about their adventures of the last six months.

-ooOoo-

This was a well-deserved week off for the teens, so for the first time they took advantage of all the opportunities the resort had to offer. In addition to spending all day out on the beach or at the pool, they played some beach volleyball, Hermione taught Harry how to snorkel, and they both attempted windsurfing. Harry's natural balance made him better at it, but Hermione eventually managed to get the sail up and move the board forward at least a little ways before falling off. She was amazed at how much she had increased her upper body strength during the weeks of training.

While they rarely saw her parents during the day, they got together every evening and had wonderful dinner conversations with them. Dan and Emma were fascinated by the stories they had to tell about what they had seen and done out in the jungles of the Yucatan. The reason that the teens spent the daytime apart from the adults was the special feature of the Robinson Club that had been the reason Dan and Emma had booked there in the first place. There was a small fenced in clothing-optional area in the resort, which included a small pool and a sauna. It wasn't until the last full day of their stay there that Harry got up the nerve to try it out.

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 26, Day 7

*Mum and Dad have been raving about the secluded little spot they found for sunbathing. It also has a sauna, and I've been hoping Harry would go there with me. I visited it with them one afternoon while Harry was playing volleyball and it's absolutely lovely. Today he agreed to check it out. He's perfectly comfortable being nude around me now, but he's still self-conscious about other people seeing him. Inside he still sees himself as the skinny little kid with knobby knees.*

*It's an interesting little setup they have. You enter through male and female changing rooms, which each end in a shower. But the showers are open to everyone's view, so why bother with the segregated changing rooms? Anyway, we each stripped off our suits, showered, then wrapped towels around ourselves and met up by the door to the sauna. Right next to it is a small plunge pool, with about twenty lounge chairs along one side. There were only a few people in the chairs when we arrived in the late afternoon, and we paid them no mind.*

*The two of us were the only ones when we entered the sauna, so we sat down on one of the wooden benches and opened our towels. We were sitting on them, but the ends were lying loose so we could cover our midsections if we needed to. It was a very hot, dry sauna, and we were sweating in no time. After a few minutes an older couple came in and followed our example. Harry tensed up a bit, but when I took hold of his hand he gave me a sheepish smile and relaxed again. I could tell he wanted to move his towel back onto his lap, but he resisted. Then a group of five entered, and they were much younger, in their 20's. I noticed the three girls take a good look at Harry, but they saw me holding his hand and didn't say anything. One of the girls, who was evidently the unattached one, took off her towel, spread it all the way out on a bench, and lay down on it on her back. Harry definitely looked (heck, so did I) but then he quickly turned back and focused his attention on me. When he was able to do that without reacting I knew he would be all right. I gave his arm a big squeeze to show him how impressed I was at how well he was handling it.*

*Fifteen minutes is the maximum time recommended for first-timers at that temperature, so we left soon after that. This was the final challenge. Outside, by the pool there were hoses that are used to cool down and rinse off the sweat, then we stepped into the plunge pool. It felt heavenly. Harry stayed right next to me the whole time and I could feel he was still a bit nervous, but he did fine. Mum and Dad were on two of the lounge chairs when we finally got out, and he was even willing to go over and sit down by them. To my amazement he even sat down on the one right next to Mum and started talking to her, telling her how great it all felt. I am SO proud of him! Now I know he'll be completely comfortable being nude at my house when we get home.*

-oooOOOooo-

"So, you did twenty-five weeks, then took a week off to spend with your parents," Ron said, confirming the details out loud. "Then you went back and did the whole thing over again. And then sometime during the second time around he asked you to marry him?" Hermione beamed at him and nodded happily. He shook his head, still having trouble grasping that his two best friends, who hadn't even been dating two weeks ago, were now engaged. "So how did he manage it? I can't believe Mr. Clueless About Women here could get those words out without some heavy prompting." Then he cocked his head and raised his eyebrows. "Or maybe you asked him?"

Hermione punched him in the arm in partially feigned indignation. "Ronald Weasley! I'll have you know that Harry made a very romantic proposal. And he even caught me by surprise."

Ron shook his head in disbelief. "Okay, let's hear it."

Hermione began paging through her journal again, although it was completely unnecessary. If she lived to be two hundred years old, she would never forget that day.

-oooOOOooo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger Week 46, Day 3

*Mine. He is going to be mine and I am going to be his forever. It's like a dream. I would never have believed this would happen, that we could possibly come this far during our year abroad. It all started with a seemingly innocuous question while we were dressing yesterday morning ...*

Hermione was getting dressed when Harry looked up at her with a raised eyebrow and a grin on his face. "Have you worn a bra at all since we've been here?"

Hermione grinned back. Although she still wore her knickers to bed every night, they had become completely open around each other, and made no attempt to cover up as they dressed. Not to mention the fact that they were doing their part to conserve water by showering together. Although, Hermione had to admit, their combined showers were probably not any shorter than two separate showers would have been. She figured that she must have the cleanest breasts in Mexico, after all the time Harry spent 'helping' her wash them.

"Nope. I only brought one along, and I've never taken it out of the trunk." She motioned him forward. "See these tank tops, how they're made from a stretchy fabric? Between that and the built in support I don't need a bra with them." Harry came closer to inspect the evidence, probably more

than absolutely necessary.

"What about your dresses?" He was clearly fascinated with this topic.

"Most of them are the same way," she replied. "The only one that isn't is the red one. I'm sure you've noticed how I jiggle when I wear that one."

"Actually, I have," he smirked. "And it's a very attractive jiggle." Hermione giggled. She knew very well that he had noticed the extra bounce she had when she wore the red dress. The reaction she got from him was her favorite feature of the dress.

"But I think my favorite is the white one," he concluded.

"Really?" Hermione asked in surprise. "Not the blue one or the green one?" One of the results with repeating the same two weeks twenty-five times was that they were very familiar with each other's clothing. Hermione figured she had worn each dress at least 30 – 40 times. (She had replaced two of the tank tops when they wore out and the spaghetti straps frayed, and Harry had bought some new tee shirts and tank tops as his torso had filled out significantly over the year.) The blue and green dresses had spaghetti strap tops with low scooped necklines, and showed a lot of skin and a fair amount of cleavage.

"Nope," he said with the grin that made her insides melt. "The white one has some pretty good memories associated with it." Hermione smiled as she recalled buying that dress and his first reaction to it, as well as that magical night six months ago. "In fact, do you think you might wear it again tonight? I think this is kind of a special night."

"You remember?" Hermione had been counting the days, but she hadn't realized that Harry was so observant.

"Yep," he announced, rather proud of himself. "If I figure it correctly this is the night the first time around that I told you I loved you. I reckon we should celebrate."

"Of course I'll wear it," she agreed happily.

"And the necklace?" he asked hopefully. Hermione smiled. He had turned into such a romantic.

"And the necklace," she confirmed.

Hermione noticed that Harry seemed unusually nervous at dinner that night, but she put it down to the special occasion. Then, over her favorite dessert, a sinfully rich chocolate mousse, he asked her something seemingly out of the blue.

"Hermione, have you ever had any nicknames? With such an unusual name it seems like someone would shorten it, but I've never heard anyone do it, not even your parents."

Hermione frowned. This was something of a sore point with her. She was rather proud of her unusual name and had resisted all attempts to shorten it. She hoped this wouldn't turn into a point of contention with them if he had his heart set on a diminutive for her. "Some of the kids called me Hermy in primary school. I hated it – partly because they got it from mispronouncing my name – you know, Her-me-own?" Harry nodded sympathetically, then his mouth twitched. Hermione's eyes narrowed and he fought to control it, but couldn't.

"I'm sorry, but I just remembered when someone at Hogwarts called you that," he said sympathetically, but with his eyes sparkling with mirth. "You might remember him. Big guy? Name of Grawp?" Hermione put her head in her hands and groaned. Harry reached over and patted her on the back in mock consolation. She lifted her head back up and glared.

"Okay, illiterate twenty foot giants aside, no one else has dared call me that since I learned to do magic."

"Hmm," mused Harry, appearing to give it some thought. "Herms?" Hermione made a gagging sound. "No, you're right, too masculine," he agreed. "And Mione mostly just sounds like someone accidentally dropped the first syllable, and besides, reducing it from four to three doesn't seem worth the effort."

Hermione was completely baffled about where Harry was going with this, and the expression on her face clearly showed her bewilderment.

"What about Mine?" he suggested. Hermione cocked her head at him, still confused. "Like in would you be mine?"

"That sounds like a Valentine," she pointed out.

"I was hoping it would be more permanent ... like forever?" Harry's teasing tone of voice was abruptly gone and he leaned forward earnestly, his green eyes boring into hers.

"Harry?" she half spoke, half whispered. Hermione's heart seemed to stop beating as it suddenly dawned on her what was going on.

"Hermione, when we started this trip I was pretty nervous about how it would work out, living with you for such a long period. Now I can't imagine living any other way, and I don't want to try. I want to go to sleep with you every night and wake up with you every morning. I never want to spend a day without you. I love you. Will you marry me and be mine forever?"

Several diners at nearby tables were startled by the squeal that erupted from Hermione, but they all smiled as they recognized what was happening.

"Oh Harry! I want to be with you more than anything in the world! You better believe I'll marry you!"

The delicious dessert was completely forgotten as the pair of them embraced in a crushing hug. Hermione finally broke away and looked up into

Harry's face, overcome by desire. In a low voice that made Harry squirm she breathed, "Harry, I want you. Room. Now."

Once back at the room, they had quickly rid themselves of all unnecessary clothing. (Which in Hermione's case meant the dress and her sandals, leaving her clad only in her knickers. And the necklace.) Later, they were lying on the bed embracing, catching their breaths after some strenuous exertions, when Harry asked. "So, what about the nickname?"

"Mine? I suppose. But shouldn't I get to call you Mine, too?" Hermione pointed out.

"Don't you think that might get confusing?"

"I think I can handle it. After all, I am the smartest witch you know," she teased.

"I'm pretty smart too, I think," he protested.

"Oh, really?"

"I was smart enough to fall in love with you."

"Oh Harry! I love you so much!"

"I love you too, Hermione. I love you."

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# Hermione's Plan

## A Year in Mexico, Part 3

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### Chapter 8, A Year in Mexico, Part 3

"Mine?" asked Ron, looking strangely at Hermione.

"No Ron, not yours," Hermione chided him teasingly. "I'm Harry's." She resisted adding, '*You had your chance.*'

Ron groaned as his two friends burst into laughter, Hermione wiping the tears from her eyes that had crept in during her description of Harry's proposal. "And don't you dare try to come up with a nickname for me of your own," she finally managed. "If you thought I knew a lot of nasty hexes before we went to Mexico, wait until you see what I can do now!"

Ron shuddered at the thought. Annoying Hermione was going to be even more dangerous now than it had been before. He decided that it would be a good idea to change the subject, and the conversation turned to safer topics.

"So, everything worked out okay with the time turner?" Ron inquired next. "It sounds horribly complicated to me."

"It wasn't as tricky as I thought it would be," admitted Harry. "Of course, a lot of that was due to the planning and careful notes of my brilliant girlfriend here." Hermione paused while turning pages back to the beginning of her journal to give him a dazzling smile. She could see another thoughtful look grow on Ron's face as he realized the different dynamic that would be operating within the trio from now on. "We have a lot more to tell you, Ron, about all the magic and other stuff we learned too," Harry continued. "It wasn't all romance, you know." Hermione responded by sticking her tongue out at Harry and they all had a good laugh before she started in on her tale again, beginning with how they used the time turner, then moving on to the details of their training.

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 27, Day 8 / Week 28, Day 1

*Everything continues to go well with the time turner. This was the first repeat of the second week, so it was a bit trickier. The last time through, we made sure to leave our resort at the end of the week by 11:00 AM, then went somewhere for lunch. At noon, we disillusioned ourselves and our trunks and went back a week. Then we moved on to the next resort, taking care to avoid being seen by our previous selves. This week, we not only have to avoid our previous selves from the prior week, but also our previous selves from six months ago. The second part is no problem since we arrive at the resort after noon, giving us an hour cushion from when we left. The only thing that might be a problem is that we look a little different than we did six months ago, having put on a bit of weight and, at least for these first few weeks, we're a lot more tan. But we don't spend that much time doing things around the hotel so hopefully the staff won't notice.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 1, Day 2

*We've decided on the following daily schedule. In the morning we'll practice spells, and in the afternoon we'll do research. (Normally the research would be the part that Harry dreads, but we've made it more palatable by deciding to read out on the beach or by the pool. I'll charm the books we take out each day to look like normal muggle reading material. Harry found my Star Wars collection of books during the week before we left and got hooked, so his books look like science fiction paperbacks. Mine are mysteries.) We've brought along 516 books from the Black family library, plus 6 that I bought just before we left, 2 that Tonks gave us, and an Auror's training guide from Moody, plus the Occlumency book Croaker sent us. Harry's been giving me a hard time that it would take us more than a year to get through them all, even if we read ten books a week. We'll see. I'm sure many of the books will have nothing useful in them, but we won't know until we look through them. We'll work on the Occlumency in the evenings before bed.*

*We hired a cab to take us over to the mainland and into the jungle to see a 'typical' native village. I'm sure it was a set-up for the tourists, but it did get us out into the jungle. It didn't take us long to find a suitable isolated spot to practice spells. We put up muggle repelling wards, detection wards, and other secrecy wards. We'll find another spot next week a little further south, and just gradually move south as our hotels move south. For today, we practiced spells we already know, working on speed, power, and accuracy. Harry's much better than I am at all of those for the spells he already knows, but I know more spells. It's a good partnership as we complement each other's strengths. He helps me with speed and accuracy and I help him learn new spells. The power will develop over time, we hope.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 2, Day 5

*I've started categorizing the spells we've been finding. Attack spells, defensive spells, shield spells, wards, etc. I'm getting through two books each afternoon, while Harry usually can only manage one. I pointed out to him teasingly that at this rate we will do twenty books a week, not ten. He gave me an exaggerated eye roll and huffed, but I could see the corners of his mouth twitch. Of course, we'll slow down when we have to start learning the spells, not just look them up.*

*The Occlumency is going slowly, but we have plenty of time. I realized that I need to make sure that I always stay ahead of Harry. At least, I need to be better at Occlumency than he is at Legilimency. I can't allow Harry to find out that I have these feelings for him and am trying to get him to fall in love with me. I don't want him to get discouraged if he can't ever get into my mind though. So occasionally I relax a bit and he breaks through briefly and sees a few innocuous memories.*

*I've read in the books from Tonks and Moody that some Aurors feel there is a connection between physical fitness and spellcasting power and endurance, especially endurance. Tonks is one of the fittest witches I know. Well, except for Angelina Johnson. She's very athletic. These books go on to point out that wizards are by and large not very physically fit because they do so much with magic, and the wealthier families have house elves to cater to their every whim. Well, that last bit settled it for me. Today we started physical training along with our spell practice. First thing in the morning we'll either run or swim laps, alternating days. For the resorts that have fitness centers, we'll lift weights in the late afternoon when it cools down and we're finished with the beach.*

*I can't believe I'm so out of shape. We only ran for a few minutes this morning before I had to start walking. But Harry assures me he'll have me more fit in no time. (I had to hit him when he said that. Just because he plays quidditch, it doesn't mean he's in that much better shape than I am. Honestly, how much fitness does it take to ride a broom?) On the bright side, maybe this exercise will do something for these hips I seem to have developed in the last couple of years.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 9, Day 4

*Since we've been here just over two months now we decided to take a day off this morning and visit the ruins at Chichen Itza. We were completely unprepared for the surprise we found there. As soon as we arrived we could literally feel the magic in the air. I had suspected from some of my reading that the Mayans were powerful magic users. Once we noticed that we started seeing other clues that this place was built by wizards. Harry pointed out that the Ball Court looked more suited to a game like quidditch than one like basketball. The target ring looks much more like a quidditch goal than a basketball hoop. And it's about ten meters off the ground. The only place for spectators is atop the walls that are even higher – just like quidditch stands. The final confirmation came when we climbed to the top of the highest temple...*

"Wow," Harry said in amazement. "You can see forever from up here."

"You're right. I had no idea this site was so large," Hermione agreed. "Only from here do you get the full scope of it." She caught the attention of their guide. "Excuse me, sir, what about those other structures in the distance? I don't see them on the map."

"Structures?" The white shirted guide looked out in the direction Hermione was pointing. "Oh, well done! You have quite the eye for ruins. Most people don't realize that those mounds are actually more ruins that haven't been excavated yet. They just see what look like green hills." He peered back at Hermione. "I imagine you've been doing some reading about this site to know that."

While a comment like this would ordinarily have amused Harry, and chagrined Hermione, neither of them heard the last sentence. They were both staring at each other, realization dawning on them. They could clearly see a temple that was in at least as good condition as the one they were standing on. And normal people could only see ruins covered with trees and bushes. That could only mean ...

"Excuse us," blurted out Harry. "I think my, um, girlfriend's feeling a little dizzy. We're going to go back down now and just walk over to the edge of the trees there and sit a while."

A short while later the pair had successfully slipped away without being noticed and headed carefully through the jungle toward what they were sure was a magical village. Hermione quickly brushed away the satisfied thought that Harry had just identified her as his girlfriend; they had more on their minds just now. After several minutes of climbing over fallen trees and pushing their way through undergrowth they found themselves in a small clearing. Just as they began to cross it they spotted several people coming towards them and stopped.

Not wanting to appear threatening, they waved hesitantly. Hermione spoke a little Spanish so she called out a greeting, but there was no response. Then they noticed more people come out of the jungle behind them and realized they were being carefully surrounded. Harry's hand found Hermione's and she relaxed a little at the protective gesture. She was sure these wizards were peaceful; they only needed to persuade them that they were also. More individuals now joined the others, and they all moved in front of the pair of students, so that they were no longer surrounded. Hermione smiled, but the grim expressions never left the faces of the local witches and wizards. Hermione carefully noted the details of the appearance of the group that now stood before them.

They were a mixed group of men and women, and their skin and hair color and facial features matched what Hermione had read of the local native Mayans. Men and women both wore lightweight tunics which varied in length from about six inches above to six inches below their knees, the shorter ones mostly on the younger women. Their legs were bare and their feet were clad in ankle height leather boots. The tunics were sleeveless with square cut necks, and were decorated with colorful embroidery. Some of them wore bright colored sashes that belted the tunics at the waist. Hermione found herself wondering what they wore beneath the tunics. She could see no evidence of bras on the women, but that didn't preclude some other sort of undergarment. All in all, they were clothed quite appropriately for the climate they lived in. Their black hair varied from shoulder length to mid-back length, their skin was deeply tanned and their eyes a dark shade of brown.

Evidently one of the leaders of the small band came to a decision about the pair of intruders, for he waved them to follow him and he turned and led them into the village. Here they found some simple huts, but other structures as well, some quite ancient and some newer, most built out of finely crafted stone. Walking by some of the huts, Hermione glanced in and discovered that they were clearly magical dwellings, for the insides were noticeably much larger than the outsides. As they approached the towering temple they had seen from afar, they were led into a ground level entrance, then up a ramp to a large inside room about 10 meters or 30 feet above ground level. Here they saw a large statue of a jaguar, similar to one they had seen inside the main temple at Chichen Itza. Seated on a simple, not overly ornate, throne behind the jaguar was an ancient woman

who was clearly in charge.

Without speaking a word the woman looked first Harry, then Hermione in the eye, her piercing gaze taking their measure, which reminded Hermione of the similar scrutiny they had received from the Unspeakable Croaker. Harry met her gaze without flinching and Hermione followed his lead and attempted to do likewise. After several long minutes the elderly woman finally broke the silence.

“Your intentions are not evil.” The guards that had accompanied them relaxed at this, and the grim expressions softened. Hermione chanced a quick smile toward the woman nearest her and it was tentatively returned. “Who are you? Why are you here?”

Relieved that at least some of this magical community evidently spoke English, Hermione began to answer but stopped as Harry spoke up. “I am Harry Potter and this is Hermione Granger. There is a great evil in our country. We have come here seeking a place where we can spend *time* training ourselves so that we may fight against it when we return.”

The ancient witch nodded thoughtfully. Hermione had noticed the stress Harry had placed on the word ‘time’ and she thought she had seen a flicker in their questioner’s eyes as though she had caught it. “We can help you in your task,” she informed them solemnly. “We can teach you a different way – a different relationship with magic that is relatively unknown in your world. It may give you an advantage in your battle with your evil foe.” Hermione’s head jerked back in surprise as a possible meaning of those words hit her. *‘The power he knows not?’*

Yes,” she said with a twinkle in her ancient brown eyes that was eerily reminiscent of the twinkle they had seen so often in Dumbledore’s blue ones, as she saw their surprise. “Even here in our isolation we are aware of the dark lord across the sea. This will certainly be a magic that your enemy will not understand, nay cannot understand. This is the magic of life itself.” She motioned them to be seated, and comfortable padded mats appeared behind them as they settled themselves down on the floor before her. Some of the company that had escorted them into the temple had left, and the two men and two women remaining, including the woman who had exchanged smiles with Hermione, were seated also. The chieftess introduced herself as Ix Chel, the mother of her people.

“Half a thousand years ago men from your part of the world came here to conquer and destroy. Yes, there were wizards with them, wizards just as greedy and power hungry as those they accompanied. In their arrogance they refused to believe that there could be another way, a more peaceful way to express their magic. In the end they were defeated and destroyed, and our understanding was denied to others of your countries. But we were too small in number to defeat the larger force of invaders without revealing ourselves, and the diseases they brought with them took a toll on our people before we could find cures. We have remained here hidden, living in peace, our existence known only to other magical communities of this and nearby countries, communities who are sworn to keep our secret. Naturally, we will expect a similar oath from you before you leave here if you wish to accept our friendship.” Harry and Hermione both agreed instantly, not wishing to offend their hosts by inquiring about the consequences of refusing.

“There is magic within you, but there is also magic within all living things,” began Ix Chel. “In addition, some magic users have infused the structures around them with their magic, which lingers after they are gone. This temple is a prime example. Can you feel the magical power emanating from it?” Both teens nodded. It was a feeling similar to what they got from Hogwarts. “But most magic users can tap only into their own magic. Over many generations we have developed our ability to draw magic from the life around us. We can reach out with our senses and feel this magic, draw it to us, and manipulate it to alter things around us.”

Harry leaned over to Hermione and whispered, “Does this sound familiar to you?”

Hermione’s mouth twitched as she whispered back, “May the Force be with you.”

Their conversation abruptly ceased as their host confirmed their analogy by stretching out her hand, concentrating briefly, then levitating a tray of beverages from the corner of the room over to where they were seated.

Hermione was the first to regain her ability to speak. “Wandless magic!” she breathed. The elderly witch smiled at them.

“Most of us still use a wand, as it does make it easier to focus the magic. But it can be useful to do certain things without being dependent on a wand.”

“I’ll say!” Harry agreed, thinking of different times when he had lost his wand or been disarmed during a skirmish. Such as his fight with Snape a month prior.

“Is there any limitation to the type of spells you can cast when drawing on this magic?” asked Hermione.

“That is a very insightful question, my child,” said Ix Chel, nodding in approval. “Since you are using the magic of life, spells intended to injure or destroy another living thing will not function properly. But that does not mean it cannot be employed in battle. For example, you could summon a knife to your hand, but you could not banish it toward an opponent. You could, however, throw the knife at your opponent after summoning it.”

“So there is no dark side of this magic?” asked Harry, concerned about the possibility of Voldemort using it against him if he discovered the secret.

“You have been watching too many American motion pictures,” she chided with a smile. “There is no dark side in the magic of life. In nature there is life and there is death, and creatures kill each other for food and protection and territory, but there is no evil. Only within sentient creatures is true evil found.”

Harry and Hermione were silent while they absorbed that declaration. After a few moments Ix Chel asked, “Now, do you wish to visit with us for a time and study our magic?”

The pair enthusiastically accepted the offer. They were then introduced to the two witches and two wizards sitting with them, who would be their guides and mentors. The older couple, who Hermione judged to be her parents’ age, were Chantico and Bolon and the younger pair, who

appeared to be in their early twenties, were Mayahuel and Ekahau. Upon Hermione's inquiry, they learned that the four of them spoke English, and had been selected partly for that reason. Others in their village had learned other languages. The two teens were given their own tunics and leather shoes to wear while in the village.

Harry immediately removed his shirt and put on the tunic. Hermione, who was wearing a T-back tank top which would not look very good under the low cut square necked tunic, hesitated, then turned her back to Harry and removed it while the two witches stepped up to assist her in donning the tunic. On future visits she would wear a spaghetti strapped tank top which had a similar back and neckline to that of the tunic and wouldn't show. The teens both decided that the shorts they were wearing wouldn't be too visible so left them on. Mayahuel gave Hermione one of the colorful sashes to belt the tunic, which made the garment conform better to her figure and also shortened it to a few inches above her knees. Once they were completely attired, Hermione decided that they didn't look too out of place. Her hair was brown instead of black, but her eyes were dark brown and her tan skin was only somewhat lighter than the lightest of the locals. Harry was more pale, but his black hair blended in well with that of the other males.

After Harry and Hermione were given a tour of the village and fed, the older couple left the four younger ones alone, declaring that they would be available for assistance whenever needed. Mayahuel sat with Hermione while Ekahau sat with Harry and they spent the rest of the afternoon instructing the British witch and wizard about this innovative (at least to them) idea of magic.

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 12, Day 7

*What an incredible experience that was! This was the last day we spent in the Mayan magical community, having spread the visits out as much as we could – one per week. It's too bad we didn't discover them until a Friday. It really helped to have a week between each day we spent there to practice what we were learning. Harry's idea of making the summoning charm our first priority was brilliant. Today we timed how long it took us to summon our wands from 10 feet away and cast a spell. Not surprisingly Harry's faster than I am, but I only took a half second longer than he did.*

*Levitating and moving around rocks wandlessly was quite a bit trickier. It combines Windgadium Leviosa with Accio or Banishing. Making the rock move wasn't too hard; making it stop where we wanted it to was the problem. The first time Harry tried bringing a rock towards him it would have hit him in the face if he hadn't ducked! Harry says he's going to keep practicing until he can not only move rocks where he wants them, but he'll be able to lift a starfighter out of a swamp!*

*We had to say goodbye to Mayahuel and Ekahau today. We'll really miss them – it's amazing how close we've grown after spending only four days together. It was wonderful learning about such a different culture. We explained the time turner to them and told them that even though we'll see them tomorrow as far as they're concerned, from our point of view it will be several months before we see them again. They then decided to take us swimming in the cenote to celebrate.*

*Well, I found out what they wear under their tunics. Not much! When we got to the cenote they removed their tunics and each was wearing only a very brief loincloth underneath. Fortunately, Harry and I have been wearing swimsuit bottoms under our tunics since the first day, because they don't stand out as much as shorts. I decided I might as well take off my tank top too, given how Mayahuel was dressed. I'm sure Harry really enjoyed that. Mayahuel has an incredible figure. I think he looked at me as much as he did at her though, but that might just be wishful thinking on my part.*

*It was fun swimming there but the water was pretty cold. Harry got an up close lesson on how cold affects a certain part of women's anatomies. It was nice though, lying out on the rocks to warm up in the sun before we put our tunics back on. I teased Harry about getting him to wear a loincloth like Ekahau's. The back is nearly a thong! Then he said he would if I would wear one like Mayahuel's. Hers was even smaller than his. Touché, Harry Potter.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 15, Day 1

*It looks like we're going to be here for a while. If we go another ten weeks before we join my parents, then repeat the whole thing, it will be a year in total. Given that, we decided today to try to become animagi. It took Harry's dad and Sirius three years, but we have some notes Sirius left Harry which should eliminate the research period. I think we can manage it in a year or less.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 24, Day 6

*Our Occlumency and Legilimency are going very well. We're pretty evenly matched. Harry is better at Legilimency and I'm better at Occlumency. Now that my feelings are out in the open, I don't have to try to hide them any more. Harry announced today that he was going to find my memories of Viktor kissing me. Rather than correct his misperception, I countered that I was going to find his memories of kissing Cho. We flipped a coin to see who would go first.*

*"Legilimens!" Harry and Hermione always did their Occlumency practice in the living area of his magical trunk, just in case a maid came to the door while they were locked in a trance with each other. Now they were facing each other across his table and he was trying to fight his way into her mind. Hermione was able to block Harry's probe for several minutes, but couldn't hold him off forever; he was just too powerful. She could usually throw him out after he had found one or two memories, but she couldn't stop him completely. So she witnessed several scenes of her encounters with Viktor flash through her mind – Viktor asking her to the ball in the library one day and her shocked acceptance. Meeting him in front of the*

doors to the Great Hall and him complimenting her on how nice she looked. Dancing with him at the ball, and him walking her back to Gryffindor Tower. Finally him giving her a kiss on the cheek outside the portrait hole, right before she climbed through to confront an angry Ron. Suddenly her mind was clear and she saw an apologetic Harry looking at her with loving concern in his eyes.

"Hermione, I'm so sorry," he said as he pulled her into his arms. "I had no idea that's all it was." Hermione hadn't been all that upset. In fact she was pleased, even relieved, that he found out so that it wouldn't ever be any cause for jealousy, but she was enjoying the hug so she let him continue to comfort her.

"That's okay, Harry. I'm actually glad now that it wasn't any more than that. I'm quite happy that you were the one who gave me my first real kiss."

After the hug, which lasted quite a bit longer than was truly necessary, Harry stepped back and announced that it was Hermione's turn. She cast the spell and spent several minutes working her way into Harry's mind. Finally she found the memory she was looking for – *Harry stood there paralyzed as Cho moved nearer. She was much too close. He could see every tear clinging to her eyelashes. Then her lips touched his. His first instinct was to jerk back, but her hand had somehow found its way to the back of his head and she held him in place, her fingers entwining themselves in his hair. She kissed him again, this time more firmly, but he was too stunned to kiss her back. Cho nibbled on his lips for a few seconds while his chest grew tighter and his limbs seemed to turn numb. Suddenly she pulled away, blushing and hurrying from the room. Harry stood there in shock for ten minutes just staring at the door in the now deserted Room of Requirement.*

Hermione pulled back in surprise. "That was it?" she asked incredulously. Harry nodded sheepishly. "I got all jealous because of that?" His eyes widened at that admission, but she paid it no mind. She had already told him how she had felt about him that year. "And that was the only time?" she continued. Harry shrugged. It hadn't really been much of a relationship. One kiss and one disastrous date.

Hermione gave him a hug, then kissed him briefly before leaning back and smiling. "Now I really wish I had made a move last summer." Harry agreed wholeheartedly, and the Occlumency was forgotten for the rest of the day.

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 30, Day 5

*We just finished spending another three days in three successive weeks at Chichen Itza. It was great to see Mayahuel and Ekahau again. They were amazed at how much Harry and I have changed. Of course they noticed right away that we were together now. Something about the way we look at each other. Mayahuel told me she knew it was going to happen just seeing how we treated each other the first time around.*

*Chantico and Bolon were very impressed at how much progress we've made at using the magic of life wandlessly. Our control of levitation is much better, and now we have also been able to make use of things in the natural world. We can make a bush restrain someone, something like the Whomping Willow, except it will only hold them, not attack them. We can use plants to hide ourselves in the jungle. We can douse someone or something with water with just a thought. We caught Bolon by surprise with that one. Chantico teased him mercilessly about it. And we can make tree roots rise up out of the ground and trip up creatures by entangling their feet. Harry suggested that we could use this especially effectively against dark creatures, and Ix Chel agreed with him. But the most important thing we can do is cause a slab of rock to erupt from the ground. We need to use our wands for this, though, since rock isn't alive. But what's so vital about that is that a slab of rock will stop an unforgivable curse, including Avada Kedavra!*

*We're going to spend the last two days of our week at Coba, but we'll probably wait a few weeks for that. Ix Chel says there is a powerful wizard there who can help us refine our technique. Harry is still determined to lift that starfighter! She also said we could tell Ron about this magic, and anyone else that we trusted with our lives, as long as they take the oath. We'll have to think about who all that might be.*

*We went swimming in the cenote one last time. It's still cold, but now Harry's much better at warming me up. (Although he seems to enjoy warming up some parts of me more than others.)*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 32, Day 3

*We have been making great progress on our Animagus forms. Bolon was able to help us out a lot on our last visit to Chichen Itza. It turns out he is a hawk animagus. Being able to feel life magic helped tremendously in terms of getting in touch with the creature inside us. It turns out that Harry is a jaguar and I am an owl. That really got the Mayans' attention, since the jaguar is sacred to them. I was hoping for a form that was a little more powerful, but Harry pointed out that being an owl would be incredibly useful. I'll not only be able to cover long distances in a hurry, but I can blend in anywhere in the wizarding world.*

*Now that we know our forms, we can start attempting partial transfigurations. Harry was quite amused when I managed to turn my hair into feathers. He asked me if I was going to leave him for Hedwig, but I reminded him that Hedwig is a female owl, and he knows better than anyone that I'm heterosexual. I hit him before he finished asking me if I fancied Errol. I do think that once I can become an owl it might help me learn to enjoy flying better. I know Harry would love it if I enjoyed it as much as he does.*

*Harry has managed to turn his hands and feet into paws. I think a few more months should do it. We have 20 more weeks here so I'm hopeful that we'll be full animagi before we get back home.*

*Bolon and Chantico were also a great help to us in dueling. Combat is much more than knowing a lot of spells. It turns out that Chantico is even better at it than Bolon is – she's what we would call a dueling master. We're getting pretty good at two on two. When we get to Coba we'll practice more at fighting against larger groups.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 40, Day 4

*We finished the last of the books from the Black family library today. We've learned a lot of dark and borderline dark spells. We still have more than two months to perfect them now. We'll probably never use a lot of them; the important part is that we have the ability to recognize and block them if a Death Eater uses them against us. The following offensive spells are the ones we've chosen to focus on:*

*Expeliarmus – disarming hex – we can cast this with enough power to not only disarm someone but hurl them back against a tree hard enough to knock them out. Harry can also control it so that the weapon dislodged comes right to him. I'm getting close to being able to do that too, but I can't catch it as well as he can.*

*Diffindo – cutting curse – with enough power we can seriously injure someone. With enough precision we can slice through someone's robes without cutting them. Or cut a rope that's tying someone's hands. (Harry thinks he can use it to cut my bikini strings so my top will fall off, but he hasn't so far. He's such a goof! I don't know why he would bother – I never wear the top out on the beach anyway!)*

*Reducto – blasting or explosion curse – good for general use in blasting things apart, can also blow someone's arm off if we aim it accurately with enough power.*

*Everbero – bludgeoning hex – we can now cast this wandlessly, and push someone back or knock them over. Harry is close to being able to cast this wandlessly with one hand while simultaneously casting another hex with his wand.*

*Incendio – fire starting hex – we think this will be very useful against inferi.*

*Sectumsempra – slashing hex – cuts a horribly deep wound. I have trouble making myself use it because of the emotional baggage associated with it. But since Snape made it up we have to assume the Death Eaters know it.*

*DiffRACTum – bone breaking curse – this one will really incapacitate someone, but is usually not life threatening. We will probably use this a lot in tough battles.*

*Disruptium – Organ rupturing curse – this is the curse Dolohov hit me with at the Department of Mysteries. I'll never use it, but you better believe I know how to block it now. Harry wants to use it on Dolohov himself if he ever meets up with him again.*

*Projectilius – solid bolts of magic ranging in size from arrows to spears depending on how much power you use. Smaller projectiles can pin opponents in place, larger ones will impale them.*

*Fiero – flaming lasso – Harry says Dumbledore used this on inferi. We think it will also be useful for restraining captured opponents.*

*We also learned a more powerful shield, that will not only block a hex but send it back at the caster. Probably the most valuable information we got out of the Black family books, though, was the information on wards. We now know a lot of wide area spells for protection, concealment, detection, and traps.*

*We also know more about how Horcruxes are made, and have several possible methods in mind for how to destroy them. We really need to know what method Dumbledore used on the ring. I don't want Harry losing his hand, or worse. I hope we can talk with his portrait, or that he left some notes or memories we can look at.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 46, Day 6

*We just spent a day at Coba. What an incredible place! It's much more spread out than Chichen Itza, and the magical area is much larger. Muggles think that most of it is unexcavated ruins, where Chichen Itza is much more thoroughly explored. In fact, what looks like unexcavated ruins to them are magical dwellings.*

*Our four guides from Chichen Itza came with us to introduce us to the people here. The leader is an imposing wizard named Ah Kinchil. I got the impression that he might even be as powerful as Dumbledore was. He spent several hours with us and gave us advice on how to complete our animagus transformations, and especially how to do them quickly and effortlessly. Right now it's still pretty painful. He's also helping us use life force magic more instinctively. We need to get to the point where we don't have to stop to think about what we're doing, just think it and do it.*

*We also learned more combat tactics. Ah Kinchil is a great tactician. We discovered that fighting against groups is much different than one on one or even two on two dueling. We intend to be able to more than hold our own if we ever find ourselves up against a group of Death Eaters like we met at the Department of Mysteries again.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 50, Day 7

*This was our last day with the Maya. Ah Kinchil was very impressed with how well we have assimilated what he taught us last time. (Of course, we had a whole month to work on it.) Harry changed into a jaguar for him and ran around the jungle and climbed a tree. He was so impressive*

– so sleek and powerful. I could stand and watch him for hours. Then I changed into an owl. I was right about liking flying more. I finally understand what Harry means when he talks about soaring. At the end I dive-bombed Harry in his jaguar form, pulling out at the last minute and landing on his back. Later he told me it was almost like a Wronsky feint. Whoops, he just told me I spelled it wrong. It's Wronski. Anyway, quite a crowd had gathered by that point and they all applauded as Harry the jaguar came trotting back with Hermione the owl perched on his shoulder.

Next we fought some mock battles against some of their warriors. We could handle nearly any two of them (not including Ah Kinchil) and we held our own against a group of eight. Blocks and shields are my strength, while Harry's is his quickness. Together we feel we're nearly unstoppable, as long as we aren't surrounded. Both of us are much more powerful than the average wizard now. They were amazed at how easily we could break through their shields.

In the afternoon Mayahuel and Ekahau took us to Tulum to see the temple there. The wizards have completely abandoned that site to the muggles, but it's still impressive to see. The view of the ocean there is incredible. Just south of the ruins is a magnificent beach. It has the whitest sand I've ever seen. To my surprise the beach there is clothing optional. I wonder if Mum and Dad know this, or if maybe they've already visited there this week. Mayahuel and Ekahau joined us in going nude. Harry's a real sweetie. He looked at her only a little bit, then focused his attention on me. Ekahau is very 'gifted', one might say, but I'm quite satisfied with how Harry looks.

What an incredible way to bring our journey to a close. Laying out in bright sunshine on a beautiful white sandy beach next to my love, both of us naked – it's like one of my fantasies come to life. I simply can't believe how happy and content I felt, just lying there on my back with my eyes closed in the warm sun, holding hands with him.

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Week 52, Day 8

This will be my last entry for this incredible journey we've been on for the last year. A year for us, but only two weeks for the rest of the world. We're on the plane on the way home. Harry's sleeping in the seat next to me, with his head on my shoulder. It's almost impossible to believe what's happened to us since we left. I can't wait to see the look on Ron's face when we tell him everything. I'm not looking forward to Ginny's reaction though. Or Mrs. Weasley's for that matter. I think she's had her heart set on the two of them getting together for years. But I hope Ginny and I can somehow come out of this as friends. I don't have so many that I can afford to lose one. But that might take a while. In the meantime – well, I've learned how to block and evade hexes pretty well during the last year.

Hermione felt Harry stir and looked up to see a pair of green eyes gazing at her. "Hey. How are you doing?" Harry asked.

"I'm pretty good. Just finishing up writing down some of my thoughts."

"Have I told you yet today that I love you?"

Hermione checked her watch. "Hmm. It's after midnight, so it's Wednesday now. So no, I guess you haven't," she replied as a smile danced across her face.

"Well, then, I better take care of that. 'I love you, Mine.'" He leaned over and gave her a soft, sweet kiss.

Hermione sighed in contentment, feeling her heart swell inside her. "I love you too."

Soon she dozed off and fell asleep with her head on his shoulder this time, the smile never leaving her face for the rest of the night.

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## Hermione's Plan An Unexpected Friend and Ally

### Chapter 9, An Unexpected Friend and Ally

The tale of their year-long adventure in Mexico finished, Harry and Hermione waited for Ron's reaction. But for once their tall red-haired friend was at a loss for words. *'Bloody Hell!'* just didn't seem adequate this time. "That's ... Wow! ... That's incredible! That's bloody amazing!" he finally managed. "You really learned to do all those spells? And wandlessly? And you're animagi??"

Harry and Hermione grinned at each other. First Harry flicked his wand and a stone slab erupted from the ground just off to Ron's right. While Ron was gaping at the rocky protuberance, Hermione made a small gesture with her hand and before he knew it a root had grown up around his leg. Once he had calmed down and she had released him the pair stood and before Ron could blink a jaguar stood before him and an owl flew up, circled, and landed on his shoulder. This time he fell back on his old standby.

"Bloody Hell!" In another second the owl had spread her wings and lifted up off his shoulder, only to transform right in front of him back into his best female friend, who promptly caught him up into a hug.

"Don't ever change, Ron," she said laughingly. Suddenly they were both staggered back by the paws of a six-foot jaguar who had jumped up on his hind legs to join in the hug. They all tumbled to the ground as Harry reappeared and the bundle of friends burst into laughter.

Once they had all regained their composure, Hermione resumed her seat in front of Harry and his arms automatically wrapped around her again as they inquired about what had happened in Britain while they were gone. Ron suddenly realized that it was late afternoon and they had been talking for nearly six hours. He also realized that he was hungry.

"Great Merlin!" I can't believe we've been out here for so long. Everyone will be getting worried, wondering what happened to us!"

Harry looked inquiringly at Hermione who checked her watch. "We still have fifteen minutes," she responded, then turned to Ron. "Relax Ron. You're not really missing." She smiled at the completely baffled look on his face and explained. "In fifteen minutes we'll use the time turner and take you back to when we arrived. Just think, you'll get a chance to eat a second lunch today," she teased. Ron shook his head, still not yet used to the idea of how relaxed the limitations of time had become for his friends. "Now," Hermione continued. "What's new around here?"

"Well, nothing's really happened with You-Know-Who. Dad and Remus say that he probably was surprised that his plot to kill Dumbledore worked so well and he wasn't ready to exploit it. Sort of like in chess when you get an unexpected opening, but your pieces aren't in the position you need them to be. You take your time, move them into place, then go for the kill." Harry and Hermione both nodded grimly at the analogy.

"Most of what has been going on around here has been wedding preparation. I can't believe how many times we've had to go into Madame Malkins for robes. First selection, then fitting, then more fitting. It's much worse for Ginny though. It took them a whole week just to pick out a color that would look good on both her and Gabrielle. Something about their hair color." Hermione stifled a laugh and shook her head. *Men and fashion!* Ron still didn't have any idea how horribly his bright orange Chudley Cannons jumpers clashed with his red hair.

"Let's see ... oh, I passed my apparation test. And Ginny and the other fifth years took their OWL's last week." Hermione perked up at that information, then had to turn around and smack Harry on the shoulder when he snickered. His only response was to tighten his arms around her waist, which she didn't mind a bit, and she smiled as she turned back to Ron while Harry congratulated him on the apparation news.

Then Ron lowered his voice and leaned forward. "I haven't made any progress on the locket, though. I'm pretty certain it's not in the house. I'm thinking now that Dung might have stolen it. But I had an idea. Why don't you ask Kreacher to look for it? You know, like you ordered him to tail Malfoy for you. He has to obey you. And if you tell him the locket belonged to Regulus, he'll probably even be enthusiastic about it." As he finished this suggestion he looked nervously at Hermione. She hadn't been too thrilled at Harry's ordering the house elf to follow Malfoy during the previous school year. This Hermione, with a year's added maturity, surprised him, however.

"That's a great idea, Ron," Harry said as Hermione nodded slowly, thinking it over. Kreacher probably would be happy to do something for his former master. She suspected, though, that he would strongly object when he discovered they wanted to destroy it.

"Kreacher!" Harry called out, letting go of her and rising to his feet. Within seconds the withered old house elf appeared, grumbling under his breath as usual. "Kreacher," Harry said in a stern voice. "I need you to do something for me. Have you ever seen a locket like this in your master's house?" Harry had withdrawn the fake horcrux from his pocket. None of them were prepared for Kreacher's response.

"Master's locket!" he cried, springing forward with more energy than they had ever seen him exhibit. "He stole it! That nasty thief stole it. Not this one though, but one like it. It belonged to Master Regulus but now it's mine." His voice was hissing now, and an insane gleam seemed to appear in his eyes. "It was a present, yes it was. And that nasty thief stole it. It was mine but he stole it. Nasty thief." He would have continued going on and on like this had Harry not broken in.



“Okay, we know he stole it. Now I want you to see if you can find it and get it back. Can you do that?” Kreacher stopped his hissing and shot a startled look at Harry.

“New Master wants Kreacher to find Former Master’s locket and get it back from nasty thief?”

“Yes. But you aren’t allowed to talk to anyone or let anyone know what you’re doing or why or who you’re doing it for. And when you find it, take it back to the house and put it back in the cabinet where it was,” Harry added.

“Yes. Kreacher can do that. Kreacher will find nasty thief and get his locket back. Kreacher will find his locket. It will be Kreacher’s locket again. His present …” Kreacher disappeared with a pop, still hissing and muttering.

Hermione, who had been watching this tableau in slack jawed amazement, finally found her voice. “Harry, have you ever read *The Hobbit*?” Harry shook his head at her, puzzled. “I think you should. I’ll let you borrow my copy when we get back home.” Harry said nothing, but merely nodded. She knew that he trusted her judgement enough that he would figure that if she thought it was important for him to do, he probably should.

Once the encounter with Kreacher had been dealt with, Hermione looked at her watch again. “Time for us to be going back,” she announced, approaching Ron. He looked at her in apprehension as she pulled the chain with the time turner on it out from her bag and looped it around both their heads. “Disillusion us please,” she said to Harry, and she saw him grin at her as he pulled out his wand and gave two quick swishes. She was aware of the cause of his amusement – Ron had been distinctly uncomfortable when she pressed up against him and reached her arms up to put the chain around his neck. She knew Harry well enough to guess that he was thinking about Ron’s reaction to what had been revealed by her bikini top when they first arrived. She shook her head in exasperation. *Boys!* After checking the dial to make sure it was set correctly, she grabbed Ron’s arm, flipped the device once and they disappeared.

The two of them found themselves behind some bushes in front of the Burrow. Fortunately, Ron refrained whatever exclamation he was about to make and she didn’t have to silence him. Putting a finger to her lips she beckoned to him to listen carefully, and they could just make out the conversation of Harry and their earlier selves as they disappeared around the back of the house. When the coast was clear, Hermione removed the chain of the time turner from Ron’s neck and they emerged from the bushes. Hermione decided that it was time to get something straight.

“Ron, I know that things are going to be different now that Harry and I are together, but my relationship with you hasn’t changed,” she insisted. “I don’t want you to be acting awkward around me, and I assure you that I’m going to keep hugging you like I always have.” He gave her a sheepish grin in response, then nodded his agreement. To prove her point she promptly gave him a hug.

“Now,” she continued, “you need to relax, go back inside, get something to eat, and tell everyone that Harry and I won’t arrive until suppertime. Just make sure everyone stays away from the shed.”

“But Hermione,” Ron worried, “how do you know no one will find us?”

Hermione smiled. “Because no one did.”

She left him frowning in puzzlement at the front door and walked back down the path, going around the house in the opposite direction that they had the first time. She disilluminated herself again before she rounded the precariously balanced structure and walked quietly to a tree a safe distance away from where their earlier selves were sitting in conversation, where she could keep them in sight, pulled a book out of her bag, and began to read.

Lost in her book, she didn’t realize how late it was until she felt Harry’s presence approaching. Looking up at him with a smile, she watched him give his wand a double swish and felt the familiar sensation of warm water flowing down her body as she reappeared.

“How did you know where I was?” she asked with a grin, although she already knew the answer.

He shrugged. “I just felt you. I could tell when you first walked back here and sat down.” He held out his hand and pulled her to her feet, continuing the motion into a hug and a small kiss. Hermione remembered to recast the concealment charm on her ring and they took each other’s hands as they walked up to the Burrow’s back door. Suddenly Harry looked around as if something had just occurred to him.

“Hermione? Shouldn’t this place be more fixed up than this? I mean, isn’t there going to be a wedding here in three days?”

Hermione tried to hold back her laughter but couldn’t, especially after seeing the adorable perplexed expression on his face. “Harry, the wedding’s not here. It’s in France. You know. Where Fleur’s from? Weddings are always held in the bride’s home town.”

Harry’s cute sheepish grin found its way to his face. She couldn’t resist reaching up and kissing it. “I bet I’m not the only one who made that mistake,” he protested. “Lots of people probably thought it was going to be at the Burrow.”

Hermione gave him an exaggerated eye-roll. “Right Harry. Honestly, I can’t imagine that there are very many people out there who are so ignorant about wedding customs.”

By this time they were at the house and received a typically boisterous Weasley welcome – with the exception that it was an exclusively male one. The only ones home besides Ron were Fred and George and Mr. Weasley. They quickly explained what had apparently not occurred to Ron to mention earlier – Bill, Fleur, Ginny, and Mrs. Weasley were already at the Delacour’s. Charlie would be traveling there directly from Romania. Percy had not been heard from.

“Yeah, it’s been a real drag the past few days, having to eat meals that we bring home from the Leaky Cauldron,” Fred moaned. Hermione was all at once aware that all four Weasley males were looking hopefully at her. Before her annoyance could grow enough that she would start lecturing them on the role of women in society Harry stepped up.

"Hermione and I would be glad to cook dinner," he offered with a perfectly straight face. The four hopeful faces changed to bafflement.

"Uh, look Harry, you don't have to do that," George protested. "Don't you want to catch up with Ron?" I'm sure Hermione can ..."

"Yeah, we can go flying for a bit," Ron said eagerly. "I know you must have missed it, during all that time ..."

Harry broke in before his girlfriend did something that might render some Weasley males incapable of fathering children. "No, no, that's okay. Your family has always been so good to us, putting us up so often during the summer, it's a way for us to show our appreciation." The boys continued to protest, but he shooed them out of the kitchen, somewhat forcefully at the end. Arthur, who had been looking at Hermione during the exchange and had seen the glare that so often intimidated his youngest son, swallowed hard and decided he had something to attend to in his study.

Next Harry pulled Hermione into the other end of the kitchen and wrapped his arms around her waist, facing her with the most disarming grin he could manage.

It worked. Hermione's glare softened and amusement took over as she inquired, "~~We~~ are going to cook dinner?"

"Well, how about I cook and you help?" The grin was still firmly in place.

"And what kind of help are you thinking of?" Harry's infectious grin had now spread to Hermione's face.

"Hmm, how about entertaining the cook?"

She smacked him on the arm in mock offense. "And just what kind of *entertainment* did you have in mind, Mr. Potter?"

"Just having you be in the same room is enjoyment enough for me."

"Oooh, smooth Potter. I think someone is going to get lucky tonight for that one." She reached up to capture his lips and give him an indication of what he could look forward to.

"Harry, I put ... whoops!" Ron burst into the kitchen and skidded to a halt, while his best friends quickly jumped away from each other. "Uh ... I, uh, put your bag in Ginny's room, Hermione, and you're in Percy's old room Harry." He looked back and forth between the pair for a few seconds, then smirked. But I'm guessing that only one of those rooms will actually be used tonight." An awkward silence settled over the kitchen as Harry and Hermione shifted about nervously before Harry nodded to Ron.

"Um, guys," Ron began. "Are you planning to keep this secret? Because, you know ..." he gestured to the rest of the house and its unseen occupants.

"Actually, we think it would be best to wait until after the wedding," Hermione responded. "We think there might be some unpleasantness and we don't want to take the attention away from Bill and Fleur."

Ron snorted. "Some unpleasantness? That's an understatement." But all three of them quickly agreed on the necessity of keeping the couple's relationship under wraps for the time being.

During dinner they all discussed the plan for the next day. Harry and Hermione mentioned that they had to pick up their dress robes at Madame Malkins. They didn't add that they had ordered them before they left but now they needed alterations due to the physical changes both had undergone during the past year. Ron, of course, had noticed the changes, and Fred and George had as well, but said nothing, merely raising their eyebrows at Harry's larger size and obviously increased strength when he had pushed them out of the kitchen, as well as casting appreciative glances at Hermione's more mature figure. Mr. Weasley hadn't seen Hermione since the previous summer or Harry since Christmas, with the exception of that chaotic time in the Hospital wing after Bill's injuries, so would have been inclined to ascribe their physical changes to normal growth. Everyone had commented on their tans, Hermione's lighter hair color, and Harry's lack of glasses when they had first arrived and the couple was satisfied to leave it at that.

They had also ordered dragonhide body armor that morning when they had stopped at Diagon Alley before coming to the Burrow, and wanted to pick it up as well. When the trio returned the next morning an additional set would be ordered for Ron. It was decided that the twins would accompany the three of them to Diagon Alley first thing in the morning, stop briefly at their shop, and be back at the Burrow so that everyone could take a portkey to France at noon.

They turned in early that evening pleading exhaustion from their travels, but in fact Hermione and Ron were six hours ahead of everyone else, so that 8:00 PM seemed like 2:00 AM. Percy's room ended up being the choice for the night, as Harry decided it would be just too weird to sleep with Hermione in Ginny's bed.

-ooOoo-

"Arry! 'Ermione! I'm so glad you could make eet!" Fleur ran out to meet them, looking more beautiful than ever, Hermione thought, while gritting her teeth as the French part-Veela gave Harry a hug and a kiss on each cheek. Her tension eased as she noted that Harry had no reaction to Fleur at all; in fact, both Harry and Fleur had puzzled looks on their faces. Fleur pulled back then and looked from Harry to Hermione, her eyes widening in understanding. She then came over to Hermione and repeated the hug and kisses she had given Harry. But along with the kiss she whispered, "we must talk later" into Hermione's ear before pulling back and greeting the others. Ron, of course, had the normal dazed look that he got whenever he was around Fleur after she gave him his hug.

Molly Weasley was next with the hugs, although Hermione noticed that the one she received was quite a bit less enthusiastic than Harry's. She suspected that it had something to do with Harry having just spent two weeks on holiday with her and her parents. Ron had tipped them off that

Molly had not been at all happy when she had heard about that. She, of happy course, was of the opinion that Harry should have spent those two weeks with the Weasley family.

"Harry, you're sharing with Ron, of course, and Hermione, you're in with Ginny," she announced. Ron cleared his throat and pulled his mother aside.

"Um, Mum, Hermione and Ginny aren't exactly on the best terms right now. That might not be such a good idea." Before the shocked Molly could respond, Fleur burst into the conversation.

"Oh, zat won't be necessary. 'Ermione can stay weeth me," she declared. Eet will only be for two nights, and zen she can 'ave ze room to 'erself after ze wedding." One of the perks of being the bride was that people tended to go along with what you wanted, (and it ~~was~~ her home, after all) so Molly gave in without too much protest.

Next, two more pretty young girls came hurrying out. Ginny and Gabrielle had apparently been engaged in some bridesmaid activities which delayed their greetings, but the young French girl made up for it with her enthusiasm. Sprinting across the front lawn with her long silvery hair flying, she hurled herself into Harry's arms, gushing about how much she had been looking forward to seeing once more the brave man who had saved her. She also emulated her older sister by giving him a kiss on each cheek – somewhat longer kisses than a normal greeting called for, Hermione noted.

She also noted something else with no small amount of apprehension. Gabrielle, according to Fleur, who was still standing next to Hermione, had just finished her first year at Beauxbatons and was now twelve years old. But she was the most physically developed twelve-year-old Hermione had ever seen. Apparently Veela developed earlier than other girls. She was shorter than Fleur, but every bit as pretty, and she had a petite but clearly mature figure. In fact, except for the hair color, she strongly resembled a fifteen year old Cho Chang – or the fifteen year old Ginny Weasley who had followed her out the door, fuming at the vivacious younger girl. As both of those stunningly attractive witches had once captivated Harry Potter, this girl was quite clearly exactly his type.

The apprehension was gone in a second, but not before Fleur noticed it. Hermione relaxed as she saw Harry return Gabrielle's hug. She knew Harry's body language intimately, and he was hugging her just like he would a friend's annoying younger sister. Gabrielle obviously picked up on this also, for she pulled back from Harry and gave him the most adorable pout Hermione had ever seen. Unfortunately for the poor starstruck girl, it had no effect on her raven-haired idol either. It did have the effect of generating a glare from Ginny that should have melted stone.

Given that she was now technically dating someone else, Ginny's own greeting of Harry was by necessity more subdued, but she made sure to tell him how great he looked, and managed to rub her hands over his newly acquired muscles by way of illustration. Her greeting of Hermione was just barely polite. She had also resented the fact that the older girl had spirited her former boyfriend off to another part of the world for two weeks. After all, how was Harry supposed to get jealous of her and Colin being together if he wasn't around to see them?

Finally all the hugs were concluded and all the appropriate introductions made, and the elder Delacours had thoroughly thanked Harry for saving their younger daughter, and everyone had marveled at how much Gabrielle had grown up and also how different Harry looked with a tan and without his glasses, etc. etc., and they all made their way into the Delacour chateau.

Hermione was entranced with the ancestral home that had been in the Delacour family for at least twenty generations. It had a grand entrance hall, with stairways spiraling up into six separate towers from the upper floors. The lower level of the entrance hall led to a ballroom and an expansive formal dining room to the right, with a series of living spaces, studies, parlors, and a library to the left. Fleur led Hermione up into one of the towers, while Bill took Fred, George, Ron, and Harry into another. Hermione was relieved to see that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were in a third tower. As they climbed the winding stairs Hermione was reminded of the chateau in the movie *Cinderella*. She wouldn't have been at all surprised to see two mice come out and start talking to her blonde companion. Finally, near the top of her tower, Fleur opened a door into a room that was easily larger than the entire sixth year Gryffindor girls' dorm.

"Now, you must tell me what ees 'appening between you and 'Arry," Fleur insisted, as she helped Hermione unpack her trunk and hang her robes in one of the closets. "But first ..." she raised her wand and cast an imperturbable charm on the door. "Ze walls 'ave ears," she explained with a shrug. Hermione couldn't help the smile that came to her face as she recalled the Extendible Ears of the Weasley twins.

"You're right, we're together now," she replied, deciding that denial was pointless, since the part-Veela had picked it up right away. "But how did you know?"

"I can sense eet," was the answer. "And eet ees more than just 'togeizzer'. You are bonded by love. Veela are always aware of zeese feelings. When I greeted 'Arry I could tell zat my Veela charm 'ad no effect on 'im. While eet ees true zat 'e can usually control 'is reactions to me, zis time zere nozzing. Same weeth Gabrielle. 'E ees clearly een love. And you are ze one 'e 'as been weeth for ze last two weeks." Fleur paused and took a close look at Hermione. "And eet 'as been much more zan two weeks, no?"

Hermione confirmed that things were not as they seemed, and Fleur accepted that she could not share the details of their journey. Then Hermione canceled the concealment charm and showed off her ring. Fleur squealed in a most gratifying manner, and agreed with Hermione that it reminded her of Harry's eyes. "I am very 'appy for you," the older witch pronounced. "Ze two of you are very much ... 'ow should I say ... right for each oizzer. You complete each oizzer. You share your souls." She turned her head and nodded at the door. "Somezing zat could not be said of my new sister-in-law, I theenk. I do not believe zat 'e ever shared ze theengs with 'er zat 'e does with you. N'est-ces pas?"

Hermione found herself more impressed with this woman than she had ever been before. She hoped that her discretion matched her perceptiveness, because she had to trust her to keep their secret. But she was not prepared for the next question.

"Do you want to sleep togezzer?" Hermione's jaw dropped, but she eventually managed a slight nod. "Bill and I 'ave rooms een ze village where we 'ave been staying – we are only pretending to stay 'ere for Molly's sake. Charlie 'as been covering for 'im. Een fact, I believe zat Charlie 'as a lady friend of 'is own who shares 'is room here."

Hermione finally found her voice. “But ... what about the tradition of the groom not seeing the bride on the day of the wedding?” She winced at the lameness of this objection, considering everything else that had just been revealed in the room.

Fleur waved her hand in dismissal. “Why would I want to give up sleeping weeth ze man I love because of some silly tradition?” Hermione had no answer for this. “Now, will Ron cover for 'Arry?”

“I ... I think so,” Hermione thought, then decided. “Yes, I'm sure he will.”

“Good. zen zere ees no problem. We will just 'ave 'im apparate een 'ere each night after everyone goes to bed, and no one will be ze wiser.” She perked up as she seemed to sense something outside the room, and Hermione suddenly felt it too. Fleur canceled her spell as she turned back to Hermione and smiled. “I theenk our loved ones are 'ere to check up on us.”

Bill and Harry were indeed outside the door, and the four of them took some time to discuss a few things. Hermione blushed brightly as Fleur matter-of-factly filled Bill in on the plan the two women had just devised. Harry hastily changed the subject by asking Bill about the possibility of finding someone with curse-breaking skills. Bill and Fleur immediately vowed to do whatever they could to help Harry out. The word had quietly spread among the Weasley brothers that Harry was up to something vital in the battle against the dark lord, and they had all agreed to assist him in any way they could, with no questions asked.

-ooOoo-

That night, while waiting for Bill and Harry to arrive, Hermione was to discover much more about Fleur, as the two grew even closer.

“Ermione, feel free to change eento your nightgown eef you like,” Fleur suggested. Hermione turned a fetching shade of pink as she revealed that she didn't wear a nightgown when she slept with Harry. “Ohhh, so maybe ze saying ees true,” Fleur teased. In response to the question on Hermione's face she explained. “At Beauxbatons eet ees widely believed zat ze studious girls are ze most knowledgeable and adventurous lovers.” Seeing that Hermione was too embarrassed to answer immediately, she went on. “Per'aps you noticed when we visited 'ogwarts for ze tournament zat our boys tended to spend ze most time weeth ze Ravenclaw girls. I am sure some would 'ave turned zere attention to you when your intellectual prowess became known, but everyone assumed zat you were weeth 'Arry after zat newspaper story appeared. We were most surprised when you attended ze Yule Ball with Veektor.”

Hermione finally recovered. “We ... well actually it's not like that,” she said uncomfortably. “We're waiting until we're married before we, um, have sex.”

“Why?” There was no hint of criticism in Fleur's question, just curiosity.

“I guess it just seems like the right thing to do.”

“Ah. And of course 'Arry Potter and 'Ermione Granger would certainly be ones who would do what ees right instead of what ees easy.” Fleur smiled at the look of surprise that flitted across Hermione's face before one of realization settled in. “Yes. As you will recall, I was zere een your Great Hall ze day your 'eadmaster made zat declaration. 'Is words, along weeth Cedric's death changed everytheeng for me zat day. It was zen zat I resolved to stop spending all of my time flirting and only worrying about finding a mate and get serious about making a contribution weeth my life. I decided to stay een England to do what I could to 'elp out. But,” she beamed happily, “as eet turned out, I met Bill and found my mate after all.” She grinned at the amazed expression on the younger witch's face. It was not very often that anyone surprised Hermione Granger with something that had not occurred to her. “And as for ze decision you and 'Arry 'ave made – I agree weeth you. I will make love to Bill for ze first time on our wedding night, and I 'ave 'ad no ozzet.”

If Hermione had been surprised before, she was positively astonished now. “Ah, you are surprised, I see. Just as everyone else, you assume zat Veela are promiscuous.” This time the color creeping onto Hermione's face was from shame, not embarrassment. “Just because we can 'ave any man we want, people assume zat we do.” Hermione began an apology, but Fleur waved her off. “Not everyone of course. Zere are some who treat us as normal people, weeth ze same respect zey 'ave for anyone else. Zose are ze ones who can become true friends.”

“Like Harry,” Hermione said meekly. Ever since the conclusion of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, Harry had considered Fleur to be a fellow champion, and had been friendly toward her. Something, to her shame, that she could not say for herself. She had only seen Fleur as a flirt who was stealing her boys' attention away from her. She had even snapped at Harry last summer for defending the beautiful blonde.

“And like Bill,” Fleur added. “Zey both 'ave a certain nobility, a strength of mind. Do you know zat Bill can throw off an Imperius curse?”

“So can Harry.” Hermione was beginning to see what Fleur was getting at.

Fleur nodded. “I am not surprised. Bill 'ad to work very 'ard at eet. 'E says eet took 'im months of practice.”

“Oh.” Hermione's pride for her beloved wouldn't let her resist bragging a bit. “Harry was able to resist it the first time he tried. It was by the fake Professor Moody. And then in the graveyard he completely threw off an Imperius from Voldemort himself.” Fleur just shook her head with a rueful laugh, realizing she shouldn't be surprised by anything about Harry Potter by now.

“But my point ees zat men like zat are rare,” she continued. “Theenk about how a Veela must go about choosing a mate. Eet ees very difficult to find a man who we can even 'ave a co'erent conversation weeth. Do you remember what eet was like during ze tournament? I naturally sought out ze most accomplished boy I could find, as zey are ze most promising.” Hermione nodded as she recalled how Ravenclaw quidditch captain Roger Davies had been Fleur's escort to the Yule Ball, and had sat there staring at her in a daze for the whole meal. “Een fact, eef 'Arry 'ad been older, and 'ad not been one of ze ozzet champions, I am sure I would 'ave chosen 'im. Alzough,” she teased, “I am not sure I would 'ave won 'im away from you. I 'ave no doubt who 'e would 'ave picked eef asked to make a choice between ze two of us.” Hermione started to protest that Harry didn't think about her that way back then, but then remembered Harry making a similar choice during his short-lived relationship with Cho Chang.

Fleur's eyes fell for the first time that evening. "I am sorry to say zat I insulted 'im ze first time I met 'im," she revealed, in a small, guilty voice. "Eet was not until ze end of ze year and all of ze tasks zat we developed a mutual respect for each ozzer." She shook off the reminiscence and her former demeanor returned.

"Now, I am not saying zat Veela do not enjoy flirting and kissing and all ze ozzer theengs zat make men such enjoyable creatures," she continued with a gleam in her eyes. "We enjoy eet very much. But eet ees so much more enjoyable when you know zat your man 'as real feelings for you, and not just because 'e is enthralled by ze Veela charm." Hermione nodded in understanding. This was something she had never thought about, not ever having been in the position to have to fight off infatuated suitors, but she supposed it was true for other dazzlingly beautiful women as well.

"As for lovemaking," Fleur continued. "Zere ees also a practical reason for waiting. Ze marriage ritual ees a very magical one. A Veela's first time weeth a man, a witch's too, to a lesser extent, also involves ze sharing of magic. Eef a bond is formed at ze same time, eet will be zat much more powerful." Her face glowed as she continued. "Not only magically, but also physically, emotionally, and spiritually." A dreamy, faraway look played across her beautiful features. "I know zat eet will be ze most incredible experience of my life."

Hermione pondered this information. Except for the magical part, these were much the same things her mum had told her during their talks on the subject. She had never pegged Fleur to be one for such a serious, thoughtful conversation. There had been a lot of wisdom in what she had said. Somewhat abashedly, she recalled that Fleur had naturally gravitated to the Ravenclaw house table during the Tri-Wizard Tournament. And that she had been a Tri-Wizard Champion, after all. To have been worthy of that honor she must have been one of the most magically accomplished students in her school. There was definitely more to the part-Veela than just an incredible figure and a pretty face. Turning her thoughts back to the topic of their conversation, she allowed herself to get lost in daydreaming of what it would be like to make love to Harry.

Her reverie was interrupted when Fleur took her by the hand and pulled her over to the closet. "Now," the older witch announced, "let us prepare a special treat tonight for our strong willed, noble men." While Hermione watched uncertainly, she pulled two fine silk negligées out of the closet, a powder blue one for Hermione and a dark red one for herself. The garments were almost, but not quite, transparent, strongly hinting at what lay beneath. Following Fleur's example, Hermione hesitantly removed everything except her knickers and donned the luxurious garment.

The sensation was incredible. The feel of the soft, smooth fabric sent tingles racing all over her skin. The sensuous material clung to her body like magic (which she supposed it was) and caressed her curves, falling to mid-thigh. Looking into the mirror, Hermione was immediately struck by two things. Her upper body was pointedly proclaiming that there was nothing under the sexy, barely-there garment but her. And she was standing next to a woman with the most perfect body in the world.

Fleur noticed the self-doubt of her newfound friend. "'Ermione," she asked softly, "what do you see when you look een ze mirror?"

"A living goddess and a plain Jane," came the dejected answer.

"And what do you suppose 'Arry will see when 'e gets 'ere?"

"The same thing?" Hermione offered, hoping otherwise.

"What 'e will see ees a beautiful woman standing next to ze woman 'e loves. And alzough 'e will appreciate my beauty, 'e will be captivated by yours." Seeing a faint blush appear on Hermione's face as her message took hold, she added. "And Bill will 'ave ze same reaction, only weeth ze identities reversed." As Hermione turned hopeful eyes to her, seeking confirmation of that declaration, she gave the younger witch's arm a squeeze and smiled. "Trust me, zat ees ze way love works."

After stepping back and studying Hermione for a few seconds, Fleur said, "You are not 'appy weeth your 'air, are you?" Hermione shook her head.

"The only thing that's ever helped is Sleakeasy's, but it took almost a whole bottle," she admitted. Fleur smiled and murmured a complicated charm. The results caused Hermione to gasp, as her unmanageable hair turned into waves of lovely, flowing curls. She squealed in delight, throwing her arms around the neck of her benefactor.

"I can't believe it! Thank you so much! You have to teach me that charm!" Fleur responded that it was Veela magic, but that she knew of a potion that would produce the same results, and promised to get Hermione some.

Fleur's prediction about the men's behavior was put to the test very shortly thereafter, as Bill and Harry appeared in the room with a pair of soft pops. And, as usual in matters of the heart, the part-Veela was spot on. After looking back and forth in awe between the two visions in blue and red before him, Harry could not take his eyes off of Hermione, not even noticing when Fleur and Bill disappeared. Hermione, however, heard Fleur's parting words, which caused her to blush furiously at the double entendre. "I imagine eet will be 'ard tonight, but I am certain zat you will continue to do ze right theeng."

Before she knew it, Harry was before her with his hands on her waist, his face revealing his thoughts – that he couldn't believe how fortunate he was to be standing here holding onto this incredible woman.

"So, do you like it?" she teased. He could only nod, still not having rediscovered the ability to speak. "Do you want me to leave it on?"

Harry still said nothing, but his hands began to move, first down to the hem of the negligée, then under it. She shuddered as her skin screamed out its delight when they moved up, along her hips, past her waist, and up to the beginning of the swell of her breasts, where they stopped as his thumbs ventured further, causing her to moan in pleasure. Finally he spoke.

"No."

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## Hermione's Plan Joy and Sorrow

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### Chapter 10, Joy and Sorrow

The time before the wedding – Thursday afternoon, Friday, and Saturday morning – afforded an interesting study in human interactions. Gabrielle was constantly hanging around Harry, much to Ginny's irritation. She clearly wanted to get Harry alone, but was continually frustrated in her attempts. Ron was with Harry most of the time, too, in a permanent daze, for Gabrielle was using her Veela powers to their fullest extent. Hermione lost track of the number of times she had to hiss at her tall friend, "Ron, she's only twelve!"

The result was that Gabrielle was effectively running interference for Hermione, and she didn't need to stay by Harry's side the whole time like they had expected. This worked to lessen any suspicion that anyone might have had about their closeness, and she could get away with a few hugs when she did 'happen' to encounter him. It also resulted in Hermione spending more time with Fleur.

She came more and more to regret not getting to know Fleur earlier, as well as her former negative attitude toward the distractingly beautiful witch. She was turning into the older sister Hermione had never had. During this period she took the time to show Hermione around the chateau and explain its history, which fascinated the studious witch. She also introduced Hermione to the Delacours' house elf. Hermione managed to keep her negative feelings about that subject under control, although she noted with some relief that Fleur and Mrs. Delacour treated the elf courteously. She was addressed like a member of the family, a long-time trusted servant rather than a slave, and they made requests of her rather than demands.

Ginny had resumed her disdainful attitude toward her sister-in-law to be, which Hermione now no longer found humorous. She was ashamed that she had once laughed when Ginny called her 'Phlegm', and she cringed at Ginny's catty comments questioning whether Fleur should be wearing white for her wedding, suggesting that scarlet might be a more appropriate color. The frosty relationship between the former good friends turned even cooler when Hermione attempted to rebuke her for those comments. It made her feel yet more guilty to realize that prior to getting to know the part-Veela better, and hearing her confession the night of their arrival, she might have agreed with the nasty remark.

Upon reflection, Hermione realized that Ginny's sense of humor, which was considered to be one of her attractive features, largely involved making fun of others, sarcastic putdowns, and mean-spirited pranks. Somehow, perhaps because she had matured so much lately, and was nearly two years older than the petite redhead to begin with, she didn't find that brand of humor to be particularly funny any more. Now she could see how destructive it was, and realized how similar it was to the nasty taunting and teasing she and Harry had each been subjected to when they were younger.

During one of the times she and Fleur were together, standing off to the side and watching yet another attempt by Ginny to get Harry's attention, Fleur made the observation that she had been surprised that Harry had gotten together with Ginny in the first place, since he didn't seem at all interested in her the previous summer. Hermione revealed that Harry had told her that it was just something that hit him all of a sudden. Fleur gave her an odd look and said it sounded like an attraction that might have been magically enhanced. Hermione responded with the rationalization that she had always used during her times of self-doubt regarding Harry. Ginny was, after all, very pretty, funny, and athletic – the type of girl Harry was attracted to – and maybe he just finally noticed her.

Fleur then made another point. While that was possible, why would it not have happened during the month before they went back to Hogwarts, when he was spending all day every day with her? Hermione then allowed that he did say that he first noticed her after the first Potions class, when he was exposed to Amortentia, and the conversation took a more serious turn.

"Do you zink eet's somezing she might 'ave done?" asked Fleur in concern.

"But the timing doesn't make sense," Hermione pointed out. "She was going out with Dean then. I think her plan was to have him view her differently, not just as the kid sister of his best friend, by seeing her in romantic situations with his dormmate. And I think she wanted to win him on her own merits."

By this point Ron had joined the discussion. "Yeah she's so competitive, having to use a love potion would have been admitting defeat – but it does sound like something Mum would do." Hermione and Fleur were both shocked into silence at this casual declaration. "Mum really wanted them together," Ron explained. "I could see her trying to help it along. And she certainly had plenty of opportunity to slip him something before he left for Hogwarts."

"I do remember her telling Ginny and me one time about using a love potion when she was a girl," Hermione added, having found her voice again.

"Are you going to tell 'Arry?" Fleur questioned.

"I would never hide anything from him," Hermione replied thoughtfully. "We're completely open with each other, and if he asks me what I think I'll tell him. But this is just speculation; I don't want to strain his relationship with your family with no evidence. And it's in the past now, and really doesn't

make any other guy anymore. It's not worth Harry's opinion of someone who has been the only mother he's known from the time he started Hogwarts until just recently."

"Just recently?" Fleur asked with a smile.

"Well, my mum has become quite taken with him," Hermione smiled back.

"You are very lucky," Fleur replied wistfully. "Eet ees much nicer to 'ave ze support of your mate's family." Hermione nodded and put her arm around her new friend to give her a quick hug. It was the first crack in the blissfully happy persona Fleur had maintained all week. She was obviously aware of the snide comments being made behind her back, but chose to take the high road. Fleur continued in a sad voice. "I know you are 'appy to 'ave me become a Weasley, Ronald." She managed a smile for him. "But not everyone een your family ees quite so enzzusiastic." The three lapsed into silence at that point, then decided to move on to more pleasant topics.

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The wedding the next day was the most beautiful one Hermione had ever seen (not to mention the *only* one Harry had ever seen). It was like a fairy tale – *Beauty and the Beast* this time, she decided. Ginny and Gabrielle were in strapless gowns of a deep blue color, that accentuated their pale skin and complimented both Ginny's flaming red hair and Gabrielle's brilliant silver mane. Fleur wore a strapless gown that conformed perfectly to her body down to her hips, then flowed out into a long train. It glistened and sparkled with hundreds of tiny gems, which added to the happy glow already emanating from the part Veela.

Hermione studied her effect on the men in the crowd as she glided past on her way to the platform where Bill awaited. While most, like Ron, were in a daze, a few were able to act normally. From what she had learned from Fleur, the men best able to resist her charms were those who were deeply in love, or had a lot of willpower, or were more inclined to favor men than women. She amused herself trying to identify which category each male in the crowd fell into. Harry, she knew, was in both of the first two categories. Mr. Weasley was obvious. Alastor Moody had a will of iron, and Remus Lupin was like Harry, doubly immune. Kingsley Shacklebolt was more of a puzzle.

It was the best time she had had since coming to France, because she had Harry all to herself nearly the entire afternoon and evening. Since all of the Weasleys and Gabrielle were part of the festivities, Harry would naturally be expected to escort her. They discreetly held hands all during the ceremony, and he even managed to put his arm around her for the occasional hug.

She also noted the differences between the magical ceremony and the church weddings with which she was familiar. There was no mention of God, and of course no scripture readings. She found herself thinking ahead to her own wedding, and decided that she wanted some sort of combination for her and Harry. In particular, she had long ago picked out the two selections from scripture she wanted read. The first spoke of how a man and a woman left their fathers and mothers and joined together to become one flesh. It reminded her very much of the sharing of magic that Fleur had described. The second, probably the most often used passage at Christian weddings, was her favorite description of love. To her mind, it described her and Harry's relationship perfectly. *'Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful. It is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.'*

She was brought back from her musings when she felt Harry squeeze her hand, and she looked up to see him smiling at her. She realized that she must have had a dreamy expression on her face so she leaned over and explained, "I was just thinking of what our wedding will be like."

His eyes danced and he whispered back, "me too." She thought her heart would burst through her chest, and she closed her eyes and leaned her head on his shoulder, wondering if she could possibly ever be happier than she was right then.

After the ceremony they mingled with the other guests, including some of their friends who had made the trip to France. Luna looked at them oddly while they were talking, but didn't say anything. Hermione wondered if the dreamy witch with the protuberant grey eyes could tell that she and Harry were together. The younger girl often seemed able to see things that others could not. She also had a nice conversation with Viktor Krum, which Harry joined in enthusiastically. After having seen her memories of her relationship with the serious Bulgarian, he had no reason for any jealousy, even when Viktor graciously kissed her hand. The two seekers even managed to avoid discussing quidditch, at least while they were with her. She was glad that Ron wasn't around at that point.

Some time later Harry burst out laughing and motioned for her to turn around. She chuckled herself when she spotted Viktor talking with Luna. He clearly didn't know what to make of her, and just stood there with a perplexed look on his face while listening to her fantastic tales that flowed effortlessly from one to the next. On the other hand, she thought Viktor might also be noticing something else about the blonde Ravenclaw. Hermione thought she looked quite stunning in her long filmy dress robes. They had a very pretty floral pattern, and fit snugly in all the right places. Here was another girl who had seemingly developed an attractive figure without anyone noticing.

For the rest of the reception, Hermione watched her Bulgarian friend as his eyes constantly seemed drawn back in the direction of the almost ethereal looking young woman who was so different from the short, solid, somber looking quidditch star. *What an interesting couple that would make*, she thought. Shortly after that Viktor came back to Hermione and asked her for a dance. It was all she could do to keep a straight face when he casually asked her about Luna.

While she was dancing with Viktor, she noticed that Gabrielle had snagged Harry, frustrating Ginny to no end. Her eyes danced with mirth at the sight of the young part-Veela using all her powers to get Harry to notice her, only to enthrall a half dozen men dancing nearby. The unfortunate males were quickly brought back to their senses by sharp pokes and jabs from their dance partners.

Ginny finally got her chance to be with Harry a bit later when she and Colin came over during the dancing and she innocently asked if they wanted to switch partners. Hermione wasn't at all concerned with what Ginny could accomplish, although she refrained from looking in their direction too obviously. It was just as well, because she was sure the younger witch was using every flirtatious move she knew on him, and that the strapless top

on her bridesmaid gown was sliding lower and lower.

The most annoying part of the situation was dancing with Colin. He was the only boy near her age who was shorter than she was, and he took the opportunity to stare at her chest the entire time they were together. She mused that the rumors of his sexual preference were apparently incorrect. Given the amount of time she had just spent on topless beaches, she wasn't overly embarrassed by his scrutiny, mostly just annoyed at the crudeness of his behavior and its lack of subtlety. Now if it were Harry ... She smiled as her mind wandered back to the reaction he had had to her new gown.

*"Either I've gotten taller or you've gotten shorter," he teased as they were being remeasured at Madame Malkins upon their return from their year abroad.*

*Hermione stuck her tongue out at him and retorted saucily, "well, I may not be taller but I've grown in other areas."*

*"Trust me, I've noticed," he responded in a low voice as he allowed his eyes to run up and down her figure." Hermione had been amazed and delighted at her new measurements. Her waist had not changed, but all the exercise had reduced her hips by an inch. Incredibly, her bust had increased by an inch and a half. Although much of that was due to her more developed chest and back muscles, the effect was eye-opening. She had previously picked out a light green floor length halter style gown that was bare halfway down her back but relatively conservative in front. For fall and winter it had a matching long sleeved jacket of the same soft material, which tied at the waist, so that it followed the same lines in front as the halter top.*

*But when Madam Malkin had taken the gown in at the hips and let out the back to adjust to her new measurements, Hermione had daringly decided to have her leave the halter top the same. The result was that there was a lot more of Hermione to be covered by the same amount of fabric, giving her a noticeable amount of cleavage, her first ever in formal dress robes. The entire gown clung to her like a second skin, and the pale green color looked fantastic with her dark tan. Harry had been delighted with the result.*

Finally her dance with Colin was over and she was happily back in Harry's arms. She couldn't resist giggling when she saw the disappointment on Colin's face as a disgruntled Ginny tugged her top back up to its proper location.

"Have I told you how lovely your hair looks tonight?" Harry asked, interrupting her thoughts on her comparative advantage over the pretty (but relatively small-breasted) redhead. She just had to hug him for that comment. She had indeed used the potion Fleur had given her to tame her hair somewhat, and it warmed her heart that he had noticed.

"Harry, you continue to amaze me," she declared. "Colin just spent the last ten minutes ogling my chest and you manage to notice how nice my hair looks." She leaned close and whispered, "I love you so much!"

Harry leaned in and whispered back. "I love you too. And just for the record, I'm enjoying very much how you fill out the top of that gown. Lavender would be so jealous." Hermione blushed furiously but was inwardly thrilled. Harry always seemed to know just what to say to make her feel good about herself. She laid her head against his chest and sighed. If only the happiness she felt today could last forever.

Near the end of the reception she found herself dancing with Bill while Fleur danced with Harry. "Fleur's been looking forward to this all evening," Bill commented, motioning to his bride smiling as she twirled away with Harry." At Hermione's questioning look he explained. "She figured that Harry was one of the only ones here who could actually manage to talk to her while they danced." Hermione nodded in understanding. Harry had taken one look at the cleavage that was revealed by the top of Fleur's strapless gown, which was considerably more impressive than Ginny's or Gabrielle's, and laughed at some teasing remark she made, then kept his eyes focused on her face for the rest of the dance.

"You and Harry seem to have developed quite an interest in curse-breaking," Bill said in a low voice as the conversation took a serious turn. "I want you to know that we plan to drop everything else and get to work on whatever this project of yours is as soon as we get back." Hermione expressed how grateful they were that the new couple would do this for them and let him know they would be looking forward to working with them.

-ooOoo-

It was a tradition in the Delacour family for the newlywed couple to return to the house the following day to open gifts with the family and close friends. When the happy pair arrived Hermione observed that Fleur was positively glowing and couldn't stop smiling the entire time. Bill's brothers, of course, immediately took him aside and began ribbing him mercilessly about his prowess the previous night, but nothing could wipe the grin off his face. Hermione would have liked a chance to ask Fleur how it had been, but she couldn't get her alone. And the answer was rather obvious at any rate.

After a few hours the newlyweds had gone and Hermione decided to try to get Harry alone for a private word. This seemed like as good a time as any for their announcement. But another couple beat them to it. Tonks pulled Remus into the center of the room and fired off a spray of multicolored sparks from her wand to get everyone's attention. With a bit of prompting at the critical moments, the shy werewolf proclaimed to loud cheers that the two of them had decided to get married, and hoped that everyone there would join them in the celebration. He further revealed that they planned to have the ceremony prior to the new school year, because they would be joining the staff at Hogwarts and jointly teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts. This caused even louder cheers from the students present who remembered him as the best Defense teacher they had ever had.

As the excitement was dying down to a steady chatter, after everyone had finished congratulating the couple, Harry caught Hermione's eye and the pair silently came to an agreement. In seconds they were side by side and Hermione's hand had slipped into Harry's. Harry cleared his throat to get the attention of the boisterous crowd.

"Um, excuse me, we have another announcement to make. I ... er we ... that is, Hermione and I, we also have some news for you. We've decided to get married too. We're engaged."



It was the loudest silence Hermione had ever heard. Her eyes roamed the room, taking in the wide variety of reactions. Remus was surprised, but not shocked. Next to him Tonks had a gleam in her eye, her head turned towards him with the message 'I told you so' clearly etched on her face. Fred and George were caught off balance, trying to figure out if it was some colossal prank or if it was for real, but nonetheless amused in either case. Across the way Ron was grinning from ear to ear, while Arthur and Charlie were clearly puzzled. Gabrielle was disappointed, but not overly so, since like Fleur she had sensed the connection between the pair. Molly was stonefaced, while Ginny ... Ginny's face was darkening rapidly; an explosion clearly imminent.

Tonks was the first to react, breaking away from Remus with a squeal and rushing across the room to smother Hermione in a hug. This tipped the balance for the twins, who each began a smart remark. "Harry, you sly dog ..." from Fred and "Oh, you two are ..." from George. Neither tease was to be completed, however, as they were both silenced by Ginny's eruption.

"WHAT!! What about me! You're supposed to be with me!"

Colin, somewhat puzzled by this declaration, unfortunately chose this instant to seek clarification. "Uh, Ginny?"

"Stuff it Colin! I was only dating you to make Harry jealous." This revelation, while surprising no one who knew Ginny well, caused Colin to quickly shrink away, and would ordinarily have earned a reprimand from Molly. But right now the older woman was preoccupied with mentally kicking herself for letting Harry out of her sight long enough for Hermione to snag him.

Ginny was far from finished, and having dispatched that annoyance, turned her sights on Hermione. "You traitor! You were after him all along! You only pretended to help me get him. And all that business with Ron this year. That was all fake too! You were just using him to get to Harry. You unspeakable bitch!!

Hermione braced herself against the onslaught, keeping her face impassive, unwilling to let the fiery tempered witch shake her. Besides, there was a grain of truth in some of the accusations. Harry's left arm had found its way around her waist, and he pulled her closer against his side. His right hand was ready to retrieve the wand strapped to his forearm with a slight flick of his wrist, in an instant if necessary, and a shield charm was in his mind, ready to be cast with a silent command if the curses started flying from his former girlfriend. The fact that Tonks was standing in between the two girls reduced the likelihood of that being necessary though.

The last line from Ginny finally shook Molly from her internal recrimination. "Ginevra Weasley! That kind of language is uncalled for!"

Ginny turned and stormed away before her mother had a chance to make her apologize for her outburst. At this point everyone's attention shifted to the other redheaded female in the room. Still clearly displeased, she now addressed the couple in an icy voice.

"Are you sure about this? After all, just a few weeks ago ..." she gestured in the direction that Ginny had just disappeared.

Hermione was relieved that Harry stepped up to respond, as she didn't trust her voice at the moment. Pulling her even closer to his side, he replied evenly. "Yes, Mrs. Weasley, we're sure. We've been spending a lot of time together for the last ... well ever since we got back from Hogwarts. The time alone together on our trip made us realize how we really feel about each other. I guess the strong feelings we've had for each other for years finally grew into something more. There's not a doubt about it in either of our minds. He turned to Hermione as he said this and their eyes met, and for a few seconds the rest of the room didn't exist.

"As for the other thing," he resumed, turning back to address the Weasley family. "Nothing happened between Hermione and me until *after* I broke up with Ginny. She was completely supportive of us while we were together. Which was only for a couple of weeks," he added. Except for Molly, he got nods from the rest of the Weasley family indicating that they believed him, that he had not cheated on their sister.

Next Ron spoke up, and Hermione could have kissed him for what he said. "As far as me and Hermione, there was never any dating relationship between us. We had a talk on the last day at Hogwarts and we both agreed that we were just friends. In fact, when we found out that Harry and Ginny weren't together any more, I encouraged her to see if there could be anything more between her and him. They're my best friends and I've supported them all the way on this. And in the time I've spent with them since they got back, I've never seen two people more in love. Except maybe for Mum and Dad," he added, trying to lighten the mood.

It worked. Harry and Hermione were suddenly swarmed with well-wishers just as Remus and Tonks had been, and Tonks and Gabrielle squealed appropriately when they saw Hermione's ring. The twins made it very clear that they were going to have fun teasing the new couple and even Molly, after everyone else was finished, finally made her way over to them. "I'm glad that you've found some happiness, Harry," she said, avoiding looking at Hermione. "If anyone deserves it, you do."

It was as much as, maybe more than, Hermione had hoped for from the domineering woman. Shortly thereafter Remus and Tonks took their leave, since it was a full moon that night. The rest of the afternoon and evening went smoothly enough, although there were suspicious looks from Molly as they all headed up to bed. It was very fortunate that Harry and Hermione went up into separate towers for the night.

-ooOoo-

A commotion outside her bedroom door interrupted Hermione's nice dream of being held in Harry's arms. As it turned out, she *was* in fact being held in Harry's arms, but those thoughts quickly evaporated as Harry leapt from the bed in a flash, his hand out to summon his wand from the nightstand. Hermione sat up quickly as the sheets fell away from her bare chest, and a brief wave of desire shot over her as she beheld his nude body in the dim light, crouched in an alert stance facing the door, clearly ready to protect her from any intruder.

The pounding on the door that had awakened them was repeated, then Charlie's voice called out. "Hermione! The Burrow's under attack! Everyone's gathering in the great room downstairs." Hermione managed to call out an acknowledgement and there was a brief pause before Charlie continued in a lower voice. "Is Harry there?" Hermione repeated her acknowledgement. "Ron will be down in a minute," Charlie

suggested. "You should probably come down with him."

Harry turned to her. "Put on your dragonhide armor." Hermione nodded in agreement and quickly grabbed the thin camisole top from the floor that matched the knickers she was wearing and pulled it over her head, then found the lightweight but nearly indestructible dragonskin garment. Meanwhile Harry had donned a pair of briefs and was tugging his own dragonskin over his legs, followed by the top. The two pieces together strongly resembled the muggle style exercise outfit of leotard and tights that dancers wore. While she finished adjusting her own top Hermione couldn't help gaze at how the tight protective gear set off every muscle in Harry's body and wished for a moment that they were still entwined together in bed. Harry apparently had similar thoughts as he looked back at her.

"You look so good in that. If I were a male dragon I'd have you stretched across that bed in an instant." Hermione blushed furiously and smacked him on the arm as he gave her a quick hug while they hurried toward the door. Slipping quietly down the winding stairs, they came upon Ron descending from his own tower where the stairs joined on the second floor landing. At that point they could hear shouting down below.

The trio emerged into the great room just as Arthur, Molly, and Charlie disappeared into the floo, while Fred, George, and Ginny were loudly protesting being left behind. Evidently Molly had won this argument. When the others spotted them, all three sets of eyes went wide as they saw the pair in the body hugging armor, and Fred immediately made a crude, but complimentary comment about Hermione's bum while George gave a thumbs up. For her part Ginny alternated lustful looks at Harry with vicious glares at Hermione. Harry was all business however.

"Fred and George, do you have those shield hats?" The shield hats were one of the reasons they had made a stop in Diagon Alley before coming to France. The twins had fashioned a dual use hat that could either disillusion the wearer or project a full body shield. It wouldn't stop the strongest curses but it would help. Harry and Hermione threw their cloaks over their shoulders, ending the free show, while the twins hurried to find the hats and pass them out to everyone.

"What's a nike?" Ron asked (pronouncing it to rhyme with 'like') as he peered at the logo on the front of the cap and the name along the headband. "And this doesn't look much like a lightning bolt on the front, if that's even what you were trying for."

"It's a muggle sporting goods company, Ron," Hermione snapped with her usual exasperation for her friend's cluelessness regarding all things muggle, as she pulled her hair into a pony tail. Next she went to Ginny and demonstrated to her how to get her long hair through the opening at the back of the cap. Ginny initially stiffened and drew away from the older girl's assistance, but then reluctantly accepted it, since she had no intention of being left behind.

Meanwhile Harry was discussing transportation options with Fred and George. "We can't floo directly from here to the Burrow, we have to go through the international floo connection," Fred was saying. "It will take some time and they probably won't let us through if Mum and Dad told them not to."

"What about apparating?" Harry asked next.

"Are you kidding?" came the reply. "Hardly anyone could apparate that far." Hermione thought that she and Harry probably could, and could see that Harry was considering the idea.

"Even if we could, Harry, I don't think we could each side-along two people," she pointed out. Harry nodded while four jaws dropped at the thought that the pair would even consider that possibility.

"It'll have to be a portkey then," Harry decided. At that moment the floo flashed and Bill and Fleur tumbled out. Hermione caught a glimpse of bare thigh from Fleur before she righted herself and finished fastening her robes. *'I bet she's wearing even less under those robes than I am,'* Hermione found herself thinking with an inner smile.

"What have we got," inquired Bill, as he rushed over to Harry.

"We just decided to take a portkey back," Harry responded.

"But creation of a portkey is illegal," protested Ron, looking at Hermione. She could see his bewilderment at why his rule-abiding friend hadn't already pointed this out. Bill quickly brushed this objection aside.

"We're in France, not in Britain. The British can't do anything to us and the French won't know about it until after we're gone. But where should we make it go to? We don't want to just fall into the middle of an attack."

"How about Stoatshead Hill?" suggested Harry. That's where we portkeyed to and from for the Quidditch World Cup."

"Sounds good," Bill agreed. "Then we can apparate from there. Everybody ready?" he called out. Hermione had just finished helping Fleur with the shield hat and signaled that they were ready to go as they hurried over to join the others. Fred produced a poker from the fireplace. "Portus!" Bill intoned, as his wand flashed over the implement and it glowed briefly.

"What's going on?" Gabrielle stumbled bleary-eyed into the room.

"Gabrielle! The Burrow is under attack and we are going there now! Tell Mama and Papa!" Fleur shouted in a flurry of French just before the eight of them grabbed the poker and vanished in a swirl of color.

After landing on Stoatshead Hill in varying degrees of gracefulness, with Bill and Fleur managing it best, they conferred briefly. They would apparate to behind the shed where Harry, Hermione, and Ron had visited just four days previously, while disillusioned. Once they got a better feel for what was going on, they would switch the hats over to shield mode. They quickly agreed to stay in pairs. Bill and Fleur, and Fred and George, were logical choices. Harry glanced briefly at Hermione. Much as she wanted to stay with him, she knew Ron and Ginny would be vulnerable

together and she nodded toward them.

"Okay," Harry finished. "Ron you're with me ... no wait, Ron, stay with Hermione. Stay behind her and watch her back." Harry saw the look of surprise, and wounded pride. "She's a lot more advanced than you right now. Ginny, same with me," Harry continued, undoubtedly realizing that Ginny wasn't the best person to cover Hermione's back right now. Ron immediately realized that both of his friend's thoughts were correct, and nodded his understanding.

"What? I don't need to hide behind you," Ginny snapped. "I can fight just as well as she can. She wasn't even in the battle the night ..."

"Ginny, we don't have time for your tantrums right now," Harry retorted. "You either do as you're told or stay behind." Ginny fumed, but said nothing, realizing that no one on the hilltop was taking her side.

"Bill, it's a full moon," Hermione noted, changing the subject. "Are you all right?"

"Just fine. But that means they'll probably have werewolves in the attack." At this George reached into his pack and handed everyone a knife.

"Silver," was his only comment and everyone nodded grimly.

Bill took Ginny's arm to side-along her, and seconds later they were huddled behind the shed, viewing a horrifying sight. The Burrow was in flames, what was left of it. There were shouts from a group of twenty or so clustered outside, silhouetted by the burning house, and in the pale moonlight they watched three figures fall to the ground. Harry reached out to grab Ron, and Bill restrained the twins from rushing madly into the fight.

"Fred and George, I need you over on the right. Stay behind the garden wall. Got it?" Harry hissed. The twins pulled themselves together and nodded. "Bill and Fleur, come in from the left. The rest of us will charge into them from here. Once we have their attention, you guys open up in a crossfire. Okay?" From their conversations of the previous three days, Bill and Fleur had become aware that Harry and Hermione were much more powerful and skilled fighters than they had been a month previously. Reluctantly, they agreed. Ginny was too startled to say anything, and Ron knew very well just how much his friends had changed. The twins and the newlyweds disappeared, leaving the other four teens behind.

Harry and Hermione dropped their cloaks to give themselves maximum freedom of movement. Next they stood up and made side by side figure 8's with their wands, creating a wide area anti-disapparation ward, before Harry caught her up in a quick hug.

"You be careful," she whispered.

"You too. Don't worry, unless Voldemort himself is here, they probably don't have anyone who can stand against us."

"Don't get cocky kid," she replied, trying to lighten the moment by quoting dialog from one of his favorite movies at him.

"I love you," he responded, giving her a quick kiss for luck.

"I know."

Switching their hats to shield mode, the four suddenly became visible and ran toward the crowd of attackers, leading with a salvo of blasting hexes. Six Death Eaters went down before they even knew what had hit them, and the rest belatedly turned to confront the threat. Just as they launched their own curses, more streaks of light blasted into them from each side, and another four tumbled to the ground.

Harry and Hermione, now about ten yards apart, stopped and pointed their wands at the ground. A huge stone slab erupted in front of each of them, just before a flurry of killing curses reached them, and the green streaks of light impacted harmlessly on the impenetrable walls. Harry motioned Ginny and Ron to stay behind the rocky barriers and provide covering fire, while he and Hermione moved forward once more.

The Death Eaters were in a panic. What had started as an enjoyable exercise of destroying the dwelling of a family of blood traitors had turned into a nightmare. While they had easily dispatched the four Weasleys who had arrived too late to save their home, they had lost five of their own before the last one fell. Now they were taking fire from three sides, their ranks were crumbling at an alarming rate, and they had just watched in disbelief as their killing curses were turned aside by two rocky walls that had appeared from nowhere. Several turned to run, but were cut down by a new barrage of hexes from behind the garden wall. Now two teens clad in a scaly coating were again racing toward them, cutting down everyone in their paths as the nearest Death Eaters collapsed, screaming in agony, their legs shattered. In a minute it would be over.

But not quite yet. With a snarl a pack of werewolves appeared from the woods to the left, catching the attackers by surprise. As Bill and Fleur turned to meet this new threat, Harry and Hermione unveiled a different spell.

*"Projectilius Argentum !"* A flight of a dozen silver arrows sliced through the pack, felling four immediately. The remaining two leapt at Bill and Fleur, pushing them back. Twin bolts of crimson light blasted one of them apart, but the other one knocked Fleur to the ground. In an instant Bill was on him, dragging him off of his new spouse, and the two of them fell to the ground, the werewolf twisting away from Bill's hold around his neck.

Harry and Hermione were helpless to intervene. The two combatants were too close to each other to risk another projectile curse without hitting Bill. Plus, there were more Death Eaters coming around the house from the other side. A volley of explosion hexes crumbled the garden wall and hurled the rubble onto Fred and George, putting them out of the fight for the time being. Ron was doing a good job of picking them off with occasional well-aimed shots from behind his slab of rock, but he had to duck back when a powerful curse shattered the top of his stone barricade, showering him with shards of rock. Fortunately, all three Weasley boys were protected from serious injury by their shield hats.

Suddenly Hermione saw that Ginny had darted from behind her stone shelter, and was racing to the aid of her oldest brother. Screaming at the top of her lungs she halted, braced herself, and hurled her silver knife with deadly accuracy, embedding it in the back of the remaining werewolf just as he was about to overpower Bill. Moving to cover her, Hermione launched a trio of magical spears at another cluster of attackers who were drawing

a bead on the small redhead, impaling two of them, then threw up a golden shield just in time to block a nasty purple flame from the third just before it could slice into the younger witch.

"Potter!" From the other side of the yard, Hermione saw Harry turn to confront one of the two men he hated more than any other. Temporarily by himself, he paused to take stock of the wizard who had killed Dumbledore, glowering back at him with his trademark sneer.

Snape expected to see a hotheaded, reckless young wizard who couldn't keep himself under control. He expected to see a flurry of wildly aimed hexes hurled haphazardly with little thought or plan. He expected to see another of the nasty slicing hexes of his own design, and prepared to block it. He would bring the arrogant young fool to his knees and capture him for the dark lord. Once he did that, this disastrous raid would turn into a stunning success.

Snape did not expect to confront an impenetrable mind, totally closed off to his strongest probes. He did not expect to be suddenly hurled back with the slightest gesture. He did not expect to have the tree he was thrown into suddenly entangle his wand arm. He did not expect a wordless curse to suddenly shatter the bones in his legs and arms, rendering him helpless. He did not expect to be hit by a disarming jinx, an incarcerous hex, and a stunning spell in rapid succession. But he was unconscious before he had the opportunity to compare his expectations with reality.

And just like that, it was over. There were bodies strewn across the grounds of the Burrow. The place where Harry had once spent what Hermione knew to be some of the happiest times of his life was a bloody battleground, the house a smoking pile of rubble. As Fred and George dragged themselves to their feet by the demolished garden wall, and Bill tenderly helped Fleur limp toward the small group of survivors, Hermione saw Harry look around to find where she had got off to. They had become separated during the battle and she saw his eyes light up as he spotted her making her way toward him, Ron still at her side. Still some distance away, she suddenly heard a movement behind her and saw Harry tense up.

"Mine! Behind you!"

Draco Malfoy had hidden himself as soon as the shooting started, and watched while his comrades were cut down by the pair who had been his hated rivals since he had first met them. Now, when everyone's attention was drawn away, he saw his chance.

"Die, you filthy Mudblood! *Avada Kedavra!*"

In the time it took him to shout the insult, several things happened. Hermione whirled, only to find that Ron had jumped in front of her, propelled by his ingrained protective instinct towards her. But all that accomplished was to put him in her way, hindering her retaliatory strike. She put both of her hands on his back and shoved him to the side as hard as she could, simultaneously throwing her body in the opposite direction, just before Malfoy's poorly aimed killing curse sailed by overhead. In one motion she rolled, sprang into a crouch, and reached out to summon her wand from where it had landed when she pushed Ron. The instant it slapped into her hand she flicked it three times and three different colored jets streaked at her foe.

In the meantime, from across the yard, Harry had fired off a spread of four explosive hexes with all his might, knowing that they could never arrive in time to stop Malfoy's first attack, but determined that it would be the last one he would ever make. He knew that Hermione should be able to block or duck the cowardly sneak attack, but his heart stopped while he awaited the result.

Malfoy stood dumbfounded, unable to believe that both Granger and Weasley had somehow evaded his killing curse, and astounded at how fast she had recovered, but he managed to put up a shield before her counterattack could reach him. A fraction of a second later, Harry's powerful curses arrived. The first missed to the right. Malfoy leaned away from the second just in time. The fourth sailed past on the left but the third blew apart his shield in a spray of red and gold shards of light, just before Hermione's three hexes hit the now defenseless wizard. Before he knew what had happened he was disarmed and knocked to the ground, locked in a body bind, and tied up. Hermione walked calmly towards him, not restraining her more enthusiastic red-haired friend, who wasted no time rushing up to confront the student he most despised. She waited while Ron relieved some of his accumulated stress by kicking the blonde Slytherin until his face was a bloody pulp, then she offered a simple summary before turning away in disdain.

"You always did talk bigger than you could perform, you disgusting little ferret."

Looking back at the Burrow, Hermione's heart broke as she paused to take in the scene before her. Bill and Fleur were wandering through the bodies, trying to find his parents and brother. Fred and George were just standing there, staring at the ruins of their home. Behind her she heard a sob, and reached back to pull Ron into her arms, sharing his pain as he buried his head on her shoulder. Then she spotted Ginny.

The diminutive redhead had dropped to her knees next to the body of her brother Charlie, weeping uncontrollably. In a few short hours her life had been shattered, having lost both her home and her dream for her future. Harry knelt behind her and tenderly pulled her onto his lap, holding her close as she burrowed her face into his chest and her small body shook with grief.

"Harry!" came a plaintive wail. "What happened? How could this happen?" But Harry had no magical solution that could make everything better, and could only rub her back while muttering vague words of comfort. Right now this was not a jilted girlfriend, but one of his dearest friends suffering a tragic loss.

Soon Ron and Hermione joined them and combined with them in a four-way hug, all of them sharing their grief and offering each other comfort as best as they could. Eventually Ron took Ginny and with his arm around her, guided her into the wreckage to see if they could salvage anything from the devastation. Harry and Hermione, noticing that Bill, Fred, and George were engaged in a heated discussion near another red-haired body, hurried over to join them.

It was Percy, and Bill quickly filled them in. "There's no way they should have been able to break through the wards that easily. They must have had help from a family member, or someone who was intimately familiar with the house and its protections. Fred and George think it had to be Percy, but I just can't accept it." Hermione wracked her brain for anyone else who might have been in position to betray the Weasleys, when it hit her.

Harry!" she whispered urgently. "Scabbers!" Harry's eyes grew wide in the dim light, and he rapidly whispered back to her. Straightening up and standing back to back, they waved their wands in 180 degree arcs while chanting the incantation in unison, "*Animagus Revert*o!"

They were rewarded with a crashing sound in the far part of the garden, and a dark figure scrambled for the shadows of the wood. Five jets of red light streaked out while Hermione disappeared and a brown owl took flight, her keen night vision tracking the fleeing man. But it was unnecessary, as the second volley of spells connected, and the traitor Peter Pettigrew fell to the ground.

Continuing on, she swooped over the rest of the Weasley property for several minutes, searching for any other hidden foes. Once she was satisfied that the area was secure, she soared in for a landing behind the shed, transformed back, and picked up their discarded cloaks before heading back to the house. Harry had dispelled the anti-disapparation ward and Alistor Moody, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Hestia Jones were arriving on the scene as Hermione returned to see Malfoy, Snape, and Pettigrew laid out on the ground, each unconscious and securely bound.

But just as she was about to relax for a bit, Harry grabbed her and pulled her aside. "Hermione, what about *your* house? We need to go check on it." Hurriedly they informed the others of their plans, and Harry promised to be right back. In an instant they were in the Granger back yard by the tool shed. Everything appeared to be quiet, but the pair cautiously explored the area until they were satisfied that all was well. Then they discussed their next move.

Hermione agreed that she should stay there while Harry returned to help out at the Burrow. They spent a few minutes discussing wards that they could erect, and Harry created a portkey that would take Dan and Emma to Grimmauld Place in an emergency. They took a few moments to create another wide area anti-apparation ward, with a designated apparation point next to the tool shed. Hermione determined that she would place a restriction barrier around the tool shed so that anyone apparating in would be unable to approach the house without the password.

"What's the password going to be?" Harry asked as he prepared to apparate away.

"Seeker," Hermione responded, and the pair managed to share a small grin. Harry removed his shield hat and handed it to Hermione. She would give it and her own to her parents, so that they could use them if necessary.

Then he was gone. Hermione slowly made her way to the house, her exhaustion starting to catch up to her as the adrenaline wore off. It had been a long night. And it wasn't over yet.

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## Hermione's Plan Life Goes On

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### Chapter 11, Life Goes On

Monday, July 21

Hermione paused on the pool deck and sat down heavily on one of the lounge chairs. First she needed to complete the wards, then she could rest. From their studies of the dark magic books from the Black library they had discovered how to layer a series of protective and detection wards. First she placed a detection ward at a one-block radius from her house, geared to respond to anyone with a magical signature. Then, just inside the anti-apparation ward, she created one with an impediment jinx combined with a stunning hex, set to activate whenever the first ward was triggered. She wished she had some sort of Dark Mark detector, so she could rig it up to trigger something more incapacitating. Next, she put impervious and flame suppression charms on the house itself, and a confundus charm at the property line. She linked the detection spell to an unused telephone with an old fashioned ringing bell. All of the Grangers' current phones had a warbling tone, so there would be no mistaking the attack warning. Finally satisfied with her work, she went upstairs to wake her parents and let them know she was home, and fill them in on the situation.

Hermione was determined to stay up until Harry returned, but Dan and Emma each had a full slate of patients scheduled for the next day, and needed more sleep. After some discussion they decided to each take a turn staying up with her. It was about 2:00 AM when the teens had first arrived at the Grangers, and nearly 3:00 when she finished explaining the events of the terrible night, so they settled on two hour shifts. Dan took the first shift, and he and his daughter talked about the fight, and she poured out her horror at what she had had to do. Dan had served a tour in the military, and endeavored to help her out as best as he was able. Finally, he just sat behind her on the lounge chair, took her into his arms and leaned back as his daughter curled up with her head on his chest and cried herself to sleep. She might not be that small anymore, but she was still his little girl and he comforted her the way he had so often when she was younger.

Emma found them in that same position at 5:00, Hermione sleeping in her father's arms, while Dan still stared into the darkness pondering everything that his daughter had gone through. Hermione awoke when they traded off, and decided to go for a swim to wake herself up. Dan returned to bed and Emma and Hermione removed their clothing and slipped into the warm water, with Emma now keeping her daughter company while she swam back and forth across the pool at a leisurely pace. Finally they returned to the pool deck and wrapped up in thick towels, once again sharing a lounge chair while they waited for the dawn and the man Hermione loved to return.

At last, just after 6:00 AM, an exhausted Harry Potter appeared out by the tool shed. Hermione and Emma, now wearing terry cloth robes, raced back to help him to the house. It quickly became clear that while he was tired to the bone, he was much too keyed up and tense to be able to sleep, and he needed to tell Hermione what had happened as much as she needed to hear it. Deciding he needed to relax, and wanting to sooth the tension in his neck, back, shoulder, arm, and leg muscles, Hermione gently removed his cloak, the dragonhide armor, and his underwear and led him into the hot tub. There she sat behind him and pulled him back into her, so that his head rested between her breasts and she could massage his shoulders. As comfortable as he could possibly imagine being, Harry began the tale of the aftermath of the attack.

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"There were Ministy Aurors there by the time I got back, and they had taken everyone into custody. As you might imagine, Pettigrew caused quite a bit of excitement. Moody later pulled me aside and said that they had removed Snape before the other Aurors got there, and had hidden him away in a secure Order hideaway. They have some questions they want to ask him under Veritaserum about him and Dumbledore, trying to figure out exactly who he was working for all those years and how much information he passed on to Voldemort. I told them that as long as they didn't take him to Grimmauld Place, and he eventually got what was coming to him, it was okay by me." Harry paused and Hermione gave his arms a squeeze to let him know how much she admired his mature behavior with respect to the man he detested.

"It turned out that it was a training exercise for the new Death Eater recruits that have been flocking to Voldemort since Dumbleore was killed, as well as a message sent to the Ministry, the Order ... and me." Hermione's hands froze for an instant before she hastened to resume her massage. During countless nights in Mexico they had talked through Harry's propensity to blame himself for Voldemort's atrocities, and this would be a test of how well he had managed to overcome that inclination. He leaned back to nuzzle his head against her cheek, letting her know that he was dealing with it and she felt a sense of relief sweep through her as he resumed. "It was led by Goyle, Sr., Snape, and Pettigrew. There were also a few there that were part of the attack on Hogwarts. A big portion of the rest of them were kids like us, nearly all Slytherins in our year or a few years older. Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Parkinson, and Bulstrode from our year. There were thirty of them all together, plus the three leaders. And six werewolves."

He let go a big sigh. "We killed sixteen – the six werewolves and ten others – and captured the rest." Hermione swallowed hard, knowing that her magical spears were responsible for at least two of the ten dead wizards, and probably a pair of the werewolves as well. This time Harry reached

up and took Hermione's hands into his, squeezing them in reassurance.

Emma, who had slipped into the hot tub herself once the teens had settled in and Harry had begun talking, was extremely impressed with the way the pair took time to comfort each other, and especially how they were able to sense when the other needed it. Their awareness of each other's feelings was at a level not normally attained by most couples until they had been together for decades, if ever.

Harry continued, with obvious pain in his voice. "The house was completely destroyed, and Ron and Ginny were unable to find anything to salvage. The Delacours arrived eventually and had brought along all of the stuff we left behind, so the only clothing and other belongings they have are what they took to the wedding. One of the first things we need to do tomorrow – actually today I guess – is go out to get them what they need." Hermione gave him another squeeze and nodded. Of course his first thoughts would be for the needs of his friends. This was Harry Potter after all. "Tonks eventually showed up and she took them to Grimmauld Place for the time being. I want to go through my properties to see if we can find another house for them to stay at as long as they need to. Fred and George will be staying with them part of the time, but they need to keep an eye on their shop as well. We figure it will be a target sooner or later."

"Bill and Fleur had been planning to spend a week in Egypt, but they didn't want to be that far away. Apparently they can't just forget about it because they need the time together – something about strengthening their bond?" Fleur had explained this to Hermione during one of their discussions, so she knew what Harry was referring to. She leaned forward and whispered to him that she would explain it later. "So anyway," Harry resumed, "I offered them my beach house in Brighton and they accepted. We apparated there and I opened the place up and let them in and stayed long enough to make sure they were all settled."

There was one topic that was conspicuous by its absence from his recounting of events – the elephant in the room that they could not ignore much longer. Hermione had seen the red-haired bodies on the ground.

"Oh, yeah. I mentioned the portkey I made for your parents to Moody and he said it was a 100 Galleon fine. I asked him I could give him 100,000 Galleons and make a thousand of them to distribute to other families. He gave me an odd look and said we could just buy them for 50 Galleons apiece. I think that's something we should look into." Harry trembled as he finished this comment, and Hermione sensed that he had run out of diversionary topics.

"Harry?" she said gently.

She could feel him slump in her arms, having lost the battle to avoid the grim news. "Percy was the first to arrive on the scene, since he was the closest. They got him with a killing curse relatively quickly. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Charlie put up quite a fight, taking out five of them before they all went down. Charlie ..." Harry's voice caught and he had to stop before he could continue. "Charlie got the worst of it. They don't think he'll make it. Mr. Weasley took a nasty cutting curse to his spine and they don't think he'll ever walk again, even if he survives. They have both of them in magically induced comas at St. Mungo's. And Mrs. Weasley ..." he gave an anguished moan and Hermione clutched him tightly to herself. "They managed to revive her but when she saw Percy, Charlie, and Mr. Weasley lying there on the ground she completely freaked out. She was hysterical for several minutes until they sedated her. Then she just sat there with all the life gone out of her eyes." Hermione recalled Harry telling her about the time in Grimmauld Place when Molly had seen the bogart turn into the dead bodies of each member of her family, and realized that there was a chance that the Weasley matriarch could lose her sanity as a result of this dreadful night.

Harry had broken down completely by this point and all she could do was hold him and whisper inadequate words of comfort into his ear. But with that final release, the tension was finally broken and exhaustion took over, and Harry fell asleep in her arms.

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Dan Granger came onto the porch at 7:00 to find them still in that position. Harry, sound asleep in Hermione's arms, had shifted somewhat so that his head was turned to the side, and he had snuggled into her. She had dozed off as well, her arms around him pulling him to her chest. Dan's eyes widened at the sight of Harry's face nestled against her breasts. As a committed nudist, he fully subscribed to the credo that nudity does not equal sex. Even so, very few fathers of teenage daughters would be able to view such a scene without alarm, at the very least, and Dan was no exception. Only the fact that his wife was sitting nearby with a look of extreme satisfaction on her face kept him from acting on his instincts.

"Don't they look adorable like that?" she smiled up at him.

Adorable was not one of the top ten words Dan would have used to describe the situation. *After all, all he had to do was move his mouth a few inches and ...* Dan shook his head, trying to bury those thoughts. The effort was aided by an elbow to his ribs from Emma, who knew very well what he was thinking. (It was, in fact, an activity she herself particularly enjoyed. But she had been watching the pair long enough to understand that nothing like that was going on here.) When Dan managed to focus only on Hermione's face he had to admit that he had never seen such a look of contentment and love on his daughter. And if he were able to ignore just where Harry's face was located, he would have described it similarly.

Hermione awoke at that point and greeted them, and Dan tried to restrain his discomfort at the fact that she seemed perfectly at ease with Harry's position, as though waking up with him like that were commonplace. Then she looked down at the messy head of hair before her and her love for him swelled inside her. After the anguish of less than an hour before he looked so relaxed and peaceful now. She knew that it was due to the contentment and security he felt from being held by her since she felt the same way. She tightened her arms around him as she leaned forward to gently place a kiss on the top of his head. She missed the small sound Emma made as she caught her breath, feeling like an intruder into the tender, intimate moment.

Deciding to extricate herself, Hermione concentrated briefly and stretched out her hand. Dan and Emma gaped in astonishment as Harry was levitated up out of her lap and she scrambled out from under him before lowering him again. Emma managed to come to her senses enough to fetch a towel for her as she climbed out of the hot tub, but not before she leaned over and gave his cheek one last soft stroke with her fingertips.

Dan could no longer contain himself. "Hermione, what did you do? That was just like that movie ..."

"Yeah," Hermione giggled. "Just like *Star Wars*. Harry still wants to try to lift a starfighter out of a swamp. Normally it would be a struggle for me to move something as heavy as Harry that easily, but because of our connection it's not much trouble for us to move each other. We can draw on the life magic of our surroundings, but it's especially easy for us to draw on each other's magic." She walked over and joined her amazed parents as they started on a light breakfast.

Once he was no longer being held in such a comforting position, it was only a short time before Harry awoke as well and joined them at the small table on the porch. As the four of them discussed the day ahead, it was clear from the yawns of the two teens that they could still use more sleep. Hermione quickly came up with a solution for this.

"Mum, has anyone been in Harry's room recently?" Emma shook her head and Hermione continued. "We arrived here just after 2:00. So at a little after 8:00 I'll use the time turner to take us back to that point, and we can slip inside and up to his room and get another six hours of sleep.

Emma and Dan processed the implications of that statement and simultaneously came to the same realization, turning to stare at each other like a choreographed comedy routine. "Do you mean," Emma stated slowly, "that another you and Harry are sleeping in his bedroom right now?" Hermione nodded, trying to look as though it was the most ordinary thing in the world, but she ultimately couldn't keep a straight face.

"That's right. Go ahead and take a peek if you like, but try not to say anything or disturb us. It's not a good idea for us to have any contact with our other selves." Dan merely moaned and held his head. The previous image of his daughter and her fiancé snuggled up naked together was not assuaged by this discussion of them sharing a bed. Emma had assured him that they were planning to wait until they were married before having sex, but two nude teens sleeping together was usually asking for trouble. On the other hand, these were not normal teens, and that fact combined with Hermione's willingness just now to have Emma look in on them eased his mind a great deal.

Harry managed to change the subject, pointing out that they should give the Grangers the emergency portkey and shield hats before they left for their office, and should ward their car and their office as soon as they got a chance. Hermione agreed and went out to the garage to cast some protective spells on the car, and Harry explained how the portkey worked. It was an ordinary looking flower pot that he had grabbed from the tool shed the previous night.

"Make sure you are both touching it and then say the activation word. The word is ..." Harry suddenly felt very self-conscious, but he had been extremely tired at the time and used the first word that came into his head. "Um, the word is Potter."

Emma snorted, then started to laugh and soon she and Dan were chortling merrily, as Harry sat there with a sheepish look on his face. "Well Harry," Dan teased. "Hermione always said you were good at gardening. I guess you were just living up to your name."

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Hermione awoke before 8:00, but knew she needed to stay in Harry's room a bit longer. She smiled at her mum when she peeked in just before she and Dan left for work. Since she had suggested that very thing, she had made sure that she would be at least partly clothed at that point, and that nothing was happening with Harry except cuddling together. The negligée from Fleur was useful yet again.

When it was safe to leave the room, she and Harry sat down for another light breakfast and began to plan and sort through all of the things they needed to do for the next few days.

Hermione made a list as Harry started making suggestions. First, they wanted to take Ron and Ginny to Diagon Alley to replace their things – no, first they needed to stop by the Grangers' dental practice to put up some wards. Then they decided to visit Fred and George's shop and talk to the twins about the shopping expedition before bringing up the subject with Ron and Ginny. He also wanted to go to Gringotts to look for possible places for the Weasleys to stay. Hermione added that they should visit St. Mungo's to see how the injured Weasleys were doing. When she asked about Winky, Harry was ashamed that he had forgotten about her the night before, but she quickly gave him a little hug and told him it was understandable that he had forgotten that the house elf was now working for the Weasleys, especially since she had been absent the day they were there before the wedding.

Harry revealed that Moody wanted to talk with them some more, but that his and Hermione's roles in repelling the attack had been successfully withheld from the Auror investigators for now. However, it was something they were probably going to have to deal with eventually. They did want to find out what was happening with Snape and Pettigrew. Hermione then pointed out that since Colin Creevey was present at their engagement announcement, they were going to have to handle the publicity from that sooner or later as well. They decided that a meeting with Rita Skeeter would also be a good idea sometime that week.

Harry added that he had been thinking about the shield caps and portkey they had given Hermione's parents, and wondered if that wouldn't be a good idea for muggle families in general. Contacting the portkey office at the Ministry of Magic and asking the twins to make more shield caps were added to the list.

The list continued to grow until Harry despaired that he didn't know how they would have enough time for everything. That caused both of them to laugh when Hermione merely smiled and held up the time turner in response. On that note, they cleaned up the breakfast dishes and went up to get dressed for their busy day.

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Hermione side-alonged Harry to the Granger dental practice and they were taken into a private conference room where they could cast their wards unobserved. Everything went fine until Emma jokingly asked Harry when the last time was that he had a dental checkup. She proudly added that Hermione had always taken such good care of her teeth that she had never had a cavity. Harry unfortunately responded that he had never had a dental checkup in his life, and that he had never had a cavity either. This led Hermione to explain sheepishly to her disillusioned parents that dental health was apparently one of the benefits of being magical and they reluctantly had to conclude that perhaps her cavity free record was less their



doing than they had assumed.

Next the pair apparated into the back room at Weasley Wizarding Wheezes, startling Lee Jordan who was in that day helping out. The twins hurried back to meet them, and in response to their first question revealed that there was no change in the condition of their injured parents and brother. They confirmed that Charlie was not likely to make it, and that Molly was still just sitting there, staring off into space. Hermione was reminded of what Neville's parents were like, and she could sense that Harry was thinking the same thing as he shared a look with her.

Next Harry asked about Winky, and Fred apologized for forgetting to mention her the previous night. After Harry and Hermione had left, Dobby appeared and hurried into the wreckage of the Burrow. After a bit he emerged with the battered little house elf in his arms. She was alive, but her magic was severely depleted. She had used her magic to reinforce the house wards for as long as she could, but the combined spells of thirty-three magic users had overpowered her. She had collapsed in the cellar, where she was found huddled up in a small cupboard, the walls of which had protected her when the house caved in. Dobby had taken her back to Hogwarts where, he assured them, he would be able to nurse her back to full health.

When Hermione wondered why they hadn't seen Winky the day before they left for the wedding, Fred and George laughed, which lightened the mood. It turned out that Molly would never allow Winky to do any cooking, and when she left for France she had given the house elf those days off. That way, she wouldn't be tempted to use Molly's kitchen while she was away, no matter how much the Weasley men might want her to. Hermione inwardly thought it served them right for always expecting females to cook for them.

That prompted them to ask how Ron and Ginny were doing, and George shrugged and answered that they weren't up yet when they had left that morning. "Is anyone there with them, then?" asked Hermione worriedly. "That's such a gloomy place, and would be especially unpleasant for them to be all alone there dwelling on what happened."

"There are always Order members around," responded George. "Moody, Shacklebolt, and Jones stayed the night. Tonks and Remus will be back this morning but Remus won't be in any kind of shape to do anything today. He'll at least be someone to look after them, though." Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance. Hermione remembered the couple leaving the post-wedding party early because of the full moon and found it hard to believe that that had been less than 24 hours ago. They would have to make sure to get to Grimmauld Place that afternoon.

Next the topic turned to their proposed shopping trip, and after some conversation with Fred and George they altered the plan a bit. Harry would provide whatever money they needed, but the twins would take care of replacing their family's clothing and other personal possessions. That way they could avoid any reluctance on the part of the other family members about accepting Harry's money. (The twins had no such qualms, having already overcome that issue with the startup funding for their business.) The household goods and furniture could wait until the Burrow was actually rebuilt. They were most appreciative of Harry's offer of a place to stay for Ron and Ginny, and their parents when they were eventually released from St. Mungo's.

For the actual shopping itself, the twins had another good point. Neither Harry nor Hermione had much experience in shopping in the magical world, except for school supplies and robes, and treats on Hogsmeade weekends. In fact, Ron didn't either since Molly had always bought his clothing for him. And due to the new relationships, Ginny wouldn't be keen to go shopping with Hermione. The pair agreed with all of this, and Hermione was even somewhat relieved. Besides her concern about spending time with Ginny, she had realized that shopping with Ron would probably not be a picnic either. Since the two of them rarely agreed on what he wore, they would likely be to ready to kill each other by the time the excursion was over.

Instead, Fred and George suggested that Lee accompany Ron and they would ask Katie Bell to take Ginny. Katie and Ginny had become pretty good friends from being chasers together on the Gryffindor quidditch team. Their to-do list a bit shorter now, the pair donned their concealment cloaks and set off for Gringotts.

After looking over all the properties he had access to with Bladrock, and getting an update on his finances (bottom line – he still had a ridiculously large amount of money) Harry and Hermione agreed that the house in Birmingham would be the best to offer to the Weasleys. It had a secure floo connection to Grimmauld Place, so they were only seconds from London, and it had almost as many protective charms on it as the London mansion. The family would have some privacy as well as being connected to what was happening. They also decided that the country estate might be useful as a secluded place to train.

Bladrock informed them that since she was wearing the Potter engagement ring, Hermione would have access to the all of the Potter vaults even if Harry were not present. He also took the opportunity to congratulate them on the engagement, and caused Hermione to blush by commenting to Harry on his good taste in his choice of a mate. The pair was once again reminded that they would soon be overwhelmed with publicity about their intended union.

Bladrock finished by revealing that Harry had been named in Dumbledore's will, the details of which had not been finally verified until a month after the headmaster's death. Instead of a monetary bequest, however, he had been left a number of items that were being held for him at Hogwarts. Hermione immediately added 'visit Hogwarts' to her ever changing to-do list.

On their return to the joke shop, they were surprised to see more people waiting for them. As soon as they came through the door the twins whisked them into the back room where they were greeted by Angelina, Alicia, and Katie who had joined Lee, Fred and George. After the three girls spent some time hugging Hermione and squealing over her engagement ring, Fred, as serious had they had ever seen him, got down to business.

"All right you two. We know that there's a lot you can't tell us about what you're doing, and we respect that. But there are some obvious things going on. First of all, you can't hide the fact that you both have matured quite a bit since the end of the school term." The others all nodded in agreement, with the three girls giving Harry an appreciative once over, and Lee obviously noticing the changes in Hermione. "I'm not just talking physically, or in terms of this engagement, which despite what you said to my family, is much, much faster than Harry, at least, has ever moved with a girl." All three girls giggled at this, and Hermione, though turning a little pink, smiled and nodded. Harry hung his head with his usual sheepish

grin, which prompted a quick kiss on the cheek from Hermione.

George continued where Fred had left off. "We saw what the two of you did last night, and that included things we have never even heard of a witch or wizard being able to do. We haven't told this lot any of the specifics, because we reckon you want to keep some things hidden..." He glanced at Hermione at this and she understood that he had seen her transform into an owl. "... but you guys have turned into awesome fighters and you didn't get that way without a lot of training." Before Harry had a chance to respond, he went on. "What we're asking is that you take some time to train us. We were all in the DA so we know you can do it. You were easily the best defense instructor we had the whole time we were at Hogwarts." Harry tried to protest that Remus was better than he was, but the rather vocal agreement of everyone else in the room, including Hermione, silenced him.

"Maybe not in the theory, but in the practical part, teaching spells we can use in combat, you were incredible," Lee broke in. "Did you know that Alicia, Angelina, and I were the top three students of our year in the DADA NEWT Practical?" He gestured towards the twins. "These two clowns would have bumped us down to three, four, and five if they had stayed around long enough to take the exam." Harry frowned thoughtfully, and Hermione entwined her fingers into his in support, but said nothing for the moment. She thought it was a great idea, but didn't want to seem to be pressuring him.

Harry turned to look at Hermione briefly, then replied. "Let me talk with Hermione about it and get back to you. She was the one who did most of the work for the DA; I just did the teaching. Right now it sounds like a good idea, I'm just not sure we have the time." The pair shared a secret smile at that comment.

Now Angelina stepped forward. "We need this Harry. All six of us work here in Diagon Alley, and we've all concluded that it's only a matter of time before the Death Eaters get bold enough to start attacking businesses here again. You guys really hit them hard last night, which will set them back for a while. By the time they've recovered enough to strike again we want to be ready for them." She pulled a familiar looking Galleon from her pocket, and the other five followed suit. "You name the time and the place and we'll be there."

Harry was somewhat flustered by this show of absolute confidence in him, but nodded back in appreciation. Next Lee reached over to a table and picked up a newspaper. "Have you two seen today's *Daily Prophet*? I bet you didn't know we were in the presence of a couple of heroes." He gestured toward the twins, who attempted to emulate Gilderoy Lockhart poses. "I've asked each of them for their autographs several times, but no luck so far." He grinned at the clowning pair and the three girls pretended to swoon.

Hermione's paper hadn't been delivered yet when they had left the house that morning, so the two took the paper from Lee and read the story of the attack on the Burrow. It was referred to as an attack on the home of a prominent Ministry employee, in an attempt to undermine the Ministry's war efforts. It went on to describe the heroic defense put up by the Weasley family, led by Ministerial Assistant Percy Weasley, who gave his life defending his beloved home. It concluded that while exact casualty figures were not known, it was a great victory against the forces of the Dark Lord, and that many dangerous Death Eaters had been killed or captured.

The couple had mixed feelings about the story. They were deeply offended by the way it downplayed the terrible losses that the Weasleys had suffered and praised the Ministry's nonexistent role, but were relieved that their enhanced powers and abilities had been overlooked. But there was nothing they could do about it right now. After promising to keep in touch with their former housemates, and to let them know about the training as soon as possible, (and after Katie, Angelina, and Alicia insisted on congratulating Harry with hugs) they took their leave.

The next most pressing item on their agenda was to visit Ron, and tell him and Ginny about the shopping arrangements. They also hoped to learn more from whichever Order members they could find at Grimmauld Place about the fate of Pettigrew and Snape. The pair decided to stop back at the Grangers' for lunch before going to see their friend. Back home they found two owls waiting for them.

The first was from the Ministry declining their request for portkeys. Although stated in vague, official sounding phrases, the message essentially said that parents of muggleborns weren't important enough to waste valuable resources on, as it would take too much employee time to create the number of portkeys they had asked for. Although Harry fumed in anger at this response, Hermione told him she wasn't surprised at it. He might not have realized it, but it was quite consistent with the way she and her parents had been treated by wizarding officials ever since she had started at Hogwarts.

The second owl was from Rita Skeeter, expressing a great deal of interest in hearing what they had to say. She reminded them that she had kept her word in writing Harry's story the way they had wanted it the last time she had interviewed him just over a year ago, and that they could trust her again. Harry confided to Hermione that he was thinking that it was time to turn the power of the press to his side in his clash with the Ministry of Magic, and she agreed wholeheartedly. They sent off a reply agreeing to set up an interview later that week, and another message with Hedwig to McGonagall inquiring about when they could stop by to pick up Dumbledore's bequest to Harry.

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By the time they arrived at Grimmauld Place, Ron and Ginny had mostly overcome the immediate shock of having their home destroyed, and members of their family killed or injured. Still, the atmosphere was much quieter than normal for the Weasleys. Ron was sitting quietly in one of the chairs in the drawing room, staring into the fireplace. Ginny was curled up in another, and seemed more subdued than Hermione could remember her being since her experience during her first year with the diary. It seemed as though all of the fight had gone out of her. Hermione supposed it was better than having the younger girl sending hateful glares her way all through the visit. Harry and Hermione settled down on the sofa, and Remus pulled up another chair.

Harry began by relaying the message from the twins about the arrangements for Ron and Ginny to go shopping with Lee and Katie. Ginny, at least, perked up somewhat at that. Ron caught Hermione's eye with a questioning look, and she could see him working out what the actual arrangements must have been. Then he gave her a short nod that he understood and accepted the situation. Next Harry revealed his offer of a place for their family to stay, in a house from the Black estate.

Ron and Ginny shared a glance before Ron responded. "Thanks Harry. I really appreciate it but I think we'll stay here for the time being. It's at least familiar. Maybe after Mum and Dad get out of the hospital we'll consider another place. And Remus and Tonks have made quite a bit of progress fixing this up during the past few weeks. We even helped them a few times."

An awkward silence descended on the room again, as their normal topics of conversation seemed out of place. Harry and Ron decided to try a game of wizard's chess, which left Ginny and Hermione watching, not exchanging a word with each other. Hermione noticed Ginny staring at her engagement ring, but the redhead turned away when Hermione looked in her direction.

Things livened up when Moody arrived. "We've been hearing some interesting stories from the interrogations of those Death Eaters you lot captured last night," he growled, not maliciously, but with some admiration in his voice. "Perhaps you can explain just what happened there?"

Hermione let Harry take the lead with how much he wanted to reveal, adding some details or clarifications along the way. Harry acknowledged that he and Hermione had been training extensively for some time, and Moody let that go without commenting on just how much time would have been necessary to gain the degree of proficiency they displayed. He admitted being impressed by the tactics they had used to disable nearly half of their opponents at the outset of the fight, and was quite interested in the rocky barrier they had created to block the killing curses. The pair also demonstrated the silver arrow spell, and Harry was quick to note the skill with which Ginny had dispatched a werewolf with her thrown knife, and how Ron's covering fire had taken out several Death Eaters. Moody was also envious of their dragonhide armor, saying it would have helped save the lives of not a few Aurors if it had been available back in his time, during the first war with Voldemort.

Hermione noted the keen interest with which Ginny listened to Harry's explanation. The younger girl was no fool, and would certainly realize that there were things that were not being said. She found herself feeling sorry for the heartbroken young witch who had lost so much. Even while they were dating, Harry had not confided in her about the things he was doing. Hermione resolved to talk to him about including her more in the future, should their relationship ever return to a friendly state. The brave girl had certainly proven herself worthy time and again.

Remus and Moody finally finished their questions, although it was clear that both of them were aware that something was up and wanted to know more. In answer to Harry's questions, Moody responded that the Ministry was in an uproar about Pettigrew, and that all of the Order's effort was going into keeping that under control. They had not yet got around to questioning Snape.

At that point Ginny spoke up for the first time. "Harry, can I talk to you ... privately?"

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## Hermione's Plan Healing

### Chapter 12, Healing

"Harry, can I talk to you ... privately?"

Harry immediately shot a glance at Hermione, but she just shrugged, letting him know that it was his decision. She rose from the couch and sent a look at Ron, who got up as well and the two of them left the room, followed by Remus and Moody. As soon as they were out the door, Ron grinned at her and held out two sets of Extendable Ears. Hermione hesitated, desperately wanting to know what Ginny was going to say, but knowing she should respect Harry's privacy. Taking a deep breath, she shook her head and headed down to the kitchen to wait. She had to trust that he would share whatever happened with her later.

Of course, she was right. As soon as Harry found her in the kitchen, he would relate the gist of what Ginny had said, and later show it to her in a pensieve memory.

*As soon as everyone had left the room, Ginny's composure crumbled, and she collapsed as Harry took her into his arms to comfort her. "Ginny, I'm so sorry. This has turned into a nightmare for you and I'm sure I've only made it worse. I wish I could have figured out a less painful way to let you know about me and Hermione, but I didn't know how to say it."*

*Without lifting her head from his shoulder, Ginny sobbed, "Harry, what happened to us?"*

*"Nothing happened, Ginny," Harry said calmly as he pulled back and sat down next to her on the sofa. "It just wasn't meant to be."*

*"But I've loved you ever since I first saw you," she protested.*

*"No, Ginny, that wasn't love," Harry tried to explain. "You can't love someone you don't really know. I only understand that now, and I know Hermione better than I'll ever know anyone else. You were in love with the idea of me. It was only a crush, or an infatuation maybe. But I'm with Hermione now, and I'm going to be for the rest of our lives. You just have to accept that."*

*With a supreme effort, Ginny nodded her head sadly in reluctant acknowledgement. "I'll always care for you, Ginny, and I'll never forget everything you've done for me," Harry continued softly. "Can we move on from here?"*

*"I guess," she finally managed. "Can I have another hug, though?"*

*"Anytime," he responded as he pulled her into another friendly embrace. "One thing Hermione's taught me is that you should always give a friend a hug when she needs one."*

*"Thanks, Harry. I know I should do it myself, and I'll try to later, but can you apologize to Hermione for the things I said the other day? And please tell her that if I couldn't have you I'm glad she's the one who's with you. I can see that you make each other happy."*

*After one more final hug, Harry gave her a smile and stroked her on the cheek, then left the room to go find Hermione.*

Hermione looked up nervously as Harry entered the kitchen, but was quickly put at ease by the smile on his face. He walked up behind her where she was sitting and leaned over to hug her and quickly related the conversation. She felt her body relax as the tension left her when he got to the message Ginny had asked him to relay. Then he told her that Ron and Ginny were leaving with Moody for Diagon Alley and their shopping expedition, and that Tonks had arrived. The pair then decided to go to St. Mungo's and the older couple said they would be glad to accompany them.

-ooOoo-

Molly was in somewhat better condition than she had been that morning when Fred and George had visited, but still had a vacant look in her eyes. She did recognize them, but their conversation consisted of simple pleasantries and questions about how they were doing and when they would be coming over to the Burrow that summer. Hermione feared that she had mentally blocked out the horror of the previous night and was constructing a world in her mind where everything was peaceful and normal.

Mr. Weasley was still in his coma, but the healers said he was recovering and would be released from the coma in a week or two. They confirmed, however, that he would probably lose the use of his legs. Harry inquired about the wizarding equivalent of wheelchairs, and told them that money was not to be an issue in any of the Weasleys' treatments, and that they should contact Griphook at Gringotts for whatever was needed.

Seeing Charlie was perhaps the most difficult. The muscular young man who had been in the prime of his life was now lying there slowly fading away. The healer informed them that his injuries were just too severe, that his magic was simply not strong enough to deal with all the damage to

his body. The best strengthening potions they had were insufficient. Hermione's heart broke as Harry turned to her, his eyes pleading with her to think of something they could do.

She wracked her brain trying to come up with anything she had read about transferring magic to an injured person. She thought that magically bonded people, like Bill and Fleur were now, and she and Harry were becoming, could share magic in that way, but there was no one like that for Charlie. Finally she had an idea that they might try.

"Harry, do you remember that strengthening spell we learned from Ix Chel? It's supposed to let you draw magic from your surroundings and feed it to someone who needs it."

"Let's try it!"

After telling the healer what they were going to attempt, and having Tonks assure her that they knew what they were doing, they arranged themselves at either side of Charlie's bed. Each of them took put one hand on Charlie, Hermione's on his forehead and Harry's over his heart, then stretched their other hand across him to grasp each other's. Then they reached their senses out to gather in the magic around them.

Since they were in the midst of a large group of wizards, and beyond that in the center of a large city, there was life all about them; they just needed to draw its magic into themselves and pass it on to Charlie. Several minutes passed, and the adults in the room could see the pair tiring under the strain as a faint glow began to build up on the head and chest of the red haired dragon keeper. The healer gasped, and hurried over to the bed to cast some diagnostic spells. Incredibly, they showed that Charlie's magic had doubled, although it was still perilously low. Then the two teens slumped back in their chairs as they broke apart, physically exhausted and magically drained, having done all they could.

As she drifted back and forth in and out of consciousness Hermione felt Tonks help her up, and was aware that Remus was doing the same for Harry.

"Come on you two. I think that's enough of doing the impossible for one day. Let's get you home."

-ooOoo-

(Tuesday)

Hermione awoke to find herself alone in her bed. It was the first time in months that she hadn't been snuggled up to Harry when she woke in the morning, and she immediately missed it. She vowed that it wouldn't happen again, and that she would speak to her mother about the two of them sharing a bed. One way or another she was determined to do so, even if they had to use the bed in her magical trunk. As she lay there wishing he were with her she recalled the prior evening and how exhausted their efforts with Charlie had left them. Getting the tired teens home had been quite the challenge for Remus and Tonks. Hermione had managed to warn them of the wards she had set, so they avoided the embarrassment of being stunned by her own traps.

The only other way in or out of the Granger property was the apparation point by the shed in the back yard, which neither Remus nor Tonks was familiar enough with to do accurately. They finally decided to use her cell phone to call her parents, who drove out to pick them up outside the wards. The shields she had put on the car allowed them to pass through without being stunned. When they finally arrived, Emma took the teens up to their bedrooms while Dan showed Remus and Tonks where the storage shed was, and they could apparate back to Grimmauld Place.

Of course, when he heard about this, Moody insisted on coming over to check it out, and found himself caught by the restriction barrier until Hermione could be roused from her nap to give Dan the password to relay to him. At that point both teens managed to wake up enough to eat some supper and fill Dan and Emma in on their day. Moody grudgingly complimented Hermione on her wards; his only suggestion was to change the Confundus charm to a notice-me-not type repellent charm, so anyone who managed to breach the first set of barriers would have trouble even figuring out which house belonged to the Grangers.

-ooOoo-

At breakfast Harry and Hermione reviewed their to-do list, which hadn't diminished at all. In addition to going to Hogwarts, they had been asked to come to the Ministry of Magic to give formal statements about the attack at the Burrow, and they had also received an owl from Bill asking them to stop by the beach house in Brighton if they got a chance. They decided to try to take care of the first two items in the morning, then visit the newlyweds in the afternoon.

Moody was waiting for them by the time they finished breakfast, and they soon found themselves in the atrium of the Ministry building. Hermione noticed Harry looking around with some trepidation, and she realized that his last two visits here had been under extremely unpleasant circumstances. They were taken down to level two where the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was located, and Hermione was relieved to see Kingsley Shacklebolt as one of the two interviewers, along with an Auror she didn't recognize. Harry evidently did, because he scowled when he saw him. (Later he would tell Hermione that he was one of the Aurors who tried to arrest Dumbledore, and later Hagrid, during fifth year.) Shacklebolt officially introduced himself and the other Auror, Dawlish, and said that he was present in his role as the Auror in charge of the Sirius Black case, while Dawlish was the lead investigator on the Burrow attack. Shacklebolt began the questioning.

The first topic was Peter Pettigrew, and the two students related the story of how he had been the Potter's real Secret Keeper, and had faked his death and hidden in his rat animagus form for twelve years, living with the Weasley family for much of that time. They also explained how they had discovered who he was on the night Sirius Black had been captured. Dawlish angrily interrupted at this point to ask why they had never told anyone this before.

"We did!" they sputtered indignantly. "But your idiot boss, Fudge, didn't believe us," Harry continued.

"He said we were disturbed!" snapped Hermione, folding her arms across her chest indignantly. Questioning her mental acuity was one of the

worst insults imaginable to her.

Once Shacklebolt had calmed everyone down, Harry went on to describe Pettigrew's role in the resurrection of Voldemort, and at the doubtful look on Dawlish's face rolled up his sleeve to show the scar on his arm from where Pettigrew's knife had drawn his blood. "Fudge didn't believe me that time either," he growled at Dawlish before the Auror had a chance to ask.

They finished by describing how they had guessed that Pettigrew had been hiding during the attack on the Burrow and that they had used the spell to force him back into his human form, then stunned him as he tried to flee. Shacklebolt finally decided they had all the information they needed on Pettigrew and formally turned the questioning over to Dawlish.

This time they were asked to describe their actions during the fight at the Burrow, and what spells they had used. They revealed how they had apparated as a group to a safe spot behind the shed, then split up and launched their counterattack, catching the Death Eaters in a crossfire.

"As for spells," Hermione stated crisply, "we used appropriate shielding and blocking spells for the curses being fired at us. Offensive spells we used were Reducto, Diffrauctum, and Projectilius, both the normal version and a silver version, when the werewolves attacked."

"Why not stunners?" challenged Dawlish.

"We were outnumbered more than four to one," Harry answered coldly. "The first spells they shot at us were Avada Kedavra. We couldn't afford to mess around. The last time Hermione and I fought Death Eaters we used stunners and they kept reviving each other. Hermione was almost killed by a Disruptum curse from Dolohov. I wasn't about to let that happen this time." The pair's hands subconsciously found each other and clasped, each giving the other a little squeeze for comfort.

Dawlish scowled, but couldn't say anything. If pressed, he would have to admit that these two students had fought and captured more Death Eaters than he had, in fact than the entire current Auror contingent had in the past year. Shacklebolt then commented that their statement was consistent with the other evidence they had, and asked Dawlish if he had any other questions.

"What were you wearing during the fight?" he inquired. "Several of the prisoners stated that you weren't wearing robes, but some kind of magical coating. Have you been performing any dark rituals?" Harry glared and pulled off his robes to reveal his tee shirt and bare arms, which although well muscled were perfectly normal. Hermione did him one better by removing her robes to expose a tank top that revealed a considerable amount of bare skin. Dawlish turned bright red and looked away in embarrassment. Hermione smirked at Harry as she replaced her robes and it took quite a bit of effort for him to hold back his laughter.

"We dressed in dragonhide vests and leggings before we went to the Burrow," Harry then explained. Kingsley's eyes widened in envy. Hermione recalled Moody wishing that the Aurors had such protective armor, and saw Harry's eyes light up as the same idea occurred to him as had just occurred to her.

The questioning finished, Shacklebolt thanked them for their cooperation and Moody escorted them back to the atrium. Harry asked if it was possible to use the Ministry floos to get to Hogwarts, and Moody informed them that the Hogwarts floos were set up for communication only, not transportation. They would have to floo to Hogsmeade and walk from there. In a matter of minutes they found themselves in the Three Broomsticks.

In short order they were back in the Hogwarts Headmistress's office. "Good morning, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger," McGonagall greeted them. "I see from your appearance that you made good use of your time tuner." It was hard to miss the physical changes that had taken place in the pair, not the least of which was their deep tans.

"Yes, thank you," Hermione responded. "We repeated two weeks twenty-five times each. From our perspective it's been more than a year since we were last here."

"My word, that's incredible!" the headmistress gasped, before bringing herself back under control. "Was it profitable?"

"Very!" said Hermione, with a gleam in her eye as she glanced at Harry. McGonagall eyed them closely, noticing now that more appeared to have changed with the pair than just their physical or magical prowess. "We were told by Gringotts that Professor Dumbledore left something for me in his will and it's being held for me here," Harry said politely, turning to the reason they had come today.

McGonagall disappeared for a few minutes into the room behind the headmaster's desk and returned floating several crates. She also handed Harry a letter from Dumbledore.

"Most of what is in these crates are books and pensieve memories," she announced briskly. "Albus left me instructions to see that you received his pensieve if anything happened to him, along with this collection. He said that you knew how to use it." Harry nodded and Hermione struggled to control her excitement. She had heard so much from Harry about the things he had seen, and now she would get to see them with him. "I assume that at least some of this is related to the project the two of you were working on?" she asked, peering at him over her glasses.

"I expect so," Harry answered, clearly not wanting to say anything more. McGonagall looked over her shoulder at the sleeping portrait of the former headmaster.

"Albus's portrait has awakened for short periods. He asked me to tell you that he would like to speak with you regarding your project once you have finished reviewing these materials. As I mentioned during your last visit, I have some things I wish to discuss with you as well. Would sometime next week or the week after be convenient for you?" Hermione checked her calendar and they tentatively set a date for the following week.

"Oh, and Mr. Potter?" McGonagall added as they got up to leave. "Congratulations on making such an excellent decision regarding your future." She gestured to Hermione's engagement ring and big smiles appeared on the faces of the two students as they thanked her for her kind words.

What the two students didn't hear was the conversation that took place in the office after they left.

*'Albus, are you sure of this?'*

*'Trust me, Minerva, they are doing even better than I had dared to hope. Have you ever seen Mr. Potter so confident, or Miss Granger so happy? And you heard what Alistor said about the power and skill they displayed the other night.'*

*'I still don't think you should have put so much pressure on two students, even ones as remarkable as those two.'*

*'I believe they will succeed, Minerva. They simply must.'*

After leaving McGonagall's office the pair stopped in an unoccupied classroom so that Harry could look at the note from Dumbledore. Hermione watched anxiously as Harry read the note and got a far-away look in his eyes for a moment before shaking himself and handing it to her to read.

"He says that Sirius had been collecting memories of my parents and had been intending to present them to me for my birthday," he explained, while wiping at his eyes. "After Sirius died Dumbledore continued with it. They're all here." Hermione found her own eyes tearing up too and she put her arms around Harry in an understanding hug. The note she had just finished reading continued to say that all of the memories that Dumbledore had collected dealing with Tom Riddle and the Horcruxes were also included, including some that Harry hadn't seen yet. Besides some spell books, which were a top priority in Hermione's opinion, there were also two detection instruments in the crates.

"What do you want to start looking at first?" she asked gently. While she hoped he would include her, she didn't want to presume anything.

"Do you think we could see some of my parents before we started the others?" Harry suggested hesitantly. Hermione's heart nearly broke as she heard the yearning in his voice. He was so desperate to know more about the parents who had died for him when he was only a year old, of whom the only memories he had were unpleasant ones. She nodded, unable to speak, and hugged him once more, much harder this time, her tears now flowing freely. She could feel him shaking with emotion against her, and she held on tight for a long time, thinking once more how unfair her best friend's life was.

Once they had composed themselves, Hermione suggested that they look at some of the pleasant memories each of the next few evenings and save the Riddle and Horcrux memories for later, once their schedule eased up. After shrinking down the crates again, Harry thought of Winky. "Dobby?" he called out tentatively. A second later the eager little house elf appeared before him with a pop.

"Harry Potter sir called for Dobby? Dobby did not even know that Harry Potter was being at Hogwarts today. Can Dobby be getting something for Harry Potter?"

Harry eventually calmed Dobby down and asked him how Winky was doing. Dobby immediately began apologizing for not coming to the Burrow sooner so that he could have helped out, but Harry quickly assured him that he had done just fine in arriving when he did, and rescuing Winky. Finally he got the house elf settled down enough to tell them about Winky. Dobby informed them proudly that he was taking good care of Winky, and that his friend would be able to go back to work for the Weasleys soon. Hermione interrupted quickly to make it clear that they were not asking after Winky for that reason, only that they were concerned about her. This caused Dobby to burst into tears, going on and on about how wonderful Harry Potter and his Miss Grangy were to house elves. Harry left him with strict instructions that Winky was to stay at Hogwarts being cared for by her good friend Dobby for as long as it took to get her health and magic back completely.

This time Harry managed to get Hermione out of the castle without a visit to the library and they began the long walk back to Hogsmeade to apparate back to the Granger residence. "You know," Harry commented while the two walked hand in hand along the path, levitating the trunks before them. "This would be a lot easier if we could fly."

"Well, why don't you buy me a broom then?" Hermione suggested with a grin that turned into a giggle at his gobsmacked expression. "What, don't you think I can fly well enough?" she teased. "I *am* an owl now, you know."

Harry's look of surprise turned into a grin that threatened to split his face. "No, that's a brilliant idea, Hermione," he answered enthusiastically. "Add that to the list!" Hermione laughed and couldn't help hugging him with such a boyishly eager expression on his face. With their arms laced around each other's waists they joked and teased each other the rest of the way to Hogsmeade.

-ooOoo-

They weren't sure what to make of the invitation from Bill and Fleur to visit, but since it was a beach house they dressed in tank tops and shorts under their robes. They later learned that Ron had received a separate note from Bill explaining why only Harry and Hermione had been invited – that he was often 'distracted' around Fleur and she was even more distracting than usual that week. Harry put his arm around Hermione's waist to side-along her and an instant later they were standing at the entrance of a lovely cottage.

It was really too large to be called a cottage, and it looked nothing like something the Black family would own, based on the appearance of Grimmauld Place. Hermione guessed that it was probably an investment property, and none of the Blacks had ever even been there. The furnishings were relatively modern, and the color schemes were bright and cheerful, just like one would expect in a beach house. The property sloped down toward the beach, so the main floor was elevated at the back of the house. All along the back was a porch that turned out to be a large, private sundeck overlooking the beach, with access off the kitchen, the dining area, and the master bedroom. The lower floor had two additional bedrooms, which opened out to ground level porches, leading to a wooden walkway to the beach. Fleur immediately pulled Hermione aside while Bill took Harry out back to the sundeck, which was equipped with several sun loungers and a wet bar.

While Bill was handing Harry a butterbeer, Fleur excitedly informed Hermione about the 'emergency' that had required her presence. It seemed that she and Bill had been out walking on the beach the day before, and had wandered all the way to a muggle section. They were amazed to see that the muggle women were wearing swim costumes that looked like underwear. "And Bill was quite interested," Fleur finished. "Is zis what ze

muggle women normally wear when swimming?"

Hermione laughed. "Well, yes. It's rather amusing. Muggle women would be extremely embarrassed to be seen in their underwear, but they wear swim suits that actually cover up less than most bras and knickers do. I have several suits like that myself, and trust me, Harry loves them. They're called bikinis."

"Zen you must 'elp me. I theenk zat Bill weell like eet very much eef I wear such a bikini. We can go to one of ze shops in town and buy some, no?"

After calling out to the men that they were going shopping for a bit, Fleur and Hermione headed for the shopping district nearby. On the way Hermione listened with rapt attention as Fleur fervently described how wonderfully her and Bill's bonding was going. Soon Hermione found a promising little boutique specializing in resort wear.

One of the problems of helping Fleur pick out a bikini, Hermione quickly discovered, was that she looked good in everything! Hermione was sure that every suit she came out of the dressing room in would have Harry drooling. And she seemed to favor the tinier ones, saying those were the ones that tended to catch Bill's eye. Finally she picked up a suit from a different rack that Hermione had been too shy to suggest.

"Um, Fleur, I'm not sure about that one," Hermione stammered. "It's called a thong and, well there isn't much to the bottom."

"Eet appears to be designed to emphasize ze derrière," Fleur surmised.

"Well, yes, emphasize is pretty accurate, I guess," Hermione agreed with a blush.

"Bill seemed particularly eenterested in ze women who were wearing zese," she announced, and insisted on trying it on. Of course, Fleur looked even more incredible in this suit, and she decided to buy one. Then she insisted that Hermione get one as well. Hermione resisted at first, but Fleur's enthusiasm eventually wore her down. Besides, she reasoned, if Fleur was wearing one too then neither of the men would notice her anyway. Fleur, of course, disagreed, reminding Hermione of the similar situation with the negligées. Hermione found herself hoping that the French woman was right, because she was getting excited at the idea of Harry seeing her in the brief suit. In the end, Fleur picked out a dazzling sapphire blue thong with string tie sides and Hermione chose one in a pink print with high cut half inch sides.

When they returned, they found Harry and Bill lying on two of the lounge chairs, catching some sun. When Hermione asked later, Harry informed her that they had discussed the attack, and that Bill and Fleur had visited his brother and parents in the hospital that morning. Harry had removed his tank top and was wearing only his shorts, which were slightly loose and went about halfway down to his knees. He had transfigured Bill's trousers to a pair of shorts as well.

"Success!" Fleur announced cheerfully as the women came out onto the porch. "You two men weell wait 'ere while 'Ermione and I put on our new bikinis." She turned and took Hermione's hand, dragging the reluctant younger witch into the bedroom to change. Just before they disappeared through the sliding glass door into the bedroom Hermione heard the following exchange from the men.

Bill – "What's a bikini?"

Harry – "Trust me, you'll like it."

Soon the women emerged, with Fleur in the lead. The exuberant part Veela could have been a model, because she instinctively knew all the moves. She posed with her hands on her hips, then swept them up in her hair, turning first one way then the other. Finally she turned around and faced away from them, putting one hand on her waist and cocking her hip while looking over her shoulder with an impish smile on her face.

Hermione giggled at the initial reaction of the two males, who stood there gaping in astonishment. Suddenly Bill let out a sound that could only be described as an animalistic growl, and rushed forward. As soon as he reached Fleur he picked her up and carried her off, with her squealing and giggling all the way as he hauled her through the sliding glass door into the bedroom.

Harry came up and stood beside Hermione and they both just stared, amazed at what had just happened. Hermione turned to Harry with a grin. "I think she achieved the effect she was looking for."

They heard another growl from Bill, and Fleur's squeal turned to a gasp. "Oh! Bill!"

"They seem to have forgotten a silencing charm," Harry said with a smirk, and with a small shake of his head he moved toward the house and gave a short wave of his hand, cutting off the sounds of the amorous activity. As he turned to come back to where Hermione was waiting by the lounge chairs he was muttering something about oversexed werewolves when he came to an abrupt halt. "Sweet Merlin!"

There, before him, Hermione was bending over a lounge chair, spreading out a towel. When she heard him she looked back over her shoulder and gave him a seductive smile, then slowly knelt down on the lounge, maximizing his view, and finally stretched out and lay down on her stomach. Harry could only stammer and stutter incoherently while he watched her untie the strings of her bikini top.

She turned back to smile at him again and motioned to the sunscreen she had set down next to her lounge. "Aren't you forgetting something?" Harry finally got his legs working again and hurried over to kneel down beside her, eagerly picking up the bottle of lotion. Hermione was enjoying this immensely, and couldn't resist another tease. "There's another place that needs it today."

Harry managed a very short response. "Oh yeah!" Hermione noticed that he spent quite a bit more time than absolutely necessary applying the sunscreen to the newly uncovered part of her anatomy. She also found that she minded it not one bit.

With two healthy young teens in minimal clothing, one thing led to another and the situation escalated to a full blown snogging session. Harry soon joined her on the lounge and eventually they were both lying on their sides facing each other, his hands roaming up and down her bare back and



bum.

"Glad to see you two weren't bored." Startled out of their activity by Bill's amused voice, the two separated and leapt to their feet as the older couple rejoined them. Unfortunately, the strings to Hermione's bikini top were still untied, and the young couple's exuberant activity had separated the triangles in front from their customary position. The top was now hanging loose down her front, exposing her breasts.

Hermione shrieked and quickly folded her arms across her chest and began to turn away, but paused. She had just recalled Bill's reaction to seeing Fleur's thong clad bum.

Laughing merrily, Fleur rushed forward to help the younger witch out of her dilemma, while Bill looked on appreciatively. Grinning, he turned to nod at Harry, communicating in silent male speak, *'that's a very fine looking lady you have there, but don't worry about me, I'm satisfied with my own.'*

Turning his attention back to Hermione, who had now gotten things back where they belonged he smirked and commented, "Nice tan!"

Fleur, having finished helping Hermione, now returned to Bill and gave him a sultry look, then slowly let her eyes drop to her own chest. "Hmm, per'aps you would like eet eef I 'ad a tan like zat?" She hooked her finger in the top of her bikini and pulled it down a bit, then slid the finger along the edge of the triangle to the middle of her chest, then back up the triangle covering the other breast. She raised her eyes back to his and cocked her head in a challenge.

Bill rose to the challenge. "I must say that I would very much enjoy watching you get such a tan."

"Well, zen," she responded in a low voice. "Per'aps 'Ermione and I should work on zem togezzar." Both of the males on the sundeck got dazed looks on their faces as they imagined the scene Fleur had just suggested, and Hermione giggled while Fleur reached up and kissed Bill on the nose. Harry could normally resist Fleur, Hermione knew, but she could see that he could not handle the thought of her and Hermione both stretched out before him wearing nothing but thong bikini bottoms.

Not quite ready for the conversation to move any further along those lines (at least not today) Hermione decided to change the subject. She noticed that Fleur was literally glowing right now, and had been ever since returning from her little 'session' with Bill. "Fleur," she interjected, "you should try to conjure a Patronus with feelings like you're having right now. You seem so happy I bet it would explode out of your wand."

Fleur's head whipped around to Hermione. "You really theenk so?" she asked excitedly. "I could never get more zan smoke, never a solid form." She hurried inside and fetched her wand. When she returned, she closed her eyes briefly and the others saw her face glow with a brilliant smile. Then she raised her wand. "Expecto Patronum!" Immediately a dazzlingly bright silver wolf sprang out of her wand. The beautiful French witch clapped her hands excitedly, then ran over and threw her arms around Bill's neck kissing him repeatedly.

While Bill struggled to maintain any semblance of coherent thought under her assault, Harry and Hermione shared a glance. It was surely no coincidence that Fleur's patronus was a wolf. They recalled that Tonks's patronus had turned into a wolf when she had fallen for Remus. Hermione could tell that she and Harry were both wondering the same thing. Summoning their wands with but a gesture, each one concentrated on their feelings for the other and they cried out in unison, "Expecto Patronum!" To their amazement, a lion and a lioness, both of them enormous, emerged from their wands. After some later discussion they would eventually come to realize that both of their patroni had changed to reflect how each saw the other.

"Too bad," Harry said, grinning in an attempt dispel the too serious silence that had fallen upon them as they considered the implications of what they had just done. "I was rather fond of your otter." Hermione smiled at him warmly and gave him a hug. They were interrupted by Bill and looked up to see that the silvery lion and lioness were nuzzling each other.

"I think you better get rid of those things before they start mating with each other," Bill teased. He was rewarded by Hermione turning bright red with embarrassment. Once she recovered and they had dispelled the pair of feline protectors, Hermione had another idea. Focusing on a happy memory that did not involve Harry, she tried again and was rewarded as her original otter flew from her wand. Once she explained to Harry what she had done, he tried the same. A quidditch memory did the trick and Prongs once more galloped across the deck. After some discussion, the two decided to use their original patroni for messenger spells, and their newer, and clearly more powerful, patroni for repelling dementor attacks.

They had a wonderful time for the rest of the afternoon. Eventually the males calmed down enough to be able to talk to the women even while they were sunning their backsides, but not before another episode of Bill being overcome by lust. It happened when Harry informed him that it was the man's duty to rub sunscreen over all of the exposed skin of his beloved. The little moaning noises Fleur made when he reached her thong clad posterior combined with the feeling of her delightfully firm, round bum in his hands to push him over the edge again. Harry and Hermione laughed so much that tears came to their eyes as Bill once more hauled a giggling, squealing Fleur inside. "I wonder if Mrs. Weasley realized exactly what it meant when Remus said Bill would have some 'wolfish' tendencies," Harry gasped out, generating a fresh round of giggles.

Then Hermione got a gleam in her eye. "You know, having you rub sunscreen on my bum got *me* pretty excited too."

"Me too," Harry admitted in a husky voice. Soon they were repeating the procedure, but without any sunscreen. Fortunately, they made sure they were both decent this time when the happy couple returned to the sundeck.

Dinner came and went all too soon. The four had begun the kind of relationship where each one found every one of the others fascinating. Harry and Hermione could sit and listen for hours to Bill's tales of cursebreaking, or Fleur's description of her heritage and how different her life had been growing up than theirs. For their part, the pair of Hogwarts students had led rather eventful lives as well, and older couple sat riveted by their stories. Even though Ron had been involved in most of them, Bill had not really spent any significant amount of time with his younger brother since the summer after his second year, and was only vaguely aware of their adventures.

As their time drew to an end, Bill and Fleur tried to persuade Harry and Hermione to stay for a few days. They immediately declined, since the older couple was on their honeymoon after all, but they were insistent. They eventually compromised after a private conversation and agreed to

come over each afternoon that week and stay for dinner. During this separate discussion Harry and Hermione considered all the things they still had to do that week. They also realized that even though they were so busy, indeed *because* they were so busy, they needed to take some time off to keep from being overwhelmed. Hermione summed up their decision succinctly – “We’ll just have to *make time* .”

They would accomplish this by repeating each day with the time turner. On the days when they would visit Bill and Fleur, they decided to stay at one of Harry’s flats in Cambridge at night and in the morning. While there they would establish an identity as muggle college students in case they ever needed it, and work their way through Dumbledore’s pensieve memories. On their other days they would stay with the Grangers and attend to the normal demands on their time.

It would turn out to be a rather momentous week.

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## Hermione's Plan A Very Long Week

### Chapter 13, A Very Long Week

(still Tuesday)

That evening Hermione matter-of-factly informed her mother that she and Harry would be sharing a bed, and asked if she would rather have them use her room or his. As Emma hesitated, Hermione calmly mentioned that they could stay at Grimmauld Place instead if she preferred. Emma looked thoughtfully at her daughter, realizing again how much had changed during the two weeks / one year that they had been abroad. Finally she relented and smiled at her grown up child, who had just skillfully maneuvered her into the only possible response. "Smooth move daughter," she said admiringly, then teased, "I suppose you want me to break the news to your father?" Hermione grinned back and nodded. Emma laughed, then grew serious. "Are you still ...?"

"Yes," Hermione responded instantly, before she could even finish the question.

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Wednesday morning, they used the time turner to return to Tuesday. (As was their standard practice whenever they went back in time, they disillusioned themselves or put on Harry's invisibility cloak first, to avoid any uncomfortable encounters when they reappeared.) This time they immediately set out for Cambridge, where they met with the man who managed Harry's rental properties. Since it was the summer, several units were empty. Harry let Hermione take the lead in picking one out, but she made sure he approved of the one she selected before they made the final decision. It had one bedroom, a full bath, a well-equipped kitchen, and a large living space with a nice view of the campus of King's College.

The property manager agreed to have it ready for occupancy by the afternoon. To be on the safe side they registered it under a false name. Hermione picked Jane Porter, which made Harry groan. They decided to leave Harry's trunk (in which they had stored all of the material they received from Dumbledore) in this flat, thanked the manager for his efforts, and departed.

The pair spent the rest of the morning checking out Harry's other properties, first the ones from the Black estate, then the Potter. There was quite a surprise waiting for them at Potter Manor. They arrived at the main gate and Harry officially took possession, as he had at his other properties, but when they reached the front door of the manor they were greeted by a house elf!

The old Potter family house elf was nothing like the Black family house elf, Kreacher. After they calmed her down and she had stopped hugging Harry and exclaiming how wonderful it was that Master Harry Potter was finally back, they managed to get her to tell them her story. Her name was Minnie, and she talked in such a high pitched, squeaky voice that Hermione had to bite her lip to keep from asking where Mickey was. She appeared to be middle aged for an elf, and confirmed that she had been serving the Potter family for half a century. She noted sadly that it had been very lonely since Master James and Miss Lily had died, but then started talking excitedly about taking care of Harry when he was a baby.

Hermione noticed that she was wearing a simple tunic, rather than a towel or a pillowcase with holes cut into it and wanted to ask her about it without offending her. She decided on the indirect approach of making a casual comment about how nice it looked.

Minnie immediately grew silent, and looked apprehensively at Hermione, then at Harry. She dropped her head and nervously ran her hands up and down the garment in question, then hesitantly began an explanation. "Miss Lily insisted that Minnie must be free. But she said it was not because Minnie was a bad elf. Minnie has always been a good elf, and works very hard for the Potter family. Miss Lily was very kind though and says Minnie can stay here as long as she wants to."

This went on for some time with the worried house elf repeating several times that she was a hard-working elf and that she tried to earn her keep by taking good care of the Potter home and other properties, even though no one had been around for a long time. It was only stopped when Harry knelt down and hugged her, which shocked her into silence. He reassured her that she was a very good elf and that she could keep living in Potter manor for however long she wished. Then Minnie began crying and saying what a wonderful master Harry Potter was.

Conflicting thoughts and emotions swirled through Hermione's head. One was a warm feeling that here was yet another example of how much she and Lily were alike. A second was how proud she was of Harry for being so kind and accepting toward the little creature. Another was the contrast between Minnie and Kreacher, both of whom had lived alone in their mansions after their masters had died. Yet another was that even a happy, well-adjusted house elf like Minnie was ashamed of being given clothes and set free, but put her shame aside and continued to do her duty, to the extent of being grateful for the opportunity. Finally there was a sinking feeling and realization that her efforts regarding house elves had been badly misdirected.

As she pondered all of this Harry rose and came over to her. Without saying a word the look of understanding he gave her told her that he knew how troubling this was to her, and he pulled her into his arms for a comforting hug. Once again, she found herself even more in love with this wonderful, caring man.

Minnie took them on a tour of the manor, proudly showing them how well kept up it was. She informed them that she was doing the same for the other Potter house as well. In stark contrast to the Black family mansion in London, it was bright and cheerful instead of dark and gloomy. Harry and Hermione spent the next half-hour in a state of perpetual astonishment at how impressive the manor and estate of an old wizarding family could be. They soon lost count of how many bedrooms there were, not to mention the dining rooms, formal, semiformal, and informal living spaces, studies, a ballroom, and of course a library. As Harry looked on from beside her in amusement and affection, Hermione paused briefly to allow herself to imagine the hours of enjoyment she would have in this room once they were married. She was also just coming to realize that she would be the mistress of the house of a noble family, and the responsibility that would come with that position.

Their final stop was at the family cemetery, and Harry was able for the first time in his life to visit the graves of his parents. Hermione was beside him all the way, with her arm around him as the tears flowed freely from all three of them. After a long period of silence Harry managed to speak.

"Hi Mum and Dad. I've missed you so much. I imagine Sirius has told you how things have been going in my life. It hasn't always been very good, but I know how you both died to keep me alive. I promise to live up to that, and do what I need to do. This is Hermione. She's been my best friend for years and we're going to be married some day. I know you'd like her. She's so much like you, Mum. I guess Dad and I go for the same things in women." Hermione tightened her arm around Harry's waist, and he turned to give her a small grin before she buried her head in his shoulder.

Once they had finished paying their respects, Minnie insisted on preparing them lunch. Again, Hermione observed how happy it made her to be able to do things like this for them, but she was also pleased and delighted when Harry firmly declared that Minnie would eat with them. During lunch they worked out how Minnie would address them. Harry managed to persuade her to call him Mister Harry instead of Master Harry, and Hermione suggested Miss Hermione. Unfortunately Minnie had trouble pronouncing Hermione, and Hermione wasn't thrilled with Miss Hermey or Miss Grangy, so they settled on Miss Miney.

Harry also inquired about the strength of the protective wards on the estate, and Minnie assured him that they were very powerful. It helped that nearly everyone had forgotten about it in the years since his parents had died. They both decided that they would come back another day, along with Ron, to see the smaller cottage on another piece of land the Potters owned in Godric's Hollow – the house where James and Lily had been killed. Minnie reminded Harry that it was still under the Fidelius Charm, and that only she and he would be able to see it unless the secret keeper revealed its existence to his friends.

-ooOoo-

That afternoon, once they knew that their other selves were in Brighton, the pair went to visit Ron and Ginny again. When they arrived they were caught off guard when both of the Weasley children tearfully thanked them for what they had done for Charlie. To Hermione's amazement, Ron even gave her a hug while Ginny hugged Harry. But when Ginny went to hug Hermione it turned awkward. After one of the most uncomfortable hugs she had ever had, Hermione stood and watched, not knowing what to do, while Ginny grimaced and fled from the room.

To break the uneasy silence, Tonks joked that St. Mungo's wanted to hire the pair to treat any future hopeless cases. "Given my track record, I'm surprised it wasn't splashed all over today's paper," Harry muttered.

"That would be my doing," Tonks revealed. "I had some forceful words with them about keeping it quiet. I finally had to cite healer/patient confidentiality and threaten to have some licenses revoked."

"Well, I'm pleasantly surprised that there hasn't been anything about our engagement in any of the papers yet, given that Colin was present for our announcement," Hermione added. "I was sure *Witch Weekly*, at least, would be distraught that they have to revise their 'Most Eligible Wizard' list." Harry gave her a dirty look and she stuck her tongue out at him and giggled. "We even made an appointment with Rita Skeeter for an interview on Thursday."

This time Ron smirked. "Well, that might be because Fred, George, and I had a bit of a talk with him that night. They threatened to hex his bits off if he said anything before you guys were ready to announce it."

They all got a laugh out of that, and then the discussion turned to their plans for the day. Harry shared his concern with the others about possible additional attacks, and suggested that Luna and Neville were potential targets. Ron agreed, since they were the other two students at the Department of Mysteries, and also were involved the defense of Hogwarts during the Death Eaters' invasion in June. The others pointed out to Harry and Hermione that both houses were likely to have powerful wards in place. The Longbottoms, because they were an old, established wizarding family, and the Lovegoods, because Mr. Lovegood was paranoid and suspected diabolical plots around every corner. They all agreed that the visits, both to catch up and to fill them in on what had been happening, were a good idea however. Ron thought that Ginny would like to come too, and left the room to fetch her back.

"The other thing I thought we might do," Harry remarked casually, "is go to Diagon Alley. Hermione told me yesterday, er, this morning, that she wanted a broomstick."

He had timed it just as Ron and Ginny were coming into the room, and he and Hermione both watched in anticipated amusement for the looks of astonishment they expected that revelation to generate. While they were rewarded by a dumfounded expression on Ron's face, they were surprised by Ginny's reaction.

"OK, what's going on here?" she demanded, her eyes narrowing. "Hermione's as likely to ask you for a broom as I am to ask for an autographed copy of *Hogwarts, A History*."

Harry and Hermione shared a guilty look before Harry nodded his agreement. Hermione, glad that he was willing to go along with the suggestion she had made earlier, gestured to the others in the room, who, except for Ron, were watching in puzzlement. "I think you should all sit down," she suggested. "This is quite a story."

After they had shared the basics of what they had been up to for the past month/year, Ginny, who had been growing more and more agitated,

blurted out, "So for you guys how long has it been since we left Hogwarts?"

"About thirteen months."

"Oh! Thank Merlin!" she exclaimed. "Oh Hermione, I'm so sorry!" She leapt to her feet and threw her arms around the astonished witch, hugging her for real this time. Then she pulled back and explained. "I was certain you must have him under an enchantment, or used a love potion or something. Oh this is such a relief!"

Hermione realized what Ginny was saying, and felt even worse than she had before for keeping the younger witch in the dark. This had clearly been weighing heavily on her mind. The irony that each witch had suspected that Harry's attraction for the other had been magically enhanced did not escape her.

Harry, though, took offense at the statement that seemed to him to be insulting Hermione. "What, don't you think Hermione's attractive enough to get a guy without a love potion?" he began angrily.

"No, no, I didn't mean that at all," Ginny responded quickly, her eyes going wide as she realized how what she had just said might be interpreted. "Goodness knows, I was aware that she was attractive long before you two idiots did," she added, recovering her composure and getting in a little dig as she reverted to her normal personality. "What I meant is that, well, there was no way you could start dating a girl, fall in love with her, and propose to her in a period of four weeks! Come on, this is Harry Potter we're talking about here."

Harry scowled while Hermione fought to stifle a giggle. "Hey!" he began to protest before Ginny cut him off.

"I'm serious," she insisted, although the mirth in her eyes suggested that she was having at least a bit of a go at him. "This is Harry I-don't-have-the-slightest-clue-about-girls Potter." Harry crossed his arms across his chest and tried to look offended, an effort that was made rather difficult by Hermione's now unrestrained giggles and Tonks's hearty laughter. Remus's and Ron's ear to ear grins weren't helping either. Ginny was on a roll now.

"Just how long did it take you to work up your nerve to ask Cho out while you were pining for her?"

"Um ..."

"And how long did you dither back and forth about telling me how you felt about me?"

"Um ..."

"Now, exactly how long did it take you, even though you were alone with her all day every day, to figure out you were in love with Hermione?"

Harry sent a helpless look toward Hermione, pleading with her to help him out here. Hermione never could resist that look from Harry, and being the loyal girlfriend besides, moved to rescue him. "Well, to be honest, Ginny, he has improved a lot recently. Wait until you hear the sweet way he proposed to me."

A sad look flashed across Ginny's face as she shrank back, her teasing forgotten as she remembered just what she was teasing him about. "Um, maybe some other time."

Remus jumped into the resulting silence with another question about the training Harry and Hermione had done, and the pair explained a bit further. They weren't ready to share quite everything just yet, though, and Harry soon suggested that they should get moving if they were going to make it to all of the places on their list.

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Both Neville and Luna were glad to see them, and Mrs. Longbottom and Mr. Lovegood appreciated their concern about possible attacks. At each house the adults had a discussion with Remus and Tonks about wards, which because of their extensive study Hermione and Harry were now able to participate in as well. Both of the adults also agreed with Harry's suggestion that they have an emergency portkey available in case they were attacked. In fact, Mr. Lovegood already had three of them.

Neville congratulated them heartily when he heard about the engagement, and Hermione noticed the little glance he shot in Ginny's direction at the news. She wondered if Ginny was aware that the shy Gryffindor secretly fancied her. Other than attending the Yule Ball with him, she had never given him any sign that she had any similar feelings for him, but Hermione knew from experience that that wouldn't stop him from hoping.

Luna took the news more calmly, as unreadable as ever. Hermione was pretty sure that she had no romantic feelings for Harry, but rather had a longstanding crush on Ron. She was also pretty sure that Ron didn't have the slightest idea of the blonde Ravenclaw's feelings.

Both Neville and Luna were quite excited with the idea of starting up the DA again as a defense training group, and their parents were supportive as well. Of course, both students still had their charmed Galleons, and Hermione promised to let them know as soon as she and Harry decided what they were going to do.

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It was a slow day on Diagon Alley, and they were fortunate to find themselves as the only customers at Quality Quidditch Supplies. Harry and Hermione shared an amused look as Ron and Ginny got into a heated discussion on the merits of Cleansweep vs. Nimbus broomsticks. While this went on Hermione wandered over to a different display. The store assistant standing there informed her that the classic Silver Arrow broomstick had just been re-released in an upgraded version. Harry had followed her over and remarked that Madame Hooch had favorably compared the

Silver Arrow's design to his Firebolt. The sleek model was the epitome of style and elegance. The salesman concurred, and said that while other brooms were faster or more maneuverable, this broom just had a feeling to it – like you were soaring instead of flying – being one with the broom rather than riding it. Hermione shivered as she touched it. That was exactly the feeling she was looking for. She knew that Harry, in his more poetic moments, felt that way about flying as well. They shared a look and both knew that this was the broom for her.

Next Harry returned to Ron and Ginny, who had still not reached any agreement, Ginny insisting on Nimbus with Ron holding out for Cleansweep. Harry interrupted to ask the salesman what the current top of the line Nimbus was.

"That would be the Nimbus 2010, but that's an international standard racing broom. The English national team's going to be using them this year," the assistant explained. "I doubt if too many students could handle it – or afford it," he added. Very few customers purchased two top quality brooms at once, especially students. Harry just smiled at him and pulled back the hood of his concealment cloak slightly, while unobtrusively casting a silencing spell. Noticing this, Hermione quickly added an imperturbable charm to the door. Given how much Harry was about to spend, the shop could afford the loss of any potential customers for the next few minutes.

"I believe you'll find my name on your preferred customer list," Harry remarked calmly.

"Mr. Potter! Oh, well, why didn't you say so? Certainly this would be an appropriate broom for you." The salesman looked back at Hermione and licked his lips. "So, you might be interested in more than one broomstick today?" Harry merely smiled.

"May we have access to your testing area?" The eager salesman quickly showed them to a doorway. Harry gestured to Hermione to bring the Silver Arrow as he picked up the Nimbus 2010. "Oh," he added, "do you also have a Firebolt that I could borrow for comparison purposes?" The assistant rushed off to another counter as the group entered the doorway, which shimmered as they passed through.

They found themselves outside in a large meadow, with a few others flying off in the distance. As the salesman nervously handed him the Firebolt, Harry turned and handed the Nimbus to Ginny. "Let's see what you can do with it." When the stunned rep protested that a small girl like her couldn't possibly handle a broom like that, Harry stopped him with a glare. "That girl's probably going to play professionally some day. Just watch."

Ginny recovered from her shock relatively quickly. Other than Harry's Firebolt, she had never seen a broomstick like this one, but she knew what to do with it. In seconds she was rocketing away, her red hair streaming out behind her, shouting with delight. To her surprise, she soon found Harry racing alongside her, grinning at her and she grinned back. For the next several minutes they shot back and forth, climbing and diving, twisting and turning, putting the brooms through a thorough test. Both had about the same top speed, while the Firebolt's acceleration was slightly better. The Firebolt was more maneuverable for subtle changes, but the Nimbus made radical changes of direction more quickly.

Back on the ground watching them, Hermione could feel the joy radiating from Harry. She decided to give her own new broom a go as well, and quickly found it was everything she had hoped for. Forgoing high speeds for now, she flew up in lazy spirals and swooped down, very much like the bird of prey that was her animagus form. She laughed as she glided past Ron, watching her in amazement, and climbed again, feeling that the broom was a part of her. Before she knew it, ten minutes had passed and she spotted Harry flying up to join her. Grinning like mad, he motioned her to land and she happily followed him.

Down on the ground Ginny was talking a mile a minute, analyzing the Nimbus's performance for Ron. After Harry and Hermione shared a long hug, perfectly capping off the wonderful feelings Hermione had just experienced, they joined their friends.

"What do you think Gin?" Harry asked with a smile. "Do you think that one will work for you?"

Ginny's eyes went wide. "Me!" she squeaked. "That's for me?" Harry nodded and turned serious as he explained. Not only was he giving it to her to help make up for the loss she had just suffered, as well as the pain he felt he had put her through, but he also expected that they would be facing some dangerous situations in the near future, and he wanted her to have the best equipment possible. A fast broomstick was a necessity as far as he was concerned, not a luxury. Ginny hesitated, but then agreed. Her eyes lit up as she gave him a big thank you hug.

Harry wasn't finished yet. "What's the best Cleansweep you have?" he inquired of the now trembling sales assistant, while grinning at Ron, whose jaw dropped.

"The Cleansweep XIV will be coming out next month, but it will be in limited release until next year."

"If I pay for one today, can you set one aside for me? We'll need it by September 1st."

The shaking man managed a nod. He couldn't believe it. He had just sold three of the most expensive broomsticks in existence in less than an hour. The commission would be more than he normally earned in a week.

"Oh, and one more thing," Harry added. "This is all completely confidential. I don't want to be reading about this in the paper tomorrow, or at all for that matter. Is that clear?"

"But ..." The advertising bonanza from being able to claim that Harry Potter bought a certain model of broomstick, not to mention three, would be incalculable.

"Would you prefer we took our business elsewhere?"

The by now nearly incoherent salesman agreed that he could live with any conditions Mr. Potter cared to suggest.

-ooOoo-

That evening in the flat in Cambridge, secluded away in Harry's magical trunk, the pair dove into some of the pensieve memories of the Hogwarts

years of Lily and James. It was fascinating to see how James matured over time, from the loud, cocky prankster of the early years into the more serious student who was eventually named Head Boy. Sirius's memories obviously were more centered on James, but Dumbledore had included some of Lily as well. Harry laughed and gave Hermione a squeeze as they watched her try to answer every question during a Charms class in her second year, while James looked on, intrigued, in the background. They also watched her blossom into a beautiful young woman, gaining in self-confidence and making close friendships as the years went on, one of them with Neville's mother Alice. After six hours of memories it was two tired, but happy students that cuddled up together in bed that night.

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*The Daily Prophet*  
Wednesday, 23 July, 1997

**Peter Pettigrew Still Alive!**  
**Hiding as a Rat Animagus for Sixteen Years**  
**Captured During Attack on Weasley Home**

**Sirius Black Innocent?**  
**New Information Indicates Pettigrew was Potter Secret Keeper**  
**Pettigrew, Not Black, Was a Death Eater**

The headline stories about Pettigrew and Black dominated the news the next day. The newspaper suggested that Sirius Black would be exonerated, and Peter Pettigrew stripped of his Order of Merlin. It went on to speculate on possible compensation to the Black estate for wrongful imprisonment. A followup story on the attack at the Weasleys revealed that Harry Potter and Hermione Granger had also been present, and noted that it was only just and right that Harry Potter, who had been orphaned by the acts of the newly revealed traitor, had been involved in his capture.

The swarm of owls that might have been expected to inundate Harry after this news was revealed failed to materialize. There were two very good reasons for that. First, no one in the general public knew where he was staying, and second, owls addressed simply to Harry Potter were confused because at that time Harry was in two places at once. As a backup plan, Hermione had found an owl repelling charm, but as it turned out she didn't need to use it. The pair did, however, decide not to go out in public that day to avoid the publicity.

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During their first time through the day, Moody came over to Grimmauld Place with an offer. "Potter, we're going to do Snape's interrogation with Veritaserum tomorrow. Do you want to be present?" Harry stared at the old Auror while Hermione came over to his side and grasped his hand. She knew this was a highly emotional subject for him. Facing the evil wizard who was responsible for his parents' deaths, not to mention Dumbledore's, would be very difficult, and he might not be able to control himself.

"No, I don't think so, not unless you discover something I need to question him about personally," he finally concluded. "I trust that you guys know what you're doing. Certainly a lot more than I do. Just be sure you find out what he knew about the project the Professor and I were working on, and what he told Voldemort about it."

Remus had some interesting news about werewolves. "It seems that the werewolves that were killed at the Burrow the other night included Fenrir Greyback and his most rabid followers," he related with a look of grim satisfaction. "The vast majority of the werewolves in Britain aren't vicious killers, and aren't dangerous at any times other than full moons. They want nothing to do with Voldemort. They mostly want to be left alone to suffer their affliction as best as they can manage," he explained. "If they only had access to Wolfsbane potion, they would pose no threat whatsoever." Harry immediately asked Remus what it would take to make that happen.

"A potions master and a thousand galleons a month for ingredients," Remus replied hesitantly.

"Do you think Slughorn could find us someone who would take three thousand galleons a month for the whole package?" Harry persisted.

Remus snorted. "For three thousand galleons a month Slughorn would do it himself." When Harry asked him to see to the arrangements Remus looked like he might cry and Tonks jumped on Harry and hugged him for all she was worth as her hair flashed like a neon sign.

Once he had regained his composure, Remus continued with the news that Harry and Hermione's proficiency with the projectile curse had made quite an impression on a coven of vampires who were being courted by Voldemort. Since lacking any serious injury they were effectively immortal, they had little desire to be killed in battle. They had just sent word to the International Confederation of Wizards that they would be staying out of this conflict.

-ooOoo-

The rest of the week seemed to involve an endless succession of meetings for Harry and Hermione.

On Thursday morning they had their interview with Rita Skeeter. They were cautiously optimistic that it would work out, but it took so long to come to an agreement on what she could write that they decided to set up another meeting to conclude the interview the following day.

On Thursday afternoon they met with Dean Thomas, Colin Creevy, and Justin Finch-Fletchley. After the by now familiar exclamations of how different Harry and Hermione looked, and congratulations on their relationship, Harry explained his idea of distributing the shield caps and emergency portkeys to families of muggleborns. All three were very enthusiastic about the idea, and Justin and Colin agreed to take the lead in contacting the families involved.

They also broached the idea of resurrecting the DA to sharpen up their fighting skills. All three boys were positively ecstatic about this plan, and

Dean immediately offered to help contact the other members.

"Well, I hope everyone else will be as receptive as the three of you seem to be," Harry commented. Dean gave him an odd look while Hermione giggled.

"He and I have a bet on how many of the old DA members will be interested," she explained. Harry shrugged and found something interesting about his shoes.

Dean snorted. "What's the bet?"

"I said it will be at least twenty-five of the original twenty-nine members," Hermione announced. "The loser has to give the winner a backrub."

Dean laughed out loud this time, and Colin and Justin joined in. "I'd say you can start picking out Hermione's favorite massage oil right now."

-ooOoo-

On Friday morning they concluded their interview with Rita Skeeter. Even though she was supposedly on their side now, they still had to keep their guard up and make sure she didn't embellish what they had to say, and the sessions were mentally taxing. There would be two stories appearing on successive days over the weekend, when the readership would be at its highest. The weekend was also when the Quibbler came out, and it would have similar stories.

On Friday afternoon the core group of the DA got together – in addition to Harry, Hermione, and Ron, they were joined by Neville, Luna, and Ginny along with the six Hogwarts graduates who had originally suggested the idea. They had a useful exchange of ideas regarding times and frequency of the training sessions, and the types of spells that they needed to master. Before they knew it they had been talking for three hours.

By that evening they were utterly exhausted. When Dan came home he found the teens lounging around the pool with Emma, finally able to relax. He cheekily asked them if they had been goofing off all week.

Hermione wandlessly threw him into the pool, while Emma's laughter echoed across the pool deck.

-ooOoo-

The other time through the week, in which they spent the nights and mornings in Cambridge reviewing pensieve memories, and the afternoons and evenings at the Brighton beach house with Bill and Fleur, were much more peaceful. The couple was becoming the older brother and sister that neither Harry nor Hermione had ever had. The first day Fleur took Hermione shopping again, buying another thong bikini. She also insisted that they select some sexy lingerie, including fancy thong knickers. Fleur explained that lingerie was one of the few areas in which clothing for witches was nearly as modern as that of muggle women. What with wearing loose robes all the time, it was the main way that witches had to feel feminine.

Hermione hesitated at the fancy bras, informing Fleur that she didn't wear them that much any more, both because she was comfortable enough without one and because Harry liked it that way. Fleur smirked that Harry sounded a lot like Bill. But she ultimately persuaded Hermione by telling her that the fancy ones were nice for when she did have to wear one. It would make her feel sexy and desirable inside. The key was to be sure to let Harry see her put it on because then he'd think about it all day – every time he looked at her he'd remember what was underneath. Later Hermione would report that Harry enjoyed seeing the sexy bras very much, but his favorite part was taking them off. Fleur's response was that he was even more like Bill than she thought. They also bought a few rather daring dresses to wear in the evenings. Those were also a success, as they managed to make the men's jaws drop each time they walked into the room displaying their new purchases.

Fleur was in heaven. She was a natural flirt, and having two male subjects that she could tease to her heart's content without having to worry about them becoming enthralled into incoherence was a dream come true for her. Hermione found herself mimicking the beautiful witch to a lesser extent, and she found she very much enjoyed the reactions she got from Harry, and Bill too for that matter. Flirting was something she had never done before, and she frankly hadn't thought she would be very good at it. This was a perfect environment for her to learn in, with one male being very receptive to her charms and the other who knew that it was just in fun.

Fleur had no trouble convincing Hermione to join her in topless sunning, and as expected the men were quite attentive. Hermione had told Harry that if she were going to go topless, he would have to also wear his briefest swimsuit. As soon as Fleur saw it, she insisted that Bill wear one like it. He adamantly refused to wear something that exposed himself so much – until Fleur put on an absolutely world class pout. Hermione noted that she did some sort of shrugging/wiggling motion with her shoulders that she would have to remember the next time she needed to persuade Harry to do something. As Fleur was topless at the time, it was even more devastatingly effective. As usual, Bill couldn't resist the sight. That time he lasted only a few minutes before he dragged Fleur away. In fact, the couple's 'disappearances' became a regular afternoon event. Needless to say, this left Harry and Hermione to entertain themselves frequently, but they always managed somehow.

On one of these occasions Hermione noticed Harry gazing at the bedroom in thought and she knew what he must be thinking. "So Harry," she asked as casually as she could, "are you wondering what it would be like to make love to a Veela?"

Harry turned back to her in surprise. "No, I was thinking about what it would be like to make love to you." Hermione gasped a little, but beamed back at him brightly. Then she lay there spellbound as he described his fantasy of the two of them living on a secluded beach, being able to be naked all day, making love whenever they felt like it. She couldn't believe how similar it was to her own fantasies and told him so while kissing him thoroughly.

Once he had recovered enough to speak again Harry confessed, "No, the reason I was staring at the bedroom was that I was wondering how many times we could do it in a day."

Hermione giggled. "Well, don't count on anything like this. I'm not a Veela and you don't have that werewolf stamina that Bill seems to have picked



up. But I'm sure we'll manage quite nicely."

Then Harry turned serious. "When do you want to get married?"

Hermione snuggled up to him and laid her head on his shoulder. "I originally thought we'd wait until after school, but with the time turner things are stretching out quite a bit," she pointed out. "Physically, we're already eighteen and nineteen and I'll probably be close to twenty by the time this is all over. What do you think?"

Harry leaned over to give her one of the little kisses on her forehead that she liked so much. Then he replied, "What you've been learning from Fleur – about the boost in magic we'll get and the closer connection we'll have? I think that might be important. Maybe we should consider it before we have to face him."

Hermione knew exactly what he was talking about, because she had pondered the same thing. "How about at Christmas?"

"Sounds perfect to me." They sealed this momentous decision with another breathtaking kiss.

While they were still cuddled together Hermione decided to lighten the mood a bit. "What do you and Bill talk about while we're out shopping?"

Harry shrugged, then gave her a teasing grin. "Curse breaking ... and beautiful women. Two in particular." Hermione blushed fetchingly. "What do you and Fleur talk about?"

Hermione returned the tease. "Handsome men, and how to make ourselves more beautiful for you." In fact, Fleur was showing Hermione things that the studious witch had never thought would interest her. How to use makeup in subtle ways to enhance her eyes, her cheekbones, and so forth. Different things to try with her hair. Even how to communicate her intentions through different postures.

These were all things that witches like Lavender, for example, already knew. But now Hermione had someone whom she respected to teach her these things. She was coming to realize that being a strong, intelligent, capable woman and being attractive, flirty, and feminine were not mutually exclusive things. She could be both, using her womanly wiles when and if she wanted to. The problem she had with girls like Lavender was that they pretty much only acted that way.

By end of the week, strong bonds had formed among the four of them. For his part, Bill was watching a beautiful woman emerge from Hermione to match the inner beauty she had always had. He found himself thinking that his youngest brother was a fool if he had had a chance at her and let her go.

For her part Hermione had always thought that Bill was the best looking of the Weasley boys, and intelligent as well. She now realized that she had harbored an inner hope that Ron would turn out like Bill, which had led to her excessive nagging of him, trying to change him into someone he wasn't. That in turn had been the cause of much of the strife between the two friends, since Ron's self-esteem issues had developed in him an ingrained resentment and resistance to exactly that. Hermione also found herself wondering what might have happened if she had been about ten years older, and been Head Girl when Bill was Head Boy, but she knew that she was perfectly satisfied with the way things were now.

From her point of view, Fleur wondered what would have happened if Harry had been older. She was sure that she would have gone after him instead of Roger Davies. She was pretty certain that she could have done better with him than Cho had, at least. But she realized that as long as Hermione was in the picture, it would likely only have been physical, given the love that Harry and Hermione had for each other.

On the other hand, Harry didn't spend much time at all thinking about 'what if'. Perhaps because he had spent most of his life wishing that his life were different, and what he had at the moment with Hermione was so much better than anything he had ever dreamed possible. He did find that he enjoyed Fleur's antics, once he was sure that Hermione was okay with them. Harry and Hermione both came to realize that it was all right to be physically attracted to someone else, and to enjoy looking at beautiful women or handsome men. It was not a betrayal of their love for each other, since they both knew that each wanted only the other.

-ooOoo-

On Sunday morning Harry and Hermione came to Brighton one last time to pick up Bill and Fleur and take them to Grimmauld Place. (Since the *Fidelius* charm had been recast, they needed to be reintroduced to the hidden house.) As they were making a final check of the beach house and preparing to close it up, Bill turned to the pair and asked a seemingly innocent question. "So have we missed anything this week?"

Harry and Hermione turned to face each other and burst out laughing. Once they had calmed down, Harry turned back to the puzzled couple who had been in blissful seclusion for the past six days and shook his head. "You have no idea."

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## Hermione's Plan Revelations

### Chapter 14, Revelations

When they had been shown the slip of paper with the location of the mansion, and settled into the room that had been set aside for them, Bill and Fleur joined the others down in the drawing room. Hermione first handed them a copy of the previous day's paper.

*The Daily Prophet*  
Saturday, 26 July, 1997

**Chosen One Chooses a Mate**  
**Harry Potter to Wed Longtime Friend**  
by Rita Skeeter

*Young witches' hearts will be breaking all over Britain this week as Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived, has announced his engagement to fellow Gryffindor Hermione Granger. The green-eyed, raven-haired wizard, who was certain to be added to the Most Eligible Wizard list next month after he comes of age, is thus off the market even before he was officially available.*

*As all readers of this paper know, Mr. Potter and Miss Granger have been best friends for many years, and have been rumored to be a couple since his participation in the Trivizard Tournament nearly three years ago. According to those who know them at Hogwarts, the pair has been nearly inseparable, even when they were dating others.*

*Both teens were involved in the capture of a large group of Death Eaters at the Ministry of Magic a year ago, and were again involved in the capture of an even larger group of Death Eaters during last week's attack on the Weasley residence. Clearly this is quite a powerful and magically gifted couple, and not a pair that one would want to cross. Miss Granger is widely regarded as the brightest and most capable witch at Hogwarts, and Mr. Potter's exploits need no further elaboration.*

*Although technically Mr. Potter will not be of age for another week, and thus cannot officially tender an offer of marriage until then, Miss Granger came of age last fall, and is already displaying a stunning engagement ring, said to have belonged to Mr. Potter's mother, Lily.*

*The Daily Prophet and this reporter would like to extend their congratulations to the couple, and offer our best wishes for their future happiness.*

*For more information on Potter and Granger's relationship during the Tri-Wizard Tournament, see reprinted articles on page 7.*

*For a related story on their romantic relationships with others, see article on page 8.*

*For an updated version of the account of James and Lily Potter's untimely deaths and the survival of the Boy Who Lived, see page 9.*

*For the current Most Eligible Wizard list, and speculation on where Mr. Potter would have placed, see page 10.*

Bill and Fleur read this without comment, since they were already aware of the information contained. Next Harry handed them the current day's paper.

*The Daily Prophet*  
Sunday, 27 July, 1997

**Boy Who Lived Makes a Statement**  
**Harry Potter Puts Fortune on the Line,**  
**Offers to Provide Protective Armor for Auror Corps**  
by Rita Skeeter

*In a display of generosity rarely witnessed in recent memory, Harry Potter has made an offer to purchase dragonhide armor for every member of the Auror Corps. This financial generosity rivals what had previously been considered to be the largest single donation ever made to the public welfare, by Lucius Malfoy to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries ten years ago. Indeed, one of the reasons given by Mr. Potter for his donation is his desire to "counter the influence of Death Eaters like Malfoy on our government." This statement refers to the fact that convicted Death Eater Lucius Malfoy was a well-known supporter of the prior Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge, which this reporter agrees raises suspicions about some of Fudge's actions while in office.*

*When asked why he chose this method of showing his support, Mr. Potter said, "The Aurors I've known are some of the bravest people I've ever met, and are out there putting their lives on the line every day. If we can provide them better equipment that might save their lives, or prevent*

serious injury, it would be a crime not to.” Returning to the previous topic, Mr. Potter added, “For years Voldemort and the Death Eaters have benefited from the support of wealthy pureblooded families like the Malfoys. I think it’s time to turn the tables and show that there are wealthy families willing to support the men and women who are fighting against this evil.”

In a followup question Mr. Potter was asked his views on the current Minister of Magic. “Well, anyone would be better than Fudge. At least he’s willing to acknowledge that Voldemort actually exists and that there is a war going on. He seems like he knows what he’s doing.” When it was pointed out that this was not exactly a ringing endorsement of the current administration, Mr. Potter elaborated. “Just what has he done, exactly? Perhaps there are things going on behind the scenes that the public is unaware of. But how many Death Eaters have been killed or captured during the last year by Aurors?”

As the readers of this paper well know, Mr. Potter was involved in every large-scale confrontation with Death Eaters that has occurred during the present struggle with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. What has not previously been revealed is that he personally has defeated more Death Eaters than the entire Auror Corps during that time. When this was pointed out to Mr. Potter his response was a grim smile. “In that case, I hope that this donation of dragonhide armor might lead to more aggressive tactics by the DMLE.”

Thus we see that there may be more to Mr. Potter’s donation than mere generosity. Perhaps he is also trying to send a message to the Ministry of Magic. To put things in perspective, a set of dragonhide armor would ordinarily represent a year’s salary for an Auror. Mr. Potter’s offer, therefore, has a monetary value in excess of half a million Galleons. Quite an expensive message. When asked to comment further, Mr. Potter had this to say.

“I’m troubled by the attitude of the Ministry. It seems to be a lot of talk with little action. And the actions they do take seem to be merely for show. For example, those security guidelines they put out last year were pretty worthless. Hide and hope the Aurors show up eventually. Well, if we had done that at the Weasleys’ last week we would all have been dead, and the Death Eaters would all have gotten away unharmed. People need to learn how to fight back, and if that’s not possible, they should have a means of escaping. Just last week I inquired about purchasing emergency escape portkeys from the Ministry for families of Hogwarts students, and they told me I was wasting their time. I’ll make them myself and pay the fine if I have to. It would be nice if the people in charge at the Ministry would take a little more interest in the safety of the public, instead of just worrying about looking good.”

This reporter feels that Mr. Potter has raised some interesting points, and that the current administration of the Ministry of Magic has some questions to answer, both about its activities and those of the former administration.

For a related article on Lucius Malfoy’s ties to Cornelius Fudge, and some of Fudge’s questionable actions, see page 4.

For an analysis of the activities of the current Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, since he has been in office, see page 5.

Bill let out a low whistle as he finished the article, and Fleur grinned at Harry. “Well, young Mr. Potter, you seem to be trying to stir things up at the Ministry of Magic. I assume you realize that at least one employee at the portkey office will likely lose their job over this?” Harry nodded with a grim expression on his face, and Hermione quickly related the story of their correspondence with the Department of Magical Transportation. Bill was about to comment on the expense of Harry’s actions, but refrained at a quick shake of the head from Hermione. As a Gringotts employee he was roughly aware of the extent of Harry’s holdings, and he realized that Harry didn’t want to make a big issue of his wealth, especially in front of Bill’s younger brother and sister.

Once that discussion had played out, Remus and Tonks gestured to Moody, who had just arrived with some parchment.

“While we’re laying all our cards on the table,” growled the grizzled old Auror. “I thought you lot ought to hear the transcript of our interrogation of Snape.” The room fell quiet as everyone eagerly leaned forward. Hermione quickly moved next to Harry and took hold of his hand. This had the potential to be upsetting, and also could raise some questions that they might be reluctant to answer. Moody conjured up a display screen and laid the parchment on a small table in front of it. At a tap from his wand the transcript was projected onto the screen.

### **Transcript of the Interrogation of Severus Snape**

24 July, 1997

Moody: “State your name.”

Snape : “Severus Snape”

Moody: “State your occupation.”

Snape : “Professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Most recently in Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

Moody: “Are you a Death Eater?”

Snape : “Yes”

Moody: “Did you kill Albus Dumbledore?”

Snape : “Yes”

Hermione tightened her grip on Harry’s hand, but he gave her a small squeeze back to let her know he was okay.

Moody: "Why did you kill Albus Dumbledore?"

Snape : "I made an Unbreakable Vow to Narcissa Malfoy."

Moody: "What did this vow entail?"

Snape : "I vowed to watch over Draco Malfoy, protect him to the best of my ability, and to carry out his mission should he fail."

Moody: "What was Draco Malfoy's mission?"

Snape : "To kill Albus Dumbledore."

Moody: "Did you know that this was his mission when you took the vow?"

Snape : "Yes"

Moody: "Would you have killed Albus Dumbledore had you not taken this vow?"

Snape : "No"

Moody: "Why did you take the vow, then?"

Snape : Bellatrix Lestrange maneuvered me into it. Had I refused, it would have exposed me as a traitor to the Dark Lord. At the time, I believed it would be better that I took the vow and remained in my capacity as a spy. I had hoped to find some way around it during the time it would take Draco to make whatever attempts he was going to make."

Moody: "How many other attempts did Draco make?"

Snape : "At least two that I was aware of. He refused to reveal his plans to me."

Moody: "Did Albus Dumbledore know of your Unbreakable Vow?"

Snape : "Yes. We discussed it on more than one occasion."

Moody: "What did he intend to do about it?"

Snape : "He believed that he could survive any of Draco's attempts, and that he could persuade Draco to abandon them. He agreed that I still had value as a spy. We argued on more than one occasion about the consequences of the vow. He believed that he would be able to restrain me when it came time for me to fulfill the vow."

Moody: "Did he think that your value as a spy was more important than his life?"

Snape : "I do not know."

Moody: "Do you think that your value as a spy was more important than his life?"

Snape : "No"

Moody paused the display while everyone had a chance to catch up and reflect on what they had heard. Several people looked over at Harry. "That pretty much agrees with what we already knew or guessed," he offered, while looking at Hermione who nodded her head in confirmation.

"Okay, let's continue," stated Moody.

Moody: "Did Albus Dumbledore believe that you were completely loyal to him?"

Snape: "I cannot answer that with certainty. I am aware that it was necessary for him to give such assurance to others on many occasions."

Moody: "What caused him to believe that you were loyal to him."

Snape: "Many years ago when I first became a Death Eater, I overheard a prophecy concerning the Dark Lord. I relayed this information to my lord and he acted upon it. This action led to him killing James and Lily Potter, and to the bizarre incident with Harry Potter that drove him out of his body and caused the public to believe that he had been destroyed. When I learned that James and Lily had been killed, I went to Albus and confessed what I had done and pleaded for a chance to make amends."

Moody: "So he believed that you had had a change of heart because you showed remorse?"

Snape: "Yes"

Moody: "And were you in fact remorseful over their deaths?"

Snape: "I felt remorse for Lily's death."

Moody: *"But not James?"*

Snape: *"No"*

Moody: *"What was different about Lily?"*

Snape: *"I wanted her. She was the only one who was my intellectual equal. And she was the only person who ever befriended me. The Dark Lord promised me that he would spare her life and give her to me. Instead she died and her accursed child survived."*

There were many sharp intakes of breath across the room, and Moody paused the transcript once more. Hermione felt Harry's hand clench hers painfully. She covered his hand with her other hand and he relaxed somewhat. This answered so many of the questions Harry had always had regarding his mother's death and Snape's treatment of him. It had not been because of Harry's resemblance to his father, at least not entirely. Snape hated him because Lily had died to save his life.

Harry turned toward her and their eyes met. She knew that he was thinking the same thing and it tore her heart to see the anguish in his eyes. Instinctively she reached up and pulled his head down to her shoulder as tears filled her eyes. Through her blurry vision she noted the reactions of the others in the room, which were a mixture of shock, horror, and disgust. Ginny, for whom so much of this was new, also appeared somewhat bewildered.

Finally everyone managed to compose themselves once more and Moody cleared his throat. "There's more upsetting information yet to come. Does everyone still want to go on?" No one was ready to stop now, and he continued.

Moody: *"Were you aware that the Potters' location was protected by a Fidelius charm?"*

Snape: *"Yes"*

Moody: *"Were you aware that the secret keeper was Peter Pettigrew?"*

Snape: *"Yes"*

Once again there was a series of gasps in the room, along with a growl from Remus.

Moody: *"Why did you allow Sirius Black to be sent to Azkaban?"*

Snape: *"He deserved it. He tried to kill me when we were students."*

Moody: *"Were you aware that Pettigrew was still alive?"*

Snape: *"No, I thought that Black really had killed him. It was the sort of thing that he would have done."*

"Damn him!" Remus had jumped out of his seat and Hermione felt Harry tense up under her hand on his arm. Tonks, her hair as red as her angry face, finally pulled Remus back into his seat. Moody, his own face as cold as stone, continued the transcript.

Moody: *"Were you completely loyal to Albus Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix?"*

Snape: *"No"*

Moody: *"Are you loyal to Lord Voldemort?"*

Snape: *"No. I am loyal only to myself. However, I wish for the Dark Lord to be defeated."*

Moody: *"In what way were you not loyal to Albus Dumbledore?"*

Snape: *"I did not agree with his plan for defeating the Dark Lord."*

Hermione could see puzzled looks being exchanged around the drawing room. But she was pretty sure she knew what Snape meant, and she suspected Harry and Ron did also. She wondered how Moody had decided where to take the questioning next.

Moody: *"Have you killed anyone since rejoining Voldemort two years ago?"*

Snape: *"No"*

Moody: *"Have you passed any information to Dumbledore that Voldemort would not have wanted revealed?"*

Snape: *"Yes"*

Moody: *"Have you passed any information to Voldemort in addition to that which Albus instructed you to give him?"*

Snape: *"Yes"*

Moody: *"Did you give information to Voldemort that led to the deaths of any Order members?"*

Snape: *"Yes"*

Moody: “How did you disagree with Dumbledore’s plan for defeating Voldemort?”

Snape: “He had the ridiculous idea that Potter would be the one to defeat him. Potter is a poor excuse for a wizard, no better than his arrogant, attention-seeking father.”

Moody: “Are you aware of the secret project Dumbledore was working on during the last year?”

Snape: “Yes. I helped heal his hand when he injured it while destroying Salazar’s ring.”

Moody: “Did you reveal any information regarding this project to Voldemort?”

Snape: “No. That part of his plan was sound. It was necessary for it to succeed in order for there to be any hope of destroying the Dark Lord.”

At this point Moody stopped the transcript. “The rest of it involves details of raids he took part in and specific people whom he betrayed to Voldemort.” He paused and stared at Harry with his magical eye. “I think we have quite a bit to talk about with regard to the information we’ve just seen.”

Harry met his gaze for a moment, then stood. “I’d like to discuss this with Ron and Hermione first. If you would excuse us.” Harry strode quickly into another room, with his two friends right behind him. Harry turned to face them as Ron closed the door and Hermione put up privacy wards. “What do you guys think?” he asked.

Ron and Hermione shared a look, and Ron let Hermione go first. “You already know my opinion, Harry,” she replied calmly. “I think we need all the help we can get. This task is too big for just the three of us. And we’ve already told bits of it to different people.”

Ron agreed. “You’re going to have to tell Bill, at least, about the Horcruxes, if he’s going to help us with them.”

“And Remus deserves to know about the prophecy,” Harry mused.

“It certainly wouldn’t hurt for all of them to know at least the part of the prophecy that Voldemort already knows,” Hermione pointed out. “And Dumbledore didn’t keep the Horcruxes secret from everyone since Snape knew about them.”

“You know, I think McGonagall knows more than she let on, too, from the way she was acting the other day,” Harry concluded. Hermione nodded in agreement.

“What about Ginny?” Ron asked. “I think she’s the one I’d most worry about giving something away. But on the other hand, she deserves to know about the diary.”

“I think you should tell Ginny, too,” Hermione responded. “What Ron said about the diary is right, and I think she’s proved herself. She *is* handling the whole situation with us much more maturely than I would have expected,” she added.

Harry straightened up and came to a decision, nodding slowly. “Okay, let’s do it.” Ron came up and put his arm around Harry’s shoulder, and Hermione moved to his other side and slipped her arm around his waist for a quick hug as the trio returned to the drawing room.

“Before we start,” Harry began, “is there some sort of secrecy pledge we can use that’s less drastic than an Unbreakable Vow?”

“We could take a Confidentiality Oath,” Tonks suggested, glancing over at Moody. “We use those routinely in the Auror Department. It keeps you from inadvertently revealing confidential information. You can override it if necessary, but it takes an effort.” Moody nodded his approval. Tonks quickly showed everyone how to take the oath, and a half dozen wands glowed briefly.

“All right,” Harry continued. “Some of you know parts of this already. Let’s start with the prophecy from the Department of Mysteries.”

“But it was destroyed, right?” Ginny blurted out. Fleur, standing next to her, put her arm on the nervous young redhead’s shoulder to settle her down. “Sorry,” the young girl mumbled.

“That’s okay,” Harry responded. “But let’s everyone try to hold back the questions until we’re finished. The others all nodded. “The prophecy was given to Professor Dumbledore, so he remembered it. The first part Voldemort already knows. That’s what Snape was talking about. He was spying on Dumbledore when it was made but he didn’t hear the whole thing.” Hermione noted that Harry specifically didn’t mention who had made the prophecy, and decided that was a good thing. “Here’s the part he heard. *‘The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies.’*”

Several people gasped, and Ginny whispered ‘Oh Sweet Merlin!’ Harry nodded grimly and continued. “There were two children who it could have been, me or Neville Longbottom. But Voldemort chose to attack me first, and according to Dumbledore that sealed the prophecy. This mark,” here he pulled back his hair to clearly display his scar, “is also mentioned, in the part of the prophecy he doesn’t know.”

There was silence in the room until Remus spoke up. “And that’s why James and Lily went into hiding.” Harry confirmed this with a nod.

“So did the Longbottoms,” added Moody. “I was their secret keeper. But when it looked like Voldemort was defeated they came out and returned to Longbottom Manor. Alice was torn – she was thankful it wasn’t Neville, but heartbroken about your mum. She tried to talk Dumbledore into giving you to her to raise, since that was the agreement she and Lily had, but he resisted. Just as well, I guess, seeing as what happened a month later.”

Remus noticed a few puzzled faces in the group, and added. "The Lestranges caught the Longbottoms by surprise and tortured them into insanity. Moody and a few other Aurors hunted them down and captured them a week later, and they were sentenced to Azkaban for life. Hermione had been watching Ginny during this exchange, and saw the shock and horror on her face, followed by a thoughtful expression as she processed this new information about the link between Harry and Neville.

"Neville deserves to know this, too," Hermione commented softly to Harry. He nodded and turned back to the others.

"So that's why Voldemort keeps trying to kill me. And it's why I have to prepare as best as I can to beat him. What it comes down to is him or me. One of us has to die." Tears were streaming down Ginny's face, and several of the others weren't much better off. Fleur wrapped an arm around her new sister-in-law, while wiping her own face with her other hand.

Hermione saw the awe growing in the eyes of their audience, and was well aware of how uncomfortable Harry would be if this went on. She moved to stand beside him and threaded her hand through his arm, while Ron appeared at his other side. "Dumbledore told this to Harry for the first time at the end of the last school year, and Harry told Ron and me last summer. The two of us are going stand beside him all the way to the end."

Once again, Hermione kept an eye on Ginny to monitor the young witch's reaction. She saw how her face changed as she realized just how much had been kept from her for the past year, and just how superficial her relationship with Harry had actually been. Fleur was doing the same thing, and put her arm around the younger girl once again.

Bill's thoughts had gone along different lines. "You know Mum will throw a fit when she hears about that," he pointed out. The room, though, suddenly went quiet as everyone else recalled the condition Molly was in as a result of the attack on the Burrow. In her current state, she would likely not even acknowledge that such a thing was a possibility.

Moody broke the silence. "Do you have any idea what this power is that you're supposed to have?"

Harry shared a glance with Hermione. "Dumbledore had some vague idea that it was my ability to love, which Voldemort is incapable of, or my persistence. Hermione and I have some other ideas, but we want to keep them to ourselves."

Moody frowned and regarded them thoughtfully. "Anything to do with some of that strange stuff you pulled off last week?" Harry shrugged noncommittally. "This is the reason for all the training this summer, then?" Harry nodded. "Need any help?"

"We'd appreciate it, yes," Harry responded gratefully, then added, "Maybe you can get together with Hermione later. She's the one who keeps track of our schedule."

"There's more to this story, though," Hermione broke in, before everyone got started talking about training schedules. "Go on, Harry," she encouraged.

"Before we can think about facing him there's something else we have to do first," Harry announced to a suddenly quiet room. "Voldemort's found a way to effectively make himself immortal. That's why he didn't completely die the first time. He's split his soul and ..."

"He's made a Horcrux?!" exclaimed Bill.

Everyone turned to stare at Bill. Harry managed to recover first. "You know about Horcruxes?"

"Of course," Bill replied, still shaken by the revelation. "The ancient Egyptians were obsessed with immortality and used them – or tried to. Not many were successful. Still, it's something every curse breaker working in that part of the world needs to be aware of and able to deal with. Every once in a while you run across one in a tomb." He shuddered, causing the others to realize that it probably wasn't exactly a pleasant experience.

Hermione found herself thinking that this was one time that Dumbledore's penchant for keeping everyone in the dark about what was going on had backfired. If Bill's knowledge had been available during the past year, how might things have turned out differently? But this new information raised some important questions. "Do you know how to detect them?" she blurted out. "And more importantly, do you know how to destroy them?"

"What I want to know," Ron broke in, "is if some of these old Egyptian guys made Horcruxes, how come they aren't still around?"

"Whoa, whoa, one at a time," Bill interrupted. "First, yes, I know how to detect them. Second, yes, they can be destroyed, but it depends on what state they're in and whether they've been activated or not. Third, some of the ancient Egyptians did in fact live a long time, and even came back to life by taking over the life force of someone else. But once that body is used up, they eventually die. And most of them didn't have enough power to create a body of their own, so their Horcruxes are still lying around, waiting for someone to activate them."

Harry and Hermione shared an uncomfortable glance. That sounded eerily like what had happened to Ginny. Bill continued without noticing. "So the most important thing is to be able to destroy one without letting it possess you. But back to the issue here. Voldemort made a Horcrux?"

"Not exactly," Harry said in a low voice. "He made six of them. He split his soul seven ways."

Now it was Bill's turn to be shocked into silence. Remus broke in at this point. "So what you have to do first is locate and destroy all of these Horcruxes, and only then can you even hope to defeat Voldemort?"

Harry nodded. "Otherwise his spirit still hangs around like it did the first time. He managed to possess Quirrell our first year. I killed him at the end of the year, and Voldemort's spirit escaped again until he managed to create a new body and join with it the night of the third task of the Tri-Wizard tournament."

Remus considered this for a moment. "But that's not something that only you can do, is it? We could help you with that part?"

Yes, that's what I was hoping Bill could help us out with. Now I see that he could be even more valuable than I had hoped."

Fleur took Bill's hand and promptly spoke up. "Of course, we will help you with this." Hermione noticed the emphasis on the word 'we' and knew that Fleur's feelings about sharing this task with her loved one matched her own.

Bill finally recovered from his surprise. "Do you have any idea of what and where they are?"

Harry nodded. "We've already destroyed two of them, and we have a lead on a third, and we're pretty sure what object he used for the fourth one. Dumbledore thinks his snake is one as well." Harry paused and shared a long look with Hermione, then Ron. Ron shrugged. Harry drew a deep breath. "One was Slytherin's ring that Snape mentioned. Dumbledore destroyed that last summer, but his hand was burned to a crisp doing it." He turned to where Bill was standing by Fleur and Ginny, seated together on a sofa. "The other was the diary that I destroyed in the Chamber of Secrets."

Ginny's hand went to her mouth as a horrified expression engulfed her face while Bill shouted, "Of course! That's how he possessed Ginny her first year! Why didn't I realize that before?"

Fleur's arms went around Ginny and she pulled her onto her lap as the smaller girl broke down into sobs. Ron crossed the room to kneel down in front of his sister and put his arms around her too. Remus, Tonks, and Moody just looked on, shocked once again. Hermione's hand found Harry's and she gave it a squeeze, receiving an acknowledging one in return. This was turning into quite an emotional afternoon.

Meanwhile Bill was still muttering, berating himself. The family had wanted to put the horrible episode behind them and move on, so he had put it out of his mind. They had even come to visit him in Egypt the following summer. If he had made the connection, they would have had a three-year head start on finding and destroying the Horcruxes. Finally Harry and Hermione came over and spoke briefly with him, persuading him to let it go and move forward. When everyone had calmed down they got down to specifics.

"If you want me to take on this project," Bill pointed out, "I can put a team together but it will cost a lot of money. Yes, you will be part of it," he hastily added to Fleur, who was giving him a hard look."

Harry smiled. "Would a million galleons be enough?" Bill swallowed hard and allowed that yes, that would probably cover it.

"Now," he went on, "you said two have already been destroyed. Can you give me the details?"

"We just watched Dumbledore's memory of the ring the other night," Hermione replied. "He put the ring on and something happened. He appeared to be fighting something off, then he cast a spell on it while it was still on his finger." She shuddered. The sight had sickened them. "The ring glowed brightly and finally the stone cracked, then whatever was fighting him weakened and he was finally able to throw it off. His hand was burnt beyond recognition."

She was unable to continue so Harry took over. "By this point he was incredibly weak, but he managed to call Snape who brought him a potion, which eventually revived him. That's the part we just saw in Snape's interrogation."

Bill nodded thoughtfully. "Well I guess that just goes to show that even Dumbledore made mistakes on occasion. That's probably the worst way he could have done it. I don't think anyone who wasn't as powerful as Dumbledore would have survived that." He looked around at the others in the room. "By putting on the ring, he inadvertently activated it. They're designed so that they're activated by some normal activity, like putting on the ring."

"Or writing in a diary," Ginny whispered, her face white as a sheet. Bill gave a grim nod of agreement.

"In this case, the spirit tried to possess him directly. He was able to fight it off. While that was happening he managed to destroy the Horcrux, which broke the soul fragment's anchor and eventually weakened it enough that he could defeat it. The better method is to destroy the Horcrux first, then cast a spell to eliminate the soul fragment as it emerges. In his defense, though, there is usually a strong compulsion spell on the Horcrux to make you perform the act that will activate it."

"I know what you mean," Harry added. "When I found the diary I couldn't resist writing in it. Was it the same for you, Ginny?" Ginny nodded, and Hermione could see that she was relieved to hear that she wasn't the only one who succumbed. She was pretty sure that was one of the reasons that Harry had mentioned it, and reached out to give him a squeeze to show that she realized what he had done and admired him for it.

"Now, in Ginny's case I think it was different," Bill continued. "The soul fragment possessed her but wasn't satisfied with that. Evidently he wanted his own body, not hers. I was never clear on exactly what happened there."

Harry thought for a moment. "Would you like to see a pensieve memory of it?"

It only took a few minutes to retrieve Dumbledore's pensieve and explain how it worked to those who weren't familiar with the process. Moody informed them that it was possible to project the memory into the room so that they didn't all have to put their heads in at once. Harry consulted with Ron for a while about the incident to decide how much to show, and to help bring the memory firmly to his mind. Hermione was eagerly awaiting this, since she had missed the whole thing while lying petrified in the hospital wing. Finally everything was ready. Hermione noticed that Ron had gone over to stand by Ginny and had his arm around her shoulders. This was going to be difficult for the young witch to relive, but she was determined to go through with it.

The memory began with the two boys shoving Lockhart into Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Everyone smiled as Moaning Myrtle flirted with an embarrassed Harry, then grew silent as the sink opened up and the entrance to the Chamber appeared. There was a disorienting feeling as they slid down, pipes rushing past them on both sides, and suddenly they were stopped again in the slimy tunnel beneath the school.



“Didn’t either of you ever learn the *Scourgify* charm?” Hermione muttered and everyone chuckled as the tension was broken momentarily.

“Hermione, we were only second years,” Ron grumbled. “How many second years know that spell?”

“At least one that I know of,” Harry teased the witch beside him, and everyone laughed again as Hermione’s cheeks turned pink. Then the onlookers gasped as the shape of a large snake came into view.

“That’s just a skin,” Ron pronounced calmly as they moved past. Hermione wondered at the smirk on Harry’s face, then realized that this twenty foot snake skin was small compared to the real thing that was still ahead. There were angry mutterings from the rest of the party as they watched Lockhart attempt to oblivate the boys with Ron’s wand, only to have the spell backfire on him. “Bloody git!” Ron snarled at the phantom Lockhart and there was general consensus on that sentiment around the room.

“This is as far as I went,” Ron declared after the dust cleared from the cave in and they saw the wall of rock separating the two boys. Everyone quieted again as they made their way down the tunnel and paused before the wall with the two entwined serpents. They all jumped when the Harry of the vision hissed and the wall slid apart. They were now in the inner Chamber.

Ginny began weeping and Ron’s arm tightened around her as the giant statue of Salazar Slytherin came into view. No one else noticed at first the small red-haired girl lying on the floor beneath the statue’s feet.

“*Ginny!*” came the whisper from vision Harry. The older Ginny’s eyes went wide as they watched younger Harry race toward her smaller self and plead with her to still be alive. And everyone jumped again along with the younger boy when the soft voice spoke from behind them.

“She won’t wake.” Except for Harry and Ginny, it was the first time any of them had ever seen young Tom Riddle. Even Moody hadn’t made his acquaintance until later when he had turned himself into the ugly snake-faced monster rechristened as Lord Voldemort.

The onlookers stood entranced during the exchange between Harry and Tom in the vision, as Harry struggled to pick up Ginny’s unconscious form. The real life Ginny flushed bright red as the ethereal Tom mockingly told of the secrets she had confided to the diary, how *‘she didn’t think famous, good, great Harry Potter would ever like her...’*

Bill suddenly gasped as he heard a revealing statement from Tom, *‘...start pouring a little of my soul back into her...’*

Finally the verbal sparring was over and the spellbound viewers watched as Fawkes came gliding into the chamber and dropped the sorting hat at Harry’s feet. There were shrieks from Fleur, Ginny, and Ron, and shouts from Remus and Tonks as the basilisk slithered out of the mouth of the statue, and a moan escaped from Hermione, even though she knew it was coming, as she clutched onto Harry’s arm. Ron began cheering as the spectral Harry picked up the sword and started swinging at the serpent.

The cheers quickly ceased when they saw Harry slide down the wall with the basilisk fang protruding from his arm. Even though they knew he had come through all right, it was still painful to watch him dying. Everyone watched in awe as Fawkes laid his head on the wound and soaked it with his tears. There was a communal wince as they heard Riddle’s taunting words, *‘So ends the famous Harry Potter.’*

“This is the part you’ll want to watch closely,” Harry informed them as they watched Fawkes drop the diary in front of his younger self. A hush fell over the watchers as the twelve-year-old boy seized the basilisk fang from the floor and plunged it into the book. There was a long, dreadful, piercing scream ... ink spurted out of the diary ... Riddle was writhing and screaming ... and then he was gone.

Bedlam erupted. Ron and Tonks were cheering, Ginny was screaming insults at the spot where Riddle had stood, and Fleur’s mouth hung open in awe as she turned to regard Harry with tears in her eyes. Hermione had her arms around him in a fierce hug and Remus looked on with pride in his eyes. Bill stood still staring at the scene before him, nodding in satisfaction, and Moody did likewise.

Harry ended the memory at the point where his younger self was helping Ginny to her feet and when everyone had finally settled down they all turned to Bill to hear his analysis. “That was what I had suspected,” he announced. “He wasn’t satisfied to merely possess her, he wanted to use her life force to come back in his own body. Like I said before, that’s considerably more difficult, and it takes some time. Fortunately, you got him at a vulnerable point in the transformation. You destroyed the Horcrux just in time. Much later and he would have been completely free of it.” Everyone in the room shuddered at that thought, and Ron put an arm around Ginny once more as she buried her head in his shoulder.

Bill turned to Harry again. “Now, you said you knew about two more?” Harry revealed Dumbledore’s reasoning about Hufflepuff’s cup and told the tale of the locket. Ginny and Tonks both had looks of disbelief that they had had one in their grasp without knowing it.

“It’s lucky we didn’t break it open back then when we didn’t know what it was,” Ron declared. “Remember, Ginny even banged it on the table.”

Bill’s eyes shot toward Ginny in alarm. “Were you tempted to put it on?”

Ginny shrugged and admitted. “A little bit. But with everyone thinking it was a dark object I didn’t dare, especially after the diary.”

Bill’s expression was solemn as he regarded them all. “Since it’s a locket, wearing it is probably the activation trigger. For the cup it’s probably drinking something from it.” He looked back at Ginny once more. “If we get it back here, I don’t want Ginny anywhere near that locket. She’s going to be the most susceptible to possession. I didn’t tell you yet what the backup plan for curse breakers is if we come across a Horcrux and don’t destroy the spirit before it possesses someone.”

His voice took on a grim tone. “Let’s just say I don’t want to have to kill my sister.”

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## Hermione's Plan Reactions

### Chapter 15, Reactions

Monday, July 28

The reactions across the wizarding world to the weekend newspaper stories about Harry and Hermione varied dramatically. The ones that would likely have most amused the young couple could be found in the houses of certain female Hogwarts students. In one such house Parvati Patil was visiting Lavender Brown ...

"I don't believe it!" Lavender exclaimed as she handed the paper back to Parvati. After all those times when she insisted that they were just friends!"

"When did we ever believe her, though?" Parvati responded with a shrug.

"Well, last year when she went after Ron," Lavender pointed out.

"Apparently she got over him," Parvati giggled.

"So, she's finally got Harry," Lavender sighed, leaning back in her armchair. I guess we should have known it all along. Remember the look on her face when Harry asked you to the Yule Ball?"

"Oh yeah, that was priceless," Parvati recalled. "But what about the look she had when you started sucking Ron's face off?"

Lavender shrugged. "Well, she was just weird last year, I suppose."

Parvati leaned forward with a sly look. "So, now that Ron's available again, are you going to try another time with him?"

"Maaaybe," Lavender said coyly. "What about you?"

"Nah, he's not my type," Parvati declared. Then the sly look returned. "Perhaps Padma?" Peals of laughter rang out from both girls as they recalled Ron's disastrous Yule Ball date with the other Patil twin.

Lavender turned a quizzical eye toward Parvati. "So, who's your type?"

Parvati shrugged, attempting to project an air of unconcern. "Oh, you know, dark hair, slender, mysterious ..."

"Green eyes?" Lavender added softly. Parvati nodded unhappily. "I'm sorry Parvati," Lavender sympathized, reaching out to put a hand on her friend's arm. "After he asked you to the Yule Ball and then took up with Cho, I was sure he went for dark haired girls.

"I'm not sure he has a type," said Parvati thoughtfully. "Look at last year. He dated Ginny for a few weeks and he asked Luna Lovegood of all people to Slughorn's party. What on earth do those two have in common?"

Lavender pondered this seeming contradiction. "Just that they're both loyal friends," she finally concluded.

"And who's his most loyal friend?" Parvati countered. Both girls nodded knowingly, satisfied that they had solved the mystery.

"I guess his type now is plain-looking bushy-haired smart girls who don't shave their legs," quipped Lavender in an attempt to lighten the conversation.

"Ewww," both girls chorused. "I bet she shaves them now," Lavender laughed.

"You actually think our shy bookworm has let him see her legs?" Parvati asked in surprise.

"Yea-aah." Lavender stared strangely at Parvati until the Indian girl recalled Hermione's clothing habits and gasped.

"You don't think ...?" Parvati began, raising her hand to her mouth in surprise, "he's seen her naked!" she continued breathlessly. "Or that she's seen him ..." Her eyes unfocused slightly as that thought lodged in her mind.

"Guess we'll have to ask her when we see her again." Both girls dissolved in giggles.

"Hmmm, now what about Ron?" Lavender cocked her head to the side as another thought occurred to her. "You know, Hermione doesn't wear a bra sometimes."

"Lavender, when Hermione or I don't wear a bra, no one notices. If you don't wear a bra *everyone* will notice!"

"Well, that's the point, isn't it?" Another round of giggles ensued.

"Snogging his brains out and giving him an eyeful didn't work last time," Parvati pointed out after they had regained their composure.

"Trust me, that wasn't the problem last time," Lavender declared confidently.

"Oh?"

"Me freaking out that Hermione would get him back and getting all clingy was the problem," Lavender continued. "And we won't have *that* problem this year will we?"

-ooOoo-

In another house in the southeastern part of England Luna Lovegood was having breakfast with her father.

"What do you think about the story about Harry and Hermione Daddy?" Luna asked absently as she attempted to balance a spoon on the edge of her goblet.

"Fantastic!" he replied, looking up from his notes about another Heliopath sighting at the Ministry of Magic. "Best selling issue we've had since the last Potter interview. Bit of a surprise, though, what?" Luna returned a blank look. "Well, it's just that last year you seemed convinced that the Granger girl was going to end up with Arthur Weasley's youngest boy." Luna shrugged, but the keen eye of her father noted that she wasn't as unconcerned about this conversation as she was pretending. He reached out and took his daughter's hand.

"What do you think, pumpkin? You had a date with him at Christmas time didn't you?"

"He's the only boy who's ever really been nice to me Daddy," Luna responded with a far-away expression. "But I never thought of us as anything more than friends. I actually always expected him to end up with Hermione, despite what poor Ginny wanted. I was quite surprised with the way Hermione acted last year, actually. It's just that ..." she began, then stopped, then began again, staring off at an unknown point in the distance. "It would be nice if some other boys could be more like him."

"A certain other boy?" he asked softly.

"You'd think with as much time as they spend together some of that niceness would rub off," she replied wistfully.

"Perhaps this year he will have matured," he offered encouragingly. "Seeing your best friends get engaged can do that to a boy."

"Perhaps."

-ooOoo-

Further north, in a wizarding home near Birmingham, Hannah Abbott was reviewing the news with her best friend. "Suse, did you hear about Harry and Hermione?"

"Yeah, it's about time," the other girl replied.

"What do you mean?" Hannah protested. "I thought she was going after Ron Weasley?" Susan shook her head. Hannah had been living with the Bones family after her mother had been killed the previous fall. She had missed a large part of the school year, although she was planning on going back for her seventh year. Susan had filled her in on the Granger-Weasley-Brown-McClaggen drama that had played out during the year, but had her own thoughts on the situation.

"I'll grant that there were some weird things going on last year. But Hannah, in previous years, especially when we were in the DA with them, think about the times you've seen them together. How did Harry and Hermione act around each other?"

"Like they cared about each other and would do anything for each other."

"And Ron and Hermione?"

"Either like they'd do anything for each other or like they wanted to kill each other," Hannah replied, nodding her head as she found herself coming to agreement with Susan's assessment. Not the best foundation for a stable relationship, at least from a Hufflepuff's point of view. But this brought her back to one of her original reasons for bringing up the article on the Gryffindors' betrothal.

"So, anyway, Ron's available now."

Susan gave her a mischievous grin. "You think maybe he needs a little Hufflepuff love?"

Hannah's response was a deliberately casual shrug. "Maybe." After an appropriate pause she continued. "Seems to me that he prefers blondes."

Susan regarded her light haired friend with a sly smile. "Oh, I don't know. I think he's more interested in what's up top," she replied while thrusting her chest out. Susan was one of the more well-endowed girls of her year.

"Hermione's not exactly stacked," Hannah objected.

“She’s not blonde either,” Susan countered.

“But Lavender Brown is,” they chorused, each referring to the aspect of the buxom, golden-maned Gryffindor witch that would support her own argument.

“So, how are we going to get to him before she does?” Hannah wondered.

“You know, his house was destroyed in that attack,” Susan mused. “I wonder where he’s living now.”

“Another possible refugee to be taken in at the Bones house?” Hannah suggested.

“We’ll see.” Susan responded. “I’ll ask my dad to make some inquiries at the Ministry.”

-ooOoo-

It was shaping up to be a very interesting school year for Ron Weasley.

-ooOoo-

Not all of the reactions to the weekend news were quite so narrowly focused. While Parvati was visiting Lavender, her twin was hosting a gathering of the Ravenclaw girls who were about to begin their last year at Hogwarts – herself, Lisa Turpin, Mandy Brocklehurst, Su Li, and Morag McDougal.

“I take it you are all aware of the news,” Padma began.

“About Potter and Granger?” Mandy responded. “Yeah, who would have thought it?”

“Only about half of the school,” Lisa retorted dryly. “Haven’t you been paying attention for the past six years?”

“Yes, I have, and in case you didn’t notice, Granger had the hots for Ron Weasley last year,” Mandy protested. “And Potter took up with Ginny Weasley at the end of the year.”

“Well, be that as it may,” Padma broke in. “Harry and Hermione are together now.”

“That means Ron is available now, though,” Lisa teased, knowing what reaction that would get from the Indian girl. As she expected, Padma made gagging noises.

“Hey, speak for yourself!” Mandy objected. “Some of us happen to think he’s cute.” Morag and Lisa nodded in agreement.

“Look, I didn’t ask you all over here to talk about Ronald Weasley’s love life,” snapped Padma irritably.

“No, you asked us over to talk about Potter and Granger’s love life,” Lisa countered. “What’s so important about that?”

“It’s not just that,” Padma explained. “Look, who do you think is going to be Head Girl next year?”

“Probably either you or Granger,” came the response.

“No, Granger, for sure.” “Yeah, can you see McGonagall picking anyone else?” “Yeah, you’re right.” “Sorry, Padma.” The rapid fire of voices eventually settled down as a consensus was reached.

“And who do you think is going to be Head Boy?” Padma continued after waving off the condolences. She had expected it to be Hermione all along, so wasn’t that disappointed.

“I don’t know, probably Terry or Anthony,” suggested Mandy.

“Maybe Ernie Macmillan,” offered Lisa. “He’s been angling for it since second year.

“Nope,” Padma insisted. “It’ll be Harry.”

“Potter? You have to be kidding. His grades are barely average,” came the objections from several of the girls.

Padma shook her head. “Head Boy’s about more than grades. Leadership is a big factor. Ask yourself who would make you most comfortable with your decision to go back to Hogwarts after everything that’s happened.” As the assembled Ravensclaws pondered her assertion, the frowns slowly turned to grudging looks of acceptance.

“Ooohh,” Mandy broke in. “Potter and Granger will be sharing the Head suite in Gryffindor tower then. Won’t that be convenient?” Knowing smiles were exchanged around the room.

“Hope she knows the *Contraceptus* charm,” Lisa grinned, causing a few gasps and some giggles.

“Oh sure, like there’s any charm that Granger doesn’t know,” Morag pointed out.

“Well, it’s possible that Granger never thought she’d need that one,” smirked Mandy.

“Oooh, meow, meow,” came the cries from the rest of the room, as the giggles turned to full-blown laughter.

"Look, you can all speculate on her virtue or lack thereof on your own time," Padma broke in, trying to get them back on track. She shook her head. For a bunch of intelligent girls, this group could gossip as much as her air-headed sister. "I want to talk about something more serious. That second story this weekend was at least as important as the first one. It's pretty clear to me that Harry Potter, and by extension Hermione Granger, are going to be the most influential wizard and witch of our generation." She paused to let that assertion sink in.

"Now, we need to decide what we're going to do. If we support them now, work with them, that could have a major effect on our careers in the long run. If this war ends with Harry being the conquering hero, any friend of his is going to be in big demand." She paused again, then continued in a somber voice. "If he loses it won't really matter one way or the other, unless anyone here is planning on throwing your lot in with You-Know-Who and the Death Eaters."

She looked around the room pointedly. There was a bit of squirming and some uncomfortable glances, but Padma already knew that there were no Voldemort sympathizers in this lot. She wouldn't have invited anyone who was at all questionable. Besides, the deaths of three of their classmates and the imprisonment of three others as a result of the attack on the Weasley home were a powerful counterinducement for anyone who might have been leaning that way.

"That's easy for you to say, Padma," Mandy pointed out. "You already know them. Some of us have gotten to know Granger from Runes or Arithmency classes, but I doubt if Potter could even tell the three of us apart." She motioned to herself, Morag, and Su Li. "Well, given our names, he could probably figure out which one is Su since she looks like Cho," she joked. Su groaned. She and Cho didn't really look that much alike. It was just her luck that the only two Chinese girls at Hogwarts would be sorted into the same house, leading to the inevitable comparisons. On the other hand, if she had been so fortunate as to have Harry Potter notice her, she was sure that she would have been able to do much better with him than Cho had done.

"Oh, right," Morag broke in. Speaking of that, I so much want to be there the next time Cho Chang and Granger see each other and Granger flashes her ring in Cho's face." This effectively dispelled the grave mood that had settled on the room as a result of Padma's unpleasant but accurate assessment of the situation.

"My money's on Granger in any hexing duel that might break out," Lisa declared. The nods and smiles indicated that no one would be willing to wager against her on that particular contest.

"Well, despite your best efforts to change the subject, that leads me to my main topic," Padma announced. "It looks like Harry and Hermione are going to reorganize their defense study group from fifth year. And my guess is that it's probably going to turn into an army to help defend Hogwarts if there's another attack this year. My challenge to you is whether you want to be part of it or sit on the sidelines and watch. For me, I'm with them all the way."

Silence descended on the room, as each girl pondered the choice she had laid before them. Lisa, who was Padma's best friend in the house and who had known in advance what Padma had planned, had already made her decision. While the others thought some more about it she asked another question. "How do you know all of this, Padma? Has your sister been in contact with them?"

Padma shook her head. "No, this comes from Luna Lovegood." The other three girls broke away from their deliberations to stare at her in surprise. "Harry told her last week and she contacted me yesterday."

"Looney?" came the predictable objection. "Why would he confide in her?"

Padma sighed. The gross underestimation of the unusual girl by the rest of the girls in her house was getting tiresome. "In case any of you didn't know, Luna is one of Harry's closest friends. She was one of the five who fought at the Ministry with him the night You-Know-Who was exposed last year. And she was one of the ones who responded to the invasion of the school by those Death Eaters the night Dumbledore was killed. Loyalty means a lot to Harry." She looked down at her feet, clearly ashamed. "Of all of us in the DA, she and Neville Longbottom were the only ones who responded to the summons for help Hermione sent out – besides Ron and Ginny of course." She raised her head with a determined look in her eye. "That's NOT going to happen again."

Padma waited for this information to sink in, then concluded. "Look, Terry, Anthony, Michael, and I were the only Ravenclaws from our year in the DA. It was mostly Gryffindors, but there were also five Hufflepuffs. I would like to see our house better represented. My father has some contacts in the DMLE, and from the stories going around there about the attack on the Weasleys it's pretty clear that Harry and Hermione have put in some serious studying with regards to defense spells this summer. I want to learn as much about how to defend myself as I can, and I know from experience that he can teach it. Yes, it could be dangerous. But it might just save your lives."

Four Ravenclaw girls returned home that afternoon with some serious contemplation ahead of them.

-ooOoo-

At Daphne Greengrass's home the mood was serious from the start. The decimation of Slytherin House the week before had been a brutal wake up call. Two thirds of the students in their year were dead or in prison as a result of that raid, and Tracey Davis had come over to confer with Daphne on their possible courses of action. Preferably one that wouldn't get them killed.

The two Slytherins were an oddly matched pair, but were inseparable. Where Daphne was tall, slender, and shapely, with silky blonde hair, and was considered by her classmates as likely to have a lucrative modeling career ahead of her, Tracey was short and stocky, and wore her hair close cropped. Daphne had a reputation as a bit of a flirt, and as a result her intelligence was constantly being underestimated. Tracey had a serious, no-nonsense reputation, which covered up a bitingly clever wit. Academically, they were the top students in their house. Both girls had been in a minority position in Slytherin house, wanting nothing to do with Malfoy and his band of Death Eaters in training. As a result they generally kept to themselves, their friendships with students of other houses constrained by the unsavory reputation of their own house.

“So what do you think will happen to us now that Malfoy’s gone?” Daphne asked. “He and Parkinson have pretty much everything their way up until now.”

“Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, and Bulstrode are gone too,” Tracey added. “Zabini’s the only one left from that crowd, and he just goes whichever way the wind blows.”

“So it’s up to us to decide,” Daphne concluded. “Do we lay low and try to stay out of it and risk retaliation anyway for not supporting the dark lord or just come out and show our support for Potter?”

“I think it’s time,” Tracey intoned gravely, “to change the reputation of Slytherin House. Ambition and cunning don’t have to be bad things. It wouldn’t hurt the good guys to have some crafty people involved in planning strategy. Blindly rushing into a fight like the Weasleys did often gets you killed.”

“So, how do we go about getting on Potter’s good side?” Daphne asked.

“We have to show him we can be trusted. It wouldn’t hurt to make a good impression on the other two thirds of the Gryffindor golden trio either.”

“I think I might be able to catch Weasley’s eye,” Daphne purred, tossing her hair back and running her hands sensuously down her sides.”

Tracey laughed. Weasley wouldn’t know what hit him. “Well, I think I can get along pretty well with Granger. She’s less judgmental than most of the Gryffindors, and we’ve collaborated successfully on a couple of Arithmency projects.”

Relieved that they had come up with a satisfactory solution, the pair of Slytherins turned to less momentous topics for the remainder of the morning.

-ooOoo-

The reactions of the male students of Hogwarts to the weekend news had gone along somewhat different lines. Dean Thomas’s conversation with his best mate Seamus Finnigan was fairly representative of one type of reaction.

“Potter and Granger, huh?” Seamus replied when Dean informed him of the couple’s status after the meeting of the muggleborns he had attended. “After all those years as best friends they finally decided to take it further.”

“It sure surprised me,” Dean admitted. “I thought she was going to end up with Ron. Not that I’m complaining, mind you.” Seamus grinned at his buddy. He knew that Dean still fancied Ginny, and now his rival for her affections was out of the picture.

“Nah, those two were never right together. They would have ended up killing each other. Still, Harry always seemed to go for prettier girls than Hermione.”

“Well, speaking of that, you won’t believe how much better she looks now,” Dean responded. “I can’t really put my finger on what’s different, but she’s really changed.”

Seamus was skeptical. “We’ll see. But the important point is, there will be a lot of girls who have been mooning after the Chosen One who are going to be available for the rest of us now. Especially a certain cute little redhead?” he teased.

“And maybe a dark haired dark skinned beauty?” Dean teased right back. Seamus had long thought that Parvati was the prettiest girl at Hogwarts. From there the conversation quickly turned into a teasing match between two young wizards.

-ooOoo-

The conversation between Justin Finch-Fletchley and Ernie Macmillan went in another direction. The two Hufflepuffs had met to discuss the reforming of the DA, and the subject of the *Daily Prophet* articles came up.

“I knew it!” Ernie announced. “I knew those two would end up together.”

“All right, I’ll grant you that,” Justin conceded, “but I think you’re missing the larger implication here. About them being engaged,” he added. The look on Ernie’s face indicated that he had no idea what the implication was. “The pressure is on the rest of us now,” Justin explained. “Every seventh year girl who sees that ring is going to get ideas. We’ll all have to think twice before getting into a serious relationship.”

Ernie nodded as he processed this information. “I was thinking of a different implication from this other news, though,” he said. Possibly an even larger one than what you thought of.” Justin leaned forward and Ernie continued in a lower voice. “I think Harry and Hermione are lining up allies. And I think we want to make sure we’re part of it. Justin nodded and the two of them spent the next hour discussing what their role might be in the plans of the pair of Gryffindors.

-ooOoo-

Head Auror Gawain Robards grinned broadly to himself as he sat in his office at the Ministry of Magic. Harry Potter’s interviews in the *Daily Prophet* and the *Quibbler* over the weekend had the place in an uproar, and he couldn’t be happier. He had long thought that Rufus Scrimgeour was too full of himself when he had been in the position Robards currently occupied, and was too preoccupied with political posturing. It had in fact earned him the Minister’s chair after the death of the most obvious candidate, Amelia Bones, but Robards didn’t begrudge him that as he personally had no interest in higher office.

His current irritation with the Minister was his overly cautious approach to the war they were currently fighting. Or not fighting. Mostly they were merely reacting to Death Eater attacks – interviewing witnesses, obliterating muggles, and then doing nothing but making meaningless announcements and gestures like arresting that pathetic Shunpike character. No raids on suspected Death Eaters. No aggressive investigations

or punitive actions. They hadn't even confiscated the assets of the Death Eaters they had caught red-handed a year ago. So he was quite pleased that Harry Potter had stirred things up with his blunt assessment of the Ministry's actions.

He had met with Potter the previous week, having been introduced by Kingsley Shacklebolt. Shack's glowing description of the kid was enough on its own to recommend him, but he had taken an immediate liking to him. Potter knew what he wanted, and didn't mince words or mess around with subtleties. And the offer he had made had shocked him senseless. A gift of that magnitude was definitely not for show. And most importantly, it would certainly help keep his Aurors alive. Potter would be coming in again today to finalize the arrangements and have his offer officially accepted, and Robards couldn't wait to see Scrimgeour squirm.

-ooOoo-

Director Connie Hammer of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was a no nonsense woman, much like her friend and predecessor Amelia Bones. Amelia's loss had been a bitter blow, and she had taken over her position eager to avenge her death, only to be held in check by the passive policies of the new Minister. She had done the best that she could with the restrictions she was forced to work under, systematically rooting out the corruption that had pervaded the Ministry under Fudge's administration, and scrambling to develop a more secure means of holding prisoners following the defection of the Dementors, the erstwhile Azkaban prison guards. Even though they hadn't captured many Death Eaters in the past year, she was fairly confident that now the Ministry personnel were clean, and there also hadn't been any breakouts of high profile prisoners under her watch.

Now she found her professionalism being challenged by a teen who wasn't even out of school yet. If it hadn't been for the fact that his charges had been completely accurate she would have given him an icy reception at their upcoming meeting. As it was, she was annoyed that he had used such a public forum for his criticisms, but she was uncomfortably aware that had he gone through channels Scrimgeour would have managed to twist his concerns into something that came out sounding like an endorsement. So she entered this meeting with Potter torn between her chagrin at his criticism of her department and her grudging admiration that he might have succeeded where she had failed, in getting the Minister to do something instead of just talking about it.

Peter Pettigrew was turning into a gold mine of information. The weak-willed Marauder turned Death Eater had put up almost no resistance to interrogation. And he had apparently been used for some extremely sensitive missions by Vol...Voldemort. Hammer mentally berated herself. If Potter could say their enemy's name out loud she ought to at least be able to *think* it without flinching. At any rate, a new group of Aurors that had been authorized by Scrimgeour when he first took office was just now coming out of the Auror Academy. With more forces available and with Pettigrew's information, combined with the new dragonhide armor, she was hopeful that they could start getting more serious about going after Death Eaters. She permitted herself a grim smile. Especially now that Potter had lit a fire under the Minister.

She had read every report on Potter she could find, and found some of them so incredible that they defied belief. A sixteen year old boy could not possibly have accomplished as much as he was alleged to have done. The problem was, the most favorable reports had come from her most reliable Aurors, and the only negative information had been submitted by Delores Umbridge, whom she detested. If everything she had read were true, he would be the most accomplished student to graduate from Hogwarts since ... she frowned and shook her head. Tom Riddle?

-ooOoo-

Rufus Scrimgeour was furious. The Potter brat needed to be put in his place, but whatever leverage over the boy he had thought he had was gone. Instead of being uncertain of what to do, adrift at the loss of his mentor, Potter was apparently more sure of himself than ever. He was confident, he was capable, and evidently he had money to burn. This was not a good situation. On arriving at his office that morning, he had discovered that Robards and Hammer had scheduled a meeting with the young troublemaker and he demanded to be included. Perhaps he could find a way to spin this to his advantage.

He needed some way to find out what was going on in Potter's head. The loss of Percy Weasley was felt even more strongly now – the young man had been his only possible in with Potter, even though he had been estranged from the rest of his family. At least he knew better than to bring Delores Umbridge into the meeting with him. She loathed the boy and Weasley had informed him that the feeling was mutual. He couldn't stand the woman himself, but she had enough dirt on his opponents in the Ministry that she was too valuable for him to let her go.

The first thing he had done was order that the idiot in the Department of Magical Transportation who had turned Potter down be fired, and that whatever Potter had requested be taken care of. That should at least be a start in getting Potter's support.

-ooOoo-

The most ominous reaction to the weekend news was from a man with snake-like features sitting in a room in a darkened, unplottable mansion in Little Hangleton. After hearing a report from a hooded man bowing before him he had a single response.

"Kill them."

-ooOoo-

At 10:00 Harry and Hermione flooded into the Ministry of Magic and were escorted to the Auror Department accompanied by much pointing and whispering by the occupants of the atrium, workers and visitors alike. At least one enterprising reporter had guessed that there might be a meeting that day and staked out the lobby hoping for a story. When they arrived at the office of the Head Auror they were greeted enthusiastically by Robards, and introduced to Director Hammer, whose greeting was polite but subdued.

"Director Hammer, I would like to assure you that I had no intention of casting any aspersions on the way you run your department," Harry immediately spoke up. "From what I hear from the Aurors I know, you're as frustrated with the situation as I am." Beside him, Hermione nodded her agreement and took his hand to show her support for his statement. They had discussed this approach and Harry had delivered the message perfectly. Hammer immediately relaxed, impressed with the boy in spite of herself. She had also read everything she could find about the young

with sitting beside him, and realized that the two of them complemented each other quite well, and that together the pair was a formidable force.

"I would have preferred not to have to see our shortcomings discussed on the front page of the Daily Prophet, but you are correct that I share some of your views," she responded. Despite her annoyance, she was impressed that he did not back down at her not so subtle rebuke. "Do you have any specific suggestions for us, besides those mentioned in your interview?"

"Perhaps a more visible Auror presence might make people feel more secure," Harry replied. Then he nodded to Hermione, who was clearly eager to contribute.

"Certainly it is not possible to be everywhere all the time," she added. "But high traffic areas like Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade are obvious targets. And it must be possible to respond to attacks more quickly. We were in France when the Burrow was attacked, and we arrived on the scene at least an hour before the Aurors from the Ministry. Rapid communication is essential. Muggles have a way of instantly contacting law enforcement officers when trouble strikes; surely wizards could develop something similar. And Harry brought up the subject of emergency portkeys in the interview. We feel that every wizarding household in the country should have one. For your part, you could set up secure destinations for these portkeys that could be staffed with emergency assistance as well as responders. And we would be willing to pay the cost for anyone who couldn't afford it."

Hammer and Robards sat back, momentarily speechless. While Hogwarts students and staff were accustomed to dissertations like this from Hermione Granger, it was a new experience for them. And it was difficult to argue with anything she had said. Before they could respond, they were interrupted by the entrance of the Minister of Magic into the room. Instantly the friendly, helpful attitude of the two students dissipated.

"Mr. Potter, how good to see you again," Scrimgeour proclaimed. "Please excuse my tardiness, but I was seeing to some urgent business that might interest you. I have just spoken to my people in Magical Transportation and they will be happy to accommodate your portkey request. And since I couldn't help but overhear your fine suggestion just now, I'm sure Director Hammer will be delighted to make the arrangements for a secure destination for anyone who wishes to purchase their own emergency portkey. It is for ideas just like this one that I sought your input last month. I'm glad to see that you've decided to support our efforts after all."

Hammer glared at the Minister. She had proposed doing something very similar nearly a year ago and he had nixed it as being not worth the cost.

"Just what efforts are those, exactly, Minister?" Harry calmly responded. "Just how many Death Eaters have you tracked down and thrown into prison during the past year? Not harmless dupes like Stan Shunpike but actual marked Death Eaters. What exactly has the Ministry done about the Dementor threat? After all they worked for you for years, you must have some way of controlling them. And how is it that a marked Death Eater like Draco Malfoy walked freely around Hogwarts all last year. Wouldn't he and the other children of known Death Eaters have been obvious ones to investigate?"

He was just getting warmed up. "Have you even bothered to root out Voldemort supporters within the Ministry? I'm sure there were plenty of them, since I personally know of two Death Eaters who worked here. Not to mention Voldemart sympathizers like Umbridge. I'm sorry, but there's no way I can support any organization that employs someone as evil as her."

While Scrimgeour was sputtering his outrage, Hammer finally spoke up. "Mr. Potter, while some of your criticisms may be valid, I can assure you that we have not been sitting on our hands here. For your information I have personally investigated every Ministry employee and seen that any remaining Voldemort supporters were removed." Scrimgeour snapped his head around in surprise, and began to challenge her statement when she cut him off. "And despite your obvious distaste for Madam Umbridge, we have no evidence that she has broken any laws."

"Well, Director, how would you characterize her sending two Dementors to attack a Hogwarts student two years ago?" Hermione broke in. "Or torturing students in detention with a blood quill while she was a professor at Hogwarts? How about giving Veritaserum to a student? Or attempting the Cruciatus curse on a student?" While Hammer and Robards turned shocked faces in her direction, Hermione continued. "We have multiple witnesses who heard her admit to several of those actions, and physical evidence of the blood quill use on several different students." To her surprise, the shock on the faces of the Chief Auror and DMLE Director was slowly replaced by satisfied smiles of anticipation. Just as Scrimgeour was beginning to protest that these were the most ridiculous charges he had ever heard Harry and Hermione rose in unison.

"Director Hammer, Chief Auror Robards, it was nice to meet you and we're happy to hear that you will be able to make good use of that dragonhide armor," Harry stated while reaching out to shake their hands. "We'll be sure to send you our evidence regarding Umbridge." Somehow when they all stood up Robards ended up between Scrimgeour and the students, and he was unable to stop them as they left the office.

Once outside, no one noticed as Hermione paused briefly to let a beetle that had been hidden under the hood of her cloak fly away.

-ooOoo-

While they were in London, the couple decided to stop by St. Mungo's to check on the Weasleys. They found that there was little change in their condition, which was a mixture of good news and bad. The healer attending Charlie assured them that his prognosis was much improved since their intervention of the previous week, and that there was now a good chance that he would recover. Arthur's condition was improving and they expected to bring him out of his coma in about a week, and a few days after that he would be ready to return home. They confirmed that they would have a custom made magical mobile chair for him to use while they debated on further treatment, artificial legs being one possibility.

Unfortunately, however, Molly was in the same state as a week ago. She once again greeted them cheerily and asked how things were going for them that summer, asked when they would be coming to the Burrow, and reminded them of Bill's wedding date. Then she smiled at Harry and teased him about when she might be hearing some kind of announcement about him and Ginny. When they left the room her healer admitted that they had done all they could for her, and they had no idea of when she would snap out of this delusional state, if ever.

As Harry and Hermione were digesting this information, an orderly hurried up to them and gave them a message that had just come in for them. It was from Ron.





## Hermione's Plan Tales of Two Horcruxes

### Chapter 16, Tales of Two Horcruxes

Still Monday, July 28

Harry and Hermione returned to Grimmauld Place to find the situation on the edge of chaos. Kreacher had returned with the locket and as instructed, had placed it back into the case in the drawing room. However, he had then stayed firmly planted in the room next to the display case, still muttering about 'thiefs' and 'presents' and something about the locket being 'precious'. When Bill had cast the Horcrux detection spell the old house elf had gone mad, throwing them out of the room and sealing it off.

Bill had sent Ginny off with Fleur, making good on his determination to keep her away from the Horcrux, and now he, Remus, and Ron were relieved at Harry's return, since he could command Kreacher to let them back into the room.

Hermione had realized the last time that Kreacher had been in their presence that he was exhibiting an unusually strong attraction to the locket, and it had reminded her of the similar situation with the character Gollum in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Harry hadn't had time to read the story since then, so she hurriedly explained her thoughts to the others. Bill agreed that it was likely that Kreacher was being influenced by the Horcrux, and had developed a dangerous attachment to the dark object.

Upon Harry's stern command, Kreacher unsealed the door to the drawing room and they entered, finding him glowering hatefully at them. Hermione quickly whispered a suggestion to Harry and he nodded.

"Kreacher," he began in a calm voice. "You have done very good work by finding and returning this valuable treasure. Master Regulus would have been very proud of you." While he was talking, the five of them split up, with Remus moving to the left and Bill and Ron to the right, while Hermione stayed next to Harry. Kreacher's eyes darted suspiciously back and forth between them, but Harry's words had gotten his attention, and he nodded slowly.

"Master Regulus brought this object into the house after he took it from a very evil man. The evil man killed Master Regulus for doing this." Kreacher turned all of his focus back to Harry now. So far his new master's words seemed to be true. His former master had indeed been killed by the dark lord that he had once followed, but later renounced.

"Master Regulus brought this object back here in order to destroy it, but he was killed before he was able to. We intend to follow Master Regulus's wishes and destroy it now."

Kreacher wavered, then stiffened. "No! Master is lying to Kreacher. Master Regulus would not have destroyed such a precious treasure." Harry's hand went to his pocket, and he withdrew the worn scrap of parchment he had kept with him ever since the night of Dumbledore's death, and showed it to the trembling house elf.

*To the dark Lord  
I know I will be dead long before you read this  
but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret.  
I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can.  
I face death in the hope that when you meet your match,  
you will be mortal once more.  
R.A.B*

"No!" Kreacher writhed in agony with his internal struggle. It was clear now what his duty was. Both his former master and his current master wanted his treasure destroyed, but the locket was compelling him to resist. Finally he slumped to the floor and Harry cautiously opened the cabinet and removed the locket. It was just as he had remembered it from the pensieve memory. As he turned to hand the locket to Bill, something in Kreacher snapped.

Leaping to his feet, he snatched the locket. With a gesture he hurled Bill and Ron across the room, and both of them crashed into a wall. While Ron was knocked unconscious, Bill managed to cast a protective spell on himself before he hit the wall, and struggled back to his feet, shaken. Remus darted forward and grabbed the wiry little elf, and they struggled briefly. Hermione tried to Accio the locket, but Kreacher had too strong a hold on it. Harry cast an Expelliarmus hex, causing the locket to fly out of the house elf's gnarled old hands. With unbelievable strength born of desperation, Kreacher managed to throw Remus off and hurled himself on the locket once more.

"Mine!" he shouted. "It belongs to me!" Harry tackled him to the ground, but before he could wrest the locket away from the crazed old elf, Kreacher slipped the chain around his neck. With a blinding flash Harry and Remus were thrown back again, but Hermione was alert enough to wandlessly redirect Harry's flight and slow him down enough to allow him to make a controlled landing. Before he had even hit the floor, Harry's wand was back in his hand and he and Hermione turned as one to confront the now dramatically enhanced threat.

An eerie glow emitted from the locket and surrounded Kreacher, seeming to seep right into his skin. Twin jets of red light streaked from Harry and Hermione's wands, only to impact on a golden shield that appeared from nowhere in front of the dazed house elf, who seemed to be waging an inner battle. His eyes clouded over briefly, then cleared, only to glow bright red as the horrified onlookers witnessed the possession of his body being fully realized. Suddenly a confused look appeared on his face, which quickly morphed into blazing rage.

"What is this?!" an unearthly voice hissed. "What manner of foul creature have I become?! Someone must pay for this insult!" Focusing his anger on the pair of students still before him, the house elf turned dark lord raised his hands and a blinding silver light burst forth, only to crash against two similar beams of light streaking from the young couple's wands. The room was lit up with a dazzling display of fireworks, as the brilliant beams blasted at each other, showering the room with sparks. Without a conscious thought the pair linked hands, and the light pouring from their wands doubled in intensity, creating a blazing wall of fire where they intersected with the light still flowing from their enemy. For a while it was a standoff, as the wall shifted only slightly, first one way, then the other, neither side gaining an advantage. While this was happening Remus and Bill were immobilized with but a thought from the now completely possessed house elf.

Overlooked on the other side of the room, where he had tumbled into an awkward tangle of limbs after his violent collision with the wall, Ron slowly pulled himself together. Fighting back the awe created by the incredible sight before him, he focused his mind on one thought. *'Help Harry!'*

*"Reducto!"*

Caught by surprise, Kreacher/Voldemort turned toward the new threat, just in time for the explosion hex to blast against his chest.

Kreacher's chest was crushed. And the locket shattered.

In an instant the light show vanished, Harry and Hermione staggered to regain their balance, Remus and Bill regained control of their limbs, the broken body of the ancient house elf slumped to the floor, and a frightening specter emerged from his still form.

*"Annihilato Spiritus!"* shouted Bill, and a golden jet burst from his wand and intercepted the misty form as it paused before Harry and Hermione, who had raised the strongest shields they knew. With another flash and a piercing scream, the soul fragment vanished and the room was suddenly deathly silent.

Eyes blinking, the four wizards and one witch in the room looked at each other, trying to convince themselves that it was over. Finally, Bill managed a wry grin.

"Okay, that was the hard way. Next time I'll show you the easy way."

Suddenly everyone was laughing and embracing and pounding each other on the back. Bill and Remus were shouting their amazement at how Harry and Hermione had fought him to a standstill, and everyone congratulated Ron for delivering the knockout blow. Finally Harry, locked in Hermione's crushing hug, but not minding it one bit, shouted out, "That's three! Only three more to go!"

-ooOoo-

Monday afternoon

"Bill? Can I talk to you for a bit?"

Hermione had found Bill in the library, where he was reviewing some of the material she and Harry had given him. Harry was catching up with Ron, playing chess in the now repaired drawing room. Fleur and Ginny were off somewhere together again – shopping Hermione thought. Fleur was determined to improve her relationship with her new sister-in-law, and the support she had given Ginny during the emotional revelations of the previous afternoon had been a good first step that she was building on. Tonks was working, and Remus was out on Order business.

Hermione's stomach was churning as she sat down in one of the chairs, her hands twisting together in her lap. It had taken her a good twenty minutes to gather herself up to come in to confront Bill, to divulge the suspicion that had been haunting her recently. With the nonstop activity that had commanded their attention for the past week, it had been pushed to the back of her consciousness, but the experience with the Horcrux that morning had brought it front and center, demanding to be recognized. Bill looked up from his reading and he frowned as he took in her nervous state, nodding for her to continue.

"Do you think it's possible that Harry is a Horcrux?"

"What!" Bill was completely taken aback. "No, I don't. What makes you think that?"

Hermione explained the connection that Harry had to Voldemort through his scar – how Voldemort had sent him visions, and how Harry had seen things through Voldemort's eyes. Initially Bill was shocked into silence, as most of this information had been kept from him. He was aware that Harry had had some sort of vision about his father being attacked a year and a half previously, but had not heard the details. Finally he pulled his thoughts together to make a response.

"I don't think Voldemort would have deliberately made a Horcrux out of Harry. Even if he had wanted to I don't see how he would have had the opportunity. And it would be foolish to make one out of a living creature, especially one he had no control over. The soul fragment would be released and dissipate when the creature died."

"I was thinking that it might have happened accidentally," Hermione countered anxiously. "Dumbledore suspected that the night he attacked Godric's Hollow he was planning to use Harry's death to make his final one. He did manage to kill James and Lily first, then he cast the killing curse on Harry. What if his soul had fragmented from the first two deaths, then went into Harry when the killing curse rebounded on him? Maybe it

entered through his scar. That could explain how Voldemort was able to possess him at the Ministry.”

Hermione had been growing increasingly more frantic and her voice gradually rose as she poured out these fears, and Bill got up, crossed over to her and took her in his arms in an attempt to calm her down. “Stop,” he urged her gently. “It doesn’t work that way. It takes two separate spells to create one. Your soul doesn’t automatically split every time you kill someone. If that were true Voldemort would have split his dozens of times. Killing someone just provides the necessary impetus. You have to first kill someone, then cast the soul splitting part of the spell, then cast the binding part of the spell to attach the soul fragment to the object.”

Hermione burst into tears as an immense feeling of relief swept over her. She sobbed onto Bill’s shoulder as the stress that had built up within her flowed out like water through a broken dam. Then she felt another pair of arms encircle her and immediately turned into them, knowing instantly that they were Harry’s.

“I heard the last bit of that,” Harry revealed. “Hermione, I’m so sorry that you’ve been worrying about this so much. You should have told me.”

Hermione nodded her head while she fought to regain control of her emotions, acknowledging to him that he was right, but knowing that he understood why she had not. Bill had stepped back, releasing her as soon as Harry had arrived, knowing that he was the one she really needed to be held by. While he was softly stroking her back Harry looked up at Bill.

“Do you think you can do the detection charm on me anyway? I think it would make Hermione feel better.” Still in his arms, Hermione nodded sheepishly against his chest.

Bill readily agreed and cast the charm, with the expected negative results. Finally Hermione was able to smile and turned to move away from Harry. However, he kept his arms around her and she relaxed quite willingly against him, her back to his chest. Then she frowned slightly and bit her lower lip as she recalled part of Bill’s explanation.

“You said no one would use a living creature for a Horcrux. Then what about Nagini, Voldemort’s snake? Dumbledore thought it was one. And we know Voldemort could possess it and see through its eyes, because Harry did exactly that when he was in Voldemort’s mind that one time.” Now it was Bill’s turn to frown.

“He planned to make one from my death, and we know for sure now that he failed,” Harry added. “So he must have been one short at that point. We think he made his final one after he came back. We’re certain that he killed Bertha Jorkins and Frank Bryce, and probably more that we don’t know about. But that was before he got his current body. He probably had plenty of opportunities after that too.”

“My guess is that if he intended to use your death to make the last one, that he probably was planning on trying it again right after he was restored to his body, when he tried to kill you after summoning the Death Eaters.” Bill had been going through some of Harry’s memories with the pensieve, and had just experienced that one earlier in the day. “I’m still not convinced that he would use Nagini for one, although what you just told me does indicate some kind of connection between the two of them. Perhaps he placed the Horcrux into Nagini after he made it.”

“Is that even possible?” Hermione inquired immediately.

Bill shrugged. “It depends on what the object is. Maybe if we knew more about what happened the night he first attacked Harry.”

We could go take a look at the house,” Harry suggested. “And we have a memory from Sirius we haven’t seen yet, of him pulling me out of the wreckage of the house.” He and Hermione had been putting off viewing that particular memory of Sirius’s, preferring to look at the happy ones first.

-ooOoo-

The four of them decided to visit the house first, in order to familiarize themselves with the layout, before viewing the pensieve memory. But this led to the problem Minnie had reminded them of earlier. The cottage at Godric’s Hollow was still under the Fidelius. Anyone other than Harry who wanted to see it had to be told the secret by Pettigrew. Fortunately Remus arrived at that point with the solution.

As soon as they explained their problem to him, a wistful smile appeared on Remus’s face. Reaching into his wallet, he withdrew a battered old piece of parchment. “This is one of the only things I kept from those days,” he said softly, as he gazed at the blank parchment in his hands. It’s what I have to remember them by.” Noticing the puzzled looks on the faces of his listeners, he grinned and tapped the parchment with his wand. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

As Harry, Ron, and Hermione shared a quick glance of realization, writing appeared on the note before them. *The Potter family lives in a cottage in Godric’s Hollow.*

“Each of us received one of these when James and Lily took you into hiding. I charmed mine so it would only appear when I said the code phrase. It’s also charmed to only respond to my voice,” he added, cutting off Hermione’s next question before she could raise it. “And if you notice, it’s in Sirius’s handwriting. But Peter was very good at faking other people’s handwriting. He even forged notes from McGonagall to get us into the restricted section of the library.

Once that hurdle was overcome, there still remained the question of how to get there. Harry provided the solution this time. He concentrated for a moment. “Minnie?” he called out.

With a pop the cheerful little Potter family house elf appeared before them. “Mister Harry, it’s good to see you again,” came the high squeaky voice. “You too Miss Miney. What can Minnie be doing for you today?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Ron mouthing the words, ‘Miss Miney?’ and fixed him with a stern glare, tapping her wand against her other hand in an obvious manner. A big grin appeared on his face as he turned toward her, only to vanish instantly as he took in her expression and

Implied threat. Swallowing hard, he returned his attention to Harry.

Meanwhile, Harry had dropped to one knee to greet his house elf. "Hello Minnie. It's good to see you too. I'd like to introduce you to some of my friends. This is Ron, Remus, and Bill." He gestured to the three in turn, and they nodded awkwardly to the little elf while she curtsied politely to each of them. Hermione beamed at Harry, as his obvious treatment of Minnie as an equal warmed her heart. "We want to go visit my cottage today. Can you take us there?"

With a pop Harry and Minnie disappeared. A few seconds later Harry reappeared, took Hermione's hand, and vanished again. Another few seconds passed and they were back. This time Harry took Ron's arm, and Hermione took Bill's. Since Remus already knew where it was, he had no need of a guide. In a short time all six of them were standing in a lane, looking at what appeared to be the ruins of an old stone cottage that hadn't been occupied for years.

"Minnie, I thought you said ..." Harry began. Before he could finish Minnie snapped her fingers and the ruins seemed to shimmer before their eyes, transforming itself into a warm, inviting cottage in perfect repair. Harry turned to Minnie, who was clearly proud of herself. "Well done, Minnie! This looks fantastic. And that disguising charm was a great idea." Minnie bounced up and down happily, basking in her master's praise. Hermione gave Harry's arm a squeeze and leaned over to kiss him on the cheek.

The cottage was on an old unused lane in the middle of the woods. Hermione guessed that it might have been a gamekeeper's cottage out on the grounds of a larger estate. Off in one direction they could see the village of Godric's Hollow nestled in some hills. There were flower beds along the front walls, and Hermione's heart jumped when she noticed that they were filled with lilies of every variety. The inside of the cottage was also immaculately kept up, and included a sitting room and a dining room near the front, with a kitchen and a small library and a study in the rear. The bedrooms were upstairs. Remus told stories of different humorous events involving Sirius, James, and baby Harry as they went through each of the rooms, but grew quiet when they ascended the stairs.

Harry's bedroom still had a crib in it, decorated with tiny snitches. Hermione squeezed Harry's hand tightly and noticed that his eyes were as moist as hers. This was the room where Lily had given her life to protect him. After looking around briefly, Ron, Remus, and Bill quietly slipped out, leaving Harry and Hermione alone together to contemplate the event that was the turning point of his life.

-ooOoo-

Back at Grimmauld Place they wasted no time setting up the pensieve memory from Sirius. It began with him arriving at the cottage in a panic, only to find his worst fears realized when he saw the door blown out of its frame. They followed him into the small house where they saw James lying in the sitting room surrounded by blast marks on the walls and shattered windows. Sirius had paused a moment there, weeping over the body of his best friend, then rose and hurried up the stairs following the trail of destruction. On Bill's instruction they all looked around carefully, trying to find anything that Voldemort might have left behind. Up in Harry's bedroom they found a sobbing Sirius kneeling over the body of Lily, prying an unconscious Harry from her cold dead arms, while Voldemort's body lay nearby.

While Hermione could not tear her eyes away from the heart wrenching sight, and Remus was an absolute wreck, it was fortunate that the Weasleys were not quite so sentimental. It was Ron who made the key discovery.

"Look, it's Scabbers ... I mean, Wormtail!" Everyone whirled to see that he was right as they spotted the rat hiding in the shadows under an overturned chair. Remus let loose with a string of curses that shocked everyone. But most important were the two objects that the rat was clutching in his paws. A wand that everyone, especially Harry, instantly recognized, and a small shiny circular object. Bill got down on his hands and knees and pushed his face right up under the image of the crouching rat to get a better look at it. It was a golden brooch, used as a clasp to hold a wizard's cloak together at the neck. And it was adorned with a large, elegant, script G.

Bill gave a command to pause the memory while he and Ron carefully inspected the rest of the room. Hermione released her death grip on Harry's arm and joined them, but Harry and Remus were in no condition to help out, still staring at the now frozen forms of Sirius, Lily, and little Harry. Once they were satisfied that there was no more evidence to uncover, Bill restarted the memory and they watched as Sirius gradually regained control of himself, kissed Lily goodbye, gathered up little Harry in his arms, and left the room with a terrible look of grim determination on his face. As the rest of them followed the image of Sirius back downstairs, Bill waited in the room for as long as the memory allowed, trying to see what Pettigrew did next. But the rat was still crouching under the chair with his two treasures when the pensieve memory pulled Bill away.

Back outside the house they watched as the memory Sirius was confronted by Hagrid and a shouting match ensued. Eventually Sirius, realizing that he could not dissuade the half giant from the task Dumbledore had given him, gave up. After hugging little Harry one final time, he let Hagrid take him and stormed off, shouting over his shoulder that Hagrid might as well take his flying motorcycle, since he would have no further need of it. Given the knowledge of what had transpired next, it was clear to everyone that he was nearly insane with grief and guilt. With that the memory ended and they found themselves in Grimmauld Place once more.

-ooOoo-

After a break for refreshments and for everyone to compose themselves and sort out their thoughts, they gathered again in the sitting room. Hermione curled up against Harry on the sofa, and Ron sat on Harry's other side, while Remus and Bill drew up comfortable chairs. Everyone looked to Harry to begin, but he motioned to Bill to go first. The eldest Weasley son gave his analysis of what they had seen, and then each of the others added their own perspectives. A consensus quickly emerged that Pettigrew must have accompanied Voldemort to the cottage that tragic Halloween night but probably hid outside while the dark lord carried out his ill-fated plan. Voldemort entered the house, killed James, then confronted Lily and Harry, intending to kill Harry and make his final Horcrux. Once the fighting was over and Voldemort failed to emerge, Pettigrew had gone in to investigate and had recovered his master's wand and the Gryffindor relic meant to be used in the soul-splitting ritual. Finally, Sirius had arrived while the traitor was still in the house, so he changed into his rat form and hid until Sirius and Hagrid left.

To Ron's question of whether the Horcrux had actually been created that night, possibly with James or Lily's death, or later after Voldemort was

reborn Bill replied that it didn't really matter. It was certainly a Horcrux now and would need to be destroyed. Before Hermione could ask, he offered his opinion that the hiding place for this Horcrux could indeed be inside the giant snake. They concluded that they had gained some useful and some interesting information. They now knew what the Gryffindor Horcrux was, and where it might be hidden, and they knew how Voldemort had regained his wand. Bill and Ron shuddered when they realized that the wand and the brooch may in fact have been hidden somewhere on the grounds of the Burrow for many years.

Talk then turned to what they should do next, and two plans emerged. Bill and Fleur would take on the task of hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, along with one or two goblin specialists that Bill would contract with. Harry and Hermione intended to keep their commitment to teach Ron what they had learned in Mexico, using the time turner to repeat a week multiple times. It was agreed that a trip to Hogwarts was in order. Bill wanted to discuss his Horcrux theories and search strategy with Dumbledore's portrait. Harry and Hermione wanted to use the castle's facilities for the extended training session for Ron, and they knew that McGonagall wanted to meet with them. Finally, it was felt by all that the Chamber of Secrets was a prime candidate for further investigation, either as a potential Horcrux location, or as a site where the young Tom Riddle might have hidden away some of his research.

That evening at dinner the plans were finalized. Bill and Fleur would spend their time on the Horcrux project in the Headmaster's office and in the Chamber. Harry and Ron would use the time turner and the different rooms in the castle to maximize Ron's training, and Hermione would supervise that process and help out Bill and Fleur when needed. Remus, Tonks, and Ginny would remain at Grimmauld Place. (Ginny wanted no part of the expedition to the Chamber, and there wouldn't be much for her to do in the castle while Harry and Ron were training all day.) Ginny would spend her days at the twins' shop, and work on contacting the former DA members. After sending Hedwig off to Hogwarts with a note letting McGonagall know that they would be coming the next day, and staying for a week, Harry and Hermione returned to the Granger house to pack their things.

-ooOoo-

"Hermione?" Harry and Hermione were lying next to each other in bed that night, but neither had managed to fall asleep yet, the events of the day still swirling through their minds.

"Hmm?"

"I've been thinking about what would have happened if Sirius hadn't let Hagrid take me away that night." Hermione turned towards Harry and put her arms around him, pulling herself up against him in an understanding hug while Harry continued. "Think how much different my life would have been if I'd grown up with him instead of with the Dursleys."

There was a long silence while each of the teens pondered how their lives might have been changed. "Well, I guess it would depend on whether Dumbledore agreed and let him raise you openly, or if he would have had to take you into hiding," Hermione finally surmised. Harry nodded and they both fell silent again.

"Either way, I would have known who I was and been aware of the wizarding world before I turned eleven," Harry pointed out.

"Yes. Just think, you wouldn't have needed a bossy know-it-all little girl to explain everything to you during your first year," Hermione replied, only partly joking.

Harry shifted in her arms and turned to face her, and wrapped his arms around her as well. They both lay there for several seconds, their eyes locked in a troubled gaze.

"I can't imagine not needing you," Harry said softly. "I would never want that part to change." Then he captured her lips with his own in a tender kiss as their bodies melted into each other. With that comforting thought, they drifted off to sleep.

-ooOoo-

(Tuesday)

After talking it over the next morning, Harry and Hermione decided that they would again use the time turner to repeat the remainder of the week, staying at their Cambridge flat during their other time through. This time, however, they would spend the time in Cambridge first, brushing up their skills, planning out a training schedule for Harry to use with Ron, and discussing what they wanted to do during for the DA meetings that would begin in August. When this was completed they would come back in time to join the others at Hogwarts. They had a nice breakfast with Dan and Emma, and informed them that they would be spending the rest of the week in Cambridge.

This decision would turn out to have significant consequences.

-ooOoo-

On Thursday morning, in the flat in Cambridge, Hermione awoke before Harry. She had used a special alarm charm to make certain that this happened, since she had a special surprise for him that day. As was often the case, she found herself in her favorite position, snuggled up in his arms. They were both lying on their right sides, with him spooned up behind her, his left arm draped across her. His left hand was cupping her right breast, and she smiled to herself as she reflected on how frequently it happened to end up in that position.

Before she got up she indulged herself by just lying there and enjoying it. Whenever Harry woke first, he would run the fingers of his other hand through her hair and scratch her head, which she just loved having him do. He would wake her in a sweet, affectionate manner by planting little kisses on her shoulder. She wondered, if they didn't have so many demands on their time, just how much of the day they could spend cuddled up together. She supposed that was what a honeymoon was for. She wished December would come soon so that she could research that question properly.

But this morning she wanted to do something she wanted to do before she woke up. She specifically, as he woke up. She carefully moved his hand and arm away, then got up out of the bed. Harry rolled onto his stomach as she vacated her warm comfy spot, with his arm reaching out for the place where she should have been. She had to hurry because he would wake soon, as he sensed that she wasn't there with him. Instead of putting on a robe she cast a mild warming charm on herself and quickly moved over to her dresser. There she pulled out a lacy red pair of thong knickers that she had been saving just for this occasion, removed the knickers she had slept in, and put the new ones on. Then she returned to the bed, clad only in the sexy thong bottom.

As quietly as she could, she pulled the covers off of Harry, exposing his naked body before her, and cast the warming charm on him also. Then she knelt down behind him and started to run her hands over him. Starting with his legs, she gradually worked her way up to his shoulders, then back down. Since the gluteus maximus were among the largest muscles on the human body, it was only proper that they be the main focus of a full body massage. She smiled to herself at this rationalization for spending most of her time massaging his bum. She was pretty sure he was awake by now, but he kept still, being smart enough to recognize a good thing when it was happening to him.

Eventually, she turned him over and repeated the process, starting at his feet and working up to his chest, then back down to her final focus for this wake-up massage. Still he kept his eyes closed, at least when she checked (she suspected that he peeked a few times), but his rapidly increased breathing gave him away. For the last part the massage got more intimate, and she lay down next to him, snuggling up against his side, and his arm automatically went around her, his hand coming to rest on her bum. There his fingers traced the line of her thong before his hand settled down into a firm grip as her own hand continued to work its magic. Now her efforts began to elicit a few gasps and moans. When she finished a few minutes later his eyes were still closed, but he had a gigantic smile on his face.

Hermione crawled on top of him, pressing her body as close to his as she could, and gave him a long sensuous kiss. Finally, as she pulled back he opened his eyes.

"I love you," he whispered, the emotion flowing out of those dazzling emerald eyes she so adored.

"Happy birthday," she returned.

"Wow," he finally managed. "I think I know what one of *your* birthday presents is going to be this year."

"Well," she smiled back. "If that's true, then I think one of your other presents is going to come in handy." He raised an eyebrow at her but instead of explaining she pushed herself up off of him, then pulled him to his feet. "First, you need to take a shower." She walked slowly towards the bathroom, wiggling her bottom enticingly, the way Fleur had taught her. Having given him a good look at her new knickers, she turned to glance back over her shoulder. "If you like, I'll join you and we can wash each other," she teased. He caught her even before she made it through the door.

The shower lasted longer than it needed to, partly because Harry returned her 'gift'. It was fortunate that he had a good hold on her, because her legs were too weak to support her by the time he finished. At last they returned to the bedroom, where she handed him two more presents.

The first was a videotape titled '*The Art of Sensual Massage*'. "That's for you to use when you lose our bet about the DA," she teased. "But from what you said earlier you might need it toward the end of September, too." Harry wondered aloud how a massage could possibly get any better than the one he had just received, but readily agreed to watch the videotape with her.

When he opened the second present, he found a loincloth like the Mayan magic users wore under their tunics. His protest that he wasn't sure if he could wear such a brief garment was silenced when Hermione revealed that she got one for herself too, and the ones for women were even briefer than those for men. She went on to suggest that they could wear them that morning while they practiced their spells. His eyes went wide when she clarified that she was suggesting that they wear *only* the loincloths.

-ooOoo-

Several hours later Harry had to admit that the brief loincloth was more comfortable than he had expected. Of course, she pointed out, his friend Ekahau wore one all day every day, so he should have realized it would be. In any case, he informed her, being able to watch her wearing hers all morning was worth it. Their spell practice hadn't been quite as productive as usual, given that there seemed to be a lot of grabbing and holding going on, but hey, it was his birthday so they deserved a semi day off. Harry's hands somehow seemed to keep finding their way to the bare part of her bum that was exposed by the thong-like garment. Of course, she had to admit, she had managed to grope his bum one or two times herself. Or possibly that was one or two dozen times.

They had been practicing casting spells against targets set up in the middle compartment of Hermione's trunk, and had just climbed out of the trunk to fix themselves some lunch. After a few more hours of practice in the afternoon, they planned to go out to dinner with the Grangers to celebrate Harry's birthday. As usual, they had the telly on during lunch so that Hermione could watch the noontime news on the BBC.

Harry was in the bedroom when Hermione's scream shattered the calm of the small flat, accompanied by a crash as a plate dropped to the floor. He dashed into the kitchen to find Hermione gripping the back of a chair, barely able to stand, while staring at the screen which showed a burning building that looked all too familiar. He quickly moved behind her, wrapping her in his arms, as they listened in horror.

*... in other news a terrorist bombing just minutes ago in West Sussex destroyed a dental clinic. Authorities are unable at this time to provide any details on which terrorist group was responsible, or why this particular target was selected. There is also no information on the numbers of deaths and injuries, although no survivors have been found as yet ...*

The newscaster's voice was interrupted by the warbling tone of Hermione's cell phone.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## Hermione's Plan Picking Up the Pieces

### Chapter 17, Picking up the Pieces

They both turned to stare at the ringing phone. Hermione found herself immobilized in terror, and to her relief Harry, sensing her reluctance, reached out and summoned the phone, pressed the button and held it to her ear.

"Hel ... Hello?" she choked out. "Mum? Mum! You're alive!" she screamed. "What happened? Where are you? Is Dad okay too?" Hermione found herself laughing and crying at the same time from the rollercoaster of emotions that had just hit her. She felt Harry, who was still behind her, tighten his arms around her waist as he also reacted to the sudden turn of events.

"Hermione! We're all right!" Emma was shouting back into her ear. "Can you hear me? We're all right. We got out okay. We used Harry's flower pot."

"Yes Mum. I can hear you," Hermione reassured her as she brought herself back under control. "I'm calmed down now."

"We have no idea where we are," Emma continued. "We're in some kind of house, but it's completely dark. The room we're in seems to be a kitchen, but the appliances are really old and we're not sure how to work them. We can't find any light switches."

Hermione laughed out loud, giddy with relief. "It's okay, Mum, I know where you are. It's one of the houses Harry owns. We'll be right over. Stay put and don't touch anything you don't have to."

"All right." Emma's voice sounded dubious. "This certainly is a grim old place."

Hermione snorted in mirth at her mother's unintentional pun. "It certainly is that. See you in a minute." She disconnected the phone and slumped back against Harry as he squeezed her in his own relief, then twisted around to face him and hugged him back.

"They got out with your portkey," she informed him happily. "Oh Harry, thank you so much. That was such a good idea. We have to go get them, though." She pulled away and looked at him expectantly, preparing to disappear.

"Uh Hermione," Harry remarked with a grin. "Don't you think we should get dressed first?"

Hermione's eyes widened as she realized that they were still both wearing only the loincloths that had been Harry's birthday present, and she blushed. "Oh. I suppose you're right."

-ooOoo-

Dan and Emma jumped as the two teens suddenly appeared in the kitchen with them with a pair of soft pops. They had hurriedly thrown on some clothing and grabbed their robes before leaving their Cambridge flat. Harry gestured to the lights and the room brightened as Hermione flung her arms around her parents, trying to hug them both at the same time. After an emotional reunion, the three Grangers finally settled themselves around the table as Harry prepared them some tea, and the adults told their story.

"We were alone in the clinic, in our office, when we heard and felt this incredible explosion. The walls of the office glowed with a bright golden light and started shaking. As soon as we figured out what was happening Dan grabbed the flower pot that we keep on his desk while we're at work and then grabbed my hand and forced me to hold it too. Just as the glow on the walls started flickering he shouted Harry's name and we felt this strange feeling in our stomachs and the next thing we knew we were here."

"Harry's name?" Hermione asked in confusion, turning toward Harry, only to see an embarrassed look on his face.

"The activation word for the portkey was 'Potter'," Harry muttered.

Hermione's eyes lit up with amusement. "You made a flower pot portkey with Potter as the activation word?" she giggled.

Harry had been expecting this reaction, since it was essentially the same one her mother had had when he first made the portkey for the Grangers. However, he managed to put on an offended look. "Laugh it up, fuzzball," he growled in his best Han Solo imitation. Hermione's eyes widened at the apparent insult, then she burst into laughter and clapped her hands in delight as she worked out the movie reference. Then she remembered to hit him for making fun of her hair.

The teasing between the pair had the beneficial effect of lightening the mood in the room, and the adults were better able to recover their composure after their near brush with death. After a bit more joking around everyone was ready to address the situation.

They all quickly agreed that the bombing had been an attempt to kill the Grangers in order to demoralize Harry. Dan and Emma thanked the teens



again for putting up the protective wards that had held long enough for them to activate the portkey. Dan suggested that they had gone after the clinic instead of the house because it was easier to find and easier to get at (it would be difficult to park an empty truck right next to their house, especially with the security of their affluent gated community). Also, it made a more visible statement. They also all grimly agreed, though, that the Granger house was a logical next target.

"Hermione!" Emma shouted suddenly. "You have that time travel thing! You can go back and stop them!" Hermione's heart broke all over again when she saw the pleading look in her mum's eyes and she could hardly bear to refuse her. Harry stepped up behind her and squeezed her shoulders in support as Dan did the same for Emma.

"Oh Mum, I'm so sorry, but we can't do it," Hermione explained sorrowfully. "It's impossible to go back and change things that we already know have happened. If we did then there would be no reason to go back. That would put us in a paradox." After a little thought, Dan and Emma understood, and Emma sadly relented. Hermione hugged her apologetically while Harry explained further. Both of the Grangers were surprised at the consequences of triggering the time travel paradox, and Hermione could tell that they were nervous about the potential danger the students were exposed to every time they used the device. She assured them that they were very responsible about it and took great care to avoid even being near places they had already been.

Harry steered the conversation back to the attack itself, wondering how they happened to be alone in the clinic.

"Well, it was the strangest thing, really," Emma responded. "Neither of our 11:30 patients showed up. Brenda Jacob was supposed to bring in her son Andrew for two fillings and Carol Mitchell had an appointment for a checkup for her grandson Brandon. Both called within a few minutes of each other saying something important had come up suddenly. So we told our assistants, Mary and Stephanie, to take an early lunch. Our receptionist Amanda usually goes for her lunch break about that time anyway."

Dan then took up the tale, not noticing the thoughtful looks Harry and Hermione exchanged. "So we retired to the office to catch up on some paperwork. It was a good thing too, because that's where you put the strongest of those shield spells you used, and that's where the flower pot was. The blast shook the building and the walls held long enough for me to grab the pot and grab Emma. The roof started falling in just as we escaped."

"We can't stop the bombing, but from what you said there are some things we can do," Harry revealed as Hermione nodded. "I think it's likely that we will turn out to be the reason those 11:30 patients canceled out. We can also watch to see who planted the bomb and try to figure out who did it."

"Since our minimum time is six hours, I think we'll wait until 4:00 this afternoon, then go back to 10:00 AM," Hermione decided. "In the meantime we need to figure out what to do with the two of you."

"How about the beach house in Brighton?" Harry suggested. The Grangers agreed with this and the four of them settled down to work out the logistics. Part of the problem was that as far as the rest of their acquaintances knew, Harry and Hermione were at Hogwarts that week. They summoned Hedwig and gave her one of the most unusual deliveries she had ever made. Hermione dictated the note as Emma wrote.

*Hermione – There's been an attack at the clinic but WE ARE OK!! We got out safely so don't worry. If you can get away, we are at Mr. Lupin's house.*

Hedwig gave Harry a most curious look when Harry told her to take the note to Hermione at Hogwarts, while Hermione was standing right there next to him. But she hooted a few times and then took off, trusting that her master knew what he was doing. The Grangers also left a note for Remus and Tonks, telling them not to worry, the portkey had delivered them to the house, but that Hermione had come for them and taken them somewhere safe.

While they waited an appropriate amount of time for Hedwig to reach Hermione at Hogwarts, the two students went to the Grangers' house to check it out. They found everything in order but decided it was just too dangerous for the Grangers to return. They picked out an assortment of clothing and other essential items and decided that they could have Dobby come and get any other possessions that Dan and Emma decided they needed.

Later that afternoon the four of them arrived at the Brighton beach house. By this time Dan and Emma were getting over the shock of the attack and realized how lucky they were. As they looked around the bright, inviting cottage they loved it. Together they vowed that whatever life and the struggle their children were locked in threw at them they would do the best with it that they were able. They had been given a second chance at life and were going to make the most of it.

At 3:00 Harry and Hermione apparated away, going back to the Cambridge flat and gathering up everything they thought they might need, including their dragonhide armor, shield hats, and the invisibility cloak. At 4:00 they went back six hours, avoiding their former selves who were down in Hermione's trunk, then apparated to the Granger house. Still finding no sign of anything amiss, they went on to the dental clinic and settled down under the invisibility cloak to watch and wait.

Just before 11:30 they cast wordless Confundus and Compulsion charms on the Jacobs and the Mitchells, ensuring their absence from the clinic at the critical time. Then things started happening.

At 11:40 two men drove up in a van and parked directly in front of the clinic, adjusted some things in the back and got out.

"You sure this is the right place?" the first one asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure," snarled the second. "The man's paying us enough that we don't make no mistakes."

Neither of the teens needed to remind the other to get a good look at the men. Their pensieve memories of this scene could be instrumental in

tracking them down. They were dressed very simply, in white tee shirts and jeans. Their heads were completely shaven. They did not appear to be wizards, as they exhibited no uneasiness or lack of familiarity with their muggle surroundings. If they were wizards they must have been muggleborn. And there were no muggleborn Death Eaters. By the time they left the van, climbing into a nondescript car that pulled up alongside and immediately zoomed off, the obvious conclusion was that they were just what they appeared to be, muggle terrorists.

After that point, the waiting became sheer torture. They were helpless to do anything but subtly redirect any pedestrians that happened by. They both breathed a sigh of relief when Mary, Stephanie, and Amanda came out the front door on their way to lunch.

Hermione's heart broke fifteen minutes later as she watched the van explode, demolishing the whole front of the building, which made the rest of it collapse inward a few seconds later with a horrifying crash. Between their dragonhide armor and their shield hats they were physically safe in their vantagepoint across the street, but the emotional damage was frightful. She had so many pleasant memories of playing in the office as a child, and she grieved as she thought about how hard her parents had worked to build up their practice, now gone in an instant. Harry had his arms around her as the tears streamed down her face, and they both winced as the faint sound of Emma's scream from inside the inferno reached them, just before it was cut off when the portkey activated.

Harry held her tight and whispered whatever comforting words he could think of in her ear as they remained hidden while sirens blared and flashing lights danced across the wreckage of the dental clinic. Eventually she managed to calm down and they observed carefully and listened unseen to the conversations of the inspectors on the scene. Finally, they returned to their apartment to discuss what they had learned and their possible courses of action while waiting until 3:00 to go back to the beach house.

They each withdrew their memory of the event and stored them in two vials, then watched them in the pensieve. They confirmed their earlier conclusion that the men in the van were not wizards. Walking up to them closely in the memory, they discovered that each had a tattoo on his left forearm, but they were not Dark Marks. They were swastikas. They eventually concluded that they were dealing with the members of some sort of white supremacist terrorist group.

Hermione found that their positions had reversed, as she was now trying to calm Harry down. He knew that this attack, just as the Weasley attack had been, was aimed at him. It was no coincidence that this had happened on his birthday. Eventually, they came to an agreement on what to do and he left Hermione and headed off to Gringotts, with as angry a look on his face as she had ever seen.

For her part Hermione headed back to Brighton, where her parents were wearing out their cell phones, systematically contacting various authorities, some coworkers, and a few friends. (She had remembered to turn hers off when they went back in time, so that it wouldn't ring again just after noon while they were concealed outside the Grangers' dental practice.) Dan and Emma decided to tell their closest friends and associates that they were going into hiding, for fear that they would be attacked again if the terrorists realized that they had escaped. They assured everyone that they had no idea why they had been targeted. They also managed to set up a secure time and place to meet with the police inspectors, who agreed with their plans to drop out of sight.

-ooOoo-

Harry returned to the Brighton beach house an hour later with a look of grim satisfaction on his face, to find that the three Grangers had made themselves comfortable out on the sundeck, and Dan had discovered the wet bar. After Hermione had jumped up from her lounge to give him a hug and a kiss, and Dan handed him a drink, he began to tell his story as he removed his own clothing.

He had experienced little trouble getting in to see Bladrock, and reminding him of his statement that anything could be done for the right price, asked him if Gringotts would be able to follow the money and track down the group that had carried out the bombing. Bladrock had hesitated only briefly, then with a wicked smile assured him that they would see what they could do, and Harry handed him the pensieve memories. Then Harry had asked a more challenging question – whose side was Gringotts on in this war?

That had got him escorted back into a maze of offices that ended with the most ornate doorway he had ever seen, and he had found himself in the presence of Ragnok, the head of the goblin bank. There he had been pleasantly surprised to be told that they had no desire to see Voldemort take over the wizarding world, amazed to learn that they could easily seal the vaults of Death Eaters and not allow them access, and positively astounded to hear that the Ministry had never requested it. And it was not due to the Ministry being unaware of the possibility, as the goblins had long ago made the suggestion to Minister Fudge. Rather it was because of Fudge's fear of resistance from the old-line pureblood families in the Wizengamot. Harry, only half-jokingly, instructed Hermione to add 'take on the Wizengamot' to her to-do list.

Once Harry had finished recounting his dealings with the goblins, the four of them relaxed and watched the sun set. Dan suggested that the cottage could use a hot tub out here on the sundeck, especially as it cooled down in the evenings and at night. Harry immediately responded by telling Dan and Emma that they should pick one out and order it, and charge it to his account. This, of course, led to a friendly debate between Dan and Harry over which one of them would be allowed to pay for it, while Hermione and Emma discussed what features it should have and what color it should be.

Despite his objections, Dan and Emma insisted on going through with the original plan of taking Harry out to dinner for his birthday. And after some initial awkwardness, the three Grangers managed to help him to overcome his guilty feelings and they all enjoyed the evening together. The lovely meal at a beachfront restaurant evoked memories of the dinners the foursome had shared at the resort when they were on their holiday in the Yucatan. Late that evening, Harry and Hermione left her parents, who assured them that they would be fine and that they loved the beach house, and returned to their Cambridge flat.

-ooOoo-

One week later, in a news story buried on the inside pages of the London Times, it would be announced that all of the members of a somewhat obscure neo Nazi group had been found dead in a warehouse. There was no indication of who was responsible. But the word quickly spread through the network of similar groups that a certain source of money was to be avoided at all costs.

ooOoo-

(Tuesday, July 29, repeated)

Since it hadn't actually happened yet, Harry and Hermione said nothing to Ron, Bill, and Fleur about the attack on the Grangers when they met the others at Hogwarts. Once in the Headmistress's office they heard a familiar voice.

"Good morning my young friends," came the greeting from the wall of portraits. Hermione immediately moved close to Harry and took his hand. This was going to be an emotional encounter.

"Hel ... Hello Headmaster," Harry managed to choke out. Hermione gave his hand a squeeze, as much for her comfort as for his, as she was having trouble controlling her own feelings. It must have helped, for Harry's voice was more steady on his next statement. "We have quite a bit to tell you, and we have some questions for you as well." He glanced uneasily at McGonagall. How did you politely ask the headmistress to leave her own office?

The portrait Dumbledore's eyes gave that familiar twinkle as he chuckled. "I must say that I admire how well you followed my instructions on secrecy. But I have since taken Professor McGonagall into my confidence, and you may speak freely in front of her." Hermione found herself annoyed with this statement. Dumbledore had made things unnecessarily difficult for Harry with those instructions, but *he* had shared the information with first Snape and now McGonagall. Moreover, his need to keep everyone, often including Harry, in the dark about his maneuverings had caused her fiancé untold grief. She noted with some satisfaction that the Dumbledore in the portrait showed a moment of surprise when he noticed her scowling at him.

But it quickly passed as he congratulated Harry on what he had accomplished so far, once Harry had brought him up to date on the Horcrux news. Harry then explained that Bill and Fleur were taking over the Horcrux project and that he, Hermione, and Ron wished to speak with McGonagall. McGonagall, who had been looking forward to the opportunity, quickly agreed and left the newlywed couple with the portrait and took the three teens to her old Transfiguration office.

"While what I am about to say is primarily directed at Mr. Potter and Miss Granger, part of it concerns you as well, Mr. Weasley, so I am pleased that all three of you could be present to hear it," McGonagall began in her usual no-nonsense tone. "Simply put, I would like Mr. Potter and Miss Granger to accept the positions of Head Boy and Head Girl for the upcoming academic year. I hope to persuade you that this having the two of you in these positions is essential for Hogwarts and that it will be in your best interests as well."

Hermione shot a glance at Harry. Try as she might to contain her excitement at being named Head Girl, she couldn't keep the delight from her face, or control her feet which insisted on bouncing up and down like Dobby did when he was allowed to assist Harry Potter with something. She could see the corners of Harry's mouth turn up as he observed her reaction. As much as she wanted to hug him, or give his arm a squeeze, she managed to restrain herself. She also wanted to hug him for his own reaction to the news.

She knew very well that a younger, less mature Harry Potter might have been surprised that he was being made Head Boy, and protested that he was not worthy of the honor. He might have even urged the headmistress to consider Ron for the position, out of some wrongheaded attempt to forestall his jealousy. (Hermione knew that there was no chance that Ron would be considered by McGonagall, given how irresponsible he had been about his prefect duties.)

But Harry had grown up a lot in the past month/year, and was more able to accept that he was destined to be regarded as a leader. Now his reaction to this news was acceptance for himself and happiness for Hermione. He returned her glance, smiling at the look on her face, then returned his gaze to McGonagall and she did as well. They both still wanted to hear McGonagall's reasoning, since Harry was not necessarily convinced that returning to Hogwarts in these roles would be the wisest course of action. Hermione settled for taking hold of his hand, while Ron reached over and clapped him on the shoulder.

"I'd like to hear why you think this is essential for Hogwarts, and now that you know about the task we have ahead of us, how it will be in our best interests," Harry asked calmly.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Granger," McGonagall replied, her face softening a bit. "I'm going to be very frank with you. I desperately need for both of you to come back to Hogwarts in the fall. Whether we can open or not may depend on your decision." The two students looked at each other again, this time with some uneasiness. *Was she serious?* Their discussions on the topic had focused on what course of action would be best for their mission. McGonagall was boldly inserting another aspect into the conversation. *How could the presence of two students matter so much?* Before Hermione could voice this question aloud, McGonagall proceeded to answer it.

"Mr. Potter, like it or not, you are not only the best known student at this school, but one of the most respected. Your actions during the past two weeks have made that more true than ever. I estimate that as many as half of our students' families will be influenced by your decision as they decide whether to send their children back in the fall. I have actually been told this by many of the Gryffindor families and also quite a few from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw." She paused to let this sink in, then added with a smile. "Even two Slytherins."

That drew a reaction out of the pair of students. Hermione nodded thoughtfully while Harry lowered his head, shaking it in resignation. McGonagall next addressed Hermione. "As for you Miss Granger, the two of you are now inextricably tied together, both by your own actions and in the public's mind. There is no conceivable way that he would return without you, so that possibility can be discounted. While it is possible that you would return without him, I believe that neither of you would be at all satisfied with that situation. So it must be together, one way or the other."

"If you do not attend in the fall, it will be seen by everyone as a lack of trust in the security of Hogwarts. And believe me, it will be a very public decision. Everyone in the country will know no later than September 2 if you are not present." Harry groaned, but couldn't dispute her assertion.

"Now," McGonagall continued, "as to what would constitute the best course of action for the success of your mission, my previous statement applies

as well. If you were not present, everyone in the country would know about it. That includes our enemies. They are sure to wonder just what you are up to. And I'm sure that you will agree that keeping them in the dark about what you are up to is essential. Even if Mr. Weasley and his new wife are to take up the search for the Horcruxes, they will be better able to do it in secret if the enemy's attention is directed at Hogwarts." Hermione chanced another glance at Harry. What McGonagall had said was pretty persuasive, and she could see that he was wavering.

"The main reason that I see for your not returning," the headmistress argued, "is that you won't have the time to prepare yourselves while attending classes and carrying out your other duties. But your rather brilliant use of your time turner has now removed the time factor from consideration." Hermione flushed at the unexpected approval from the teacher she most respected as McGonagall continued. "What remains is to ensure your freedom of movement. And I am willing to grant you unprecedented latitude in that regard. Provided that you keep me informed, you will be free to leave the castle whenever you deem necessary. That will be facilitated by another of the reasons for you to accept the Heads positions. I am certain that Miss Granger, at least, is aware that the Head Boy and Girl have their own rooms." Harry's head snapped up at that revelation, and he shot a look at Hermione who nodded. "In fact, since you are both from the same house, you will share the Gryffindor Head Suite. I might add that it has been twenty years since that suite was fully occupied, which was the last time that both the Head Boy and Head Girl were from Gryffindor." Harry smiled wistfully at that remark, since she was referring to his mother and father.

This was beginning to sound better and better, Hermione thought. They would be able to use all of the resources that Hogwarts provided, provide needed leadership to the student body, live a somewhat normal life, and leave whenever necessary. They could even take a week off if they desired, spend it away from the castle at any one of their secret properties, and return without anyone even being aware that they were gone. Hermione gave Harry's hand a squeeze to show that she was favorably inclined to the headmistress's proposition and received one in return.

McGonagall cleared her throat to make another point. "I must remind you that there are privacy charms on the bedrooms in that suite that are similar to those that exist on the boys and girls dorms." Hermione smiled to herself. In other words, Harry might not be able to get into her bedroom but there was nothing stopping her from getting into his. That settled the question of where they would be sleeping. Another squeeze of her hand by Harry's let her know that he was thinking the same thing. But McGonagall was not finished. "But I can assure you that no one on the staff will bother to check up on such things as how and where you choose to spend your time while in the privacy of your suite. I believe that I can trust you to be responsible about your activities." Hermione turned bright red at this statement, and she was certain she saw McGonagall's mouth twitch as she uttered it. Her interpretation was that the headmistress had just told her not to get pregnant. She gave her assurance that they intended to behave responsibly, and Harry quickly joined her. While they would discuss it together before giving their final decision, it now seemed that McGonagall's proposal was clearly the best option.

McGonagall now turned her attention to Ron, who had been almost forgotten during the previous negotiation. "Mr. Weasley will continue to have his prefect status of course, which gives him a great deal of freedom of movement as well. I was also wondering, though, if you would consent to add to your responsibilities by assuming the position of Gryffindor quidditch captain for this year." Ron was unable to answer, as his jaw had dropped nearly to his chest. "Of course, if you think that this would be too much of a burden, I believe that I could prevail on Miss Weasley to accept."

Ron had regained the ability to move, at least, as he was now shaking his head. Hermione smiled broadly at her friend and Harry was grinning from ear to ear. Finally Ron managed to speak. "No ... I mean yes ... I mean, yes I'll do it and no you don't need to ask Ginny." Harry cut off anything else he might have wanted to add by shaking his hand and pounding him on the back, while Hermione wrapped him up in a hug. None of them noticed McGonagall surreptitiously wipe a tear from her eye.

-ooOoo-

When they met up with Bill and Fleur again there were congratulations and hugs for the new Head Boy, Head Girl, and Quidditch Captain. Although Harry cautioned that it wasn't certain that they would accept the positions, Bill pointed out that it was an honor just the same. McGonagall had given her consent to their proposed activities for the upcoming week and they settled down to work out the details. They visited the Gryffindor head suite which was located in Gryffindor Tower adjacent to the common room and Bill showed them around, since he had resided in the suite himself some ten years earlier. They decided to make Gryffindor Tower their base of operations. Bill and Fleur would stay in the Head Boy's room (Fleur didn't bother to ask if she would be permitted, she simply moved in) and Hermione would take the Head Girl's room, while Harry and Ron would use all seven of the Gryffindor boys' dorms.

As Bill was anxious to get started, after lunch they headed down to the second floor and Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. McGonagall had insisted on accompanying them, and when Flitwick heard about their excursion he expressed a desire to join them. Harry considered asking Hagrid if he wanted to come along, but when Ron pointed out that it would be a tight fit for him going down the pipes he abandoned that idea. Harry stopped for a few moments of polite conversation with Moaning Myrtle, and Hermione had to bite her lip to keep a straight face while the ghost flirted with him.

Only Ron and Hermione had heard Harry speak Parseltongue before, in second year, and while Fleur and Bill had witnessed it in pensieve memories, it was a first for McGonagall and Flitwick. All six of them shuddered at the hissed command to the sink to open up, since it was creepy in any case. Once the sink stopped moving and the pipe was exposed Fleur gave Harry a look that clearly said, *'You can't possibly expect me to go down that disgusting pipe!'*

Hermione caught Fleur's look and managed to stifle a laugh, but she was also dubious about the prospect. Not that she wasn't willing, or indeed hadn't already followed Harry into equally disturbing places. But McGonagall, though – in contrast to Fleur – managing to keep an impassive expression on her face, was equally displeased.

"Having gone to school with Tom Riddle, I am quite certain that he did not slide down this filthy pipe whenever he wished to enter the Chamber." Flitwick, who had been a professor at the time and had taught Riddle in Charms, agreed. Some investigation by Bill and Flitwick soon revealed a hidden set of stairs, and a few minutes later Bill worked out a way to counter the concealment ward and to activate them. All that remained was another word in Parseltongue from Harry. Soon they were riding a moving staircase down along the now expanded pipe with Harry and Ron just looking at each other and shaking their heads while Hermione rolled her eyes at them.

The professors were suitably awed when they passed the twenty-foot snakeskin but the others only grinned at each other, since what awaited them

was much more impressive. It took a while to clear away the rubble from the collapsed tunnel, since among them only Flitwick would be able to fit through the small opening that a twelve year old Harry and an eleven year old Ginny had crawled back through. The twisting and turning tunnel seemed longer to Hermione in real life than it had in the pensieve memory, and they all grimaced once again when Harry hissed at the wall with the twin serpents. The wall slid apart and they entered the Chamber.

A quick search turned up nothing aside from an impressive basilisk carcass, although Bill identified several promising spots where hidden rooms might exist. Flitwick commented to McGonagall that Slughorn would love to have a go at the dead basilisk for potions ingredients. McGonagall retorted that she would have to come up with something in return that the potions master could do for her. Hermione exchanged a smile with Harry as they recalled how the greedy Potions professor traded favors.

After supper they sat around the Heads common room and discussed the week ahead. Since they had a busy day ahead of them the next day they decided it was time for bed. Harry, Ron, and Hermione went to the Gryffindor common room while Bill and Fleur disappeared into the Head Boy's bedroom. Hermione gave Ron a quick hug and kissed Harry good night as Ron headed up the stairs. At Harry's raised eyebrow she smiled sweetly at him.

"I have to kiss you goodnight six more times yet this evening. I'll see you in the morning. Sooner if you're good."

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## Hermione's Plan Training Ron

### Chapter 18, Training Ron

Tuesday, August 5 10:35 PM

"Ready for bed, Mine?"

Hermione looked up from writing in her journal to see Harry smiling at her, and she smiled back broadly at the use of his special nickname for her. She had just finished sending the last of the other six Harrys and Rons back in time at five-minute intervals. For the first time in a week there was only one Harry Potter in the castle. She knew that Harry was looking forward to having her 'all to himself' that night.

"In a minute. I'm just finishing up with my notes," she responded happily. Harry moved behind her and his hands started massaging her shoulders.

"As you wish," he replied. A shiver went through her at those words and she reached up and took one of Harry's hands from her shoulder and ran it against her cheek, sighing contentedly. Harry had started using that phrase on occasion ever since they had watched *The Princess Bride* together.

The cottage in Brighton, unlike many other wizarding houses, had been equipped with electricity, so Harry and Hermione had fetched the Grangers' computers, telly, and VCR so that her parents wouldn't be so bored in their hiding spot. The computer's modem had taken over the phone line and the dentists had relied on their cell phones for voice communication. But the availability of the VCR had led to what came to be known as 'Movie Night at the Grangers'. During the remainder of the week that they had spent preparing before coming to the castle, the two students had gone to the beach front cottage every evening to keep her parents company. Each night they made popcorn, poured soft drinks (sugar-free of course) and settled down to watch one of their favorite movies.

Until Emma had teased her about it, Hermione had never realized that *her* favorite movies could be summed up in two categories. 'Girl Falls In Love With Her Best Friend' and 'Reluctant Hero Saves the World'. A bit obvious, really, now that she thought about it. Of course her all-time favorite, *Spiderman*, was in both categories. A real tearjerker, since the hero decided that saving the world meant he couldn't be with the girl who loved him. But when they watched it that weekend she got to snuggle up with Harry during the movie, and she didn't cry nearly as much as usual.

Reluctantly, she returned her attention to the journal in front of her, in which she had faithfully kept track of everything that had gone on during the 'seven weeks of training in one week' that Ron had just undergone. Her final entry detailing the sending back in time of six pairs of her best friends dovetailed nicely with her first, which had been about greeting them the week prior as they appeared in the Gryffindor common room.

-oooOOOooo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Day 0 – Tuesday, July 29, 10:45 PM

*Everything is off to a good start. At 10:00 I sent Harry and Ron up to the first year boys dorm and sat down to wait. At 10:05 the time turner brought them back for the second go round. I'm going to start numbering them to keep them straight. Anyway, Harry #2 gave me another good night kiss and I sent him and Ron #2 up to the second year boys dorm.*

*10:10 H3 and R3 arrived. This Harry had a mischievous look in his eye, and I found out why when he gave me a rather longer good night kiss as Ron squirmed a bit. I shoed them up to the third year boys dorm.*

*10:15 H4 and R4 arrived. Harry seems to be playing some sort of game with Ron. This time the kiss was even longer and more passionate, and Ron headed for the stairs for the fourth year boys dorm as soon as it started.*

*10:20 H5 and R5 arrived. I decided to teach Harry a lesson and offered him a handshake instead of a kiss. Then I burst out laughing at the look on his face. He was so dejected that I gave him a kiss anyway. Poor Ron had gone up the stairs as soon as they arrived, but then he turned around to see what was going on as I started laughing, only to have to see us kissing again.*

*10:25 H6 and R6 arrived. Harry must have learned his lesson because this time it was a nice sweet kiss. I decided to cross him up next time. Anyway, this pair is in the sixth year boys dorm.*

*10:30 H7 and R7 arrived right on schedule. This time I attacked him! Ron fled up the stairs to the seventh year boys dorm while I pulled Harry down onto the sofa. Since this was the last pair I didn't have to send him up right away. I definitely gave him something to remember me by, though.*

*Unfortunately, now I have to decide where to sleep. I certainly don't want to sleep by myself in the Head Girl's room. But which of my Harrys should I go to? I think it's going to be a long night.*

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Day 1 – Wednesday, AM

*To keep things as simple as possible, Harry and Ron are going to eat breakfast in their dorm rooms, and lunch and dinner in whatever classrooms they're in that week. My job is to keep everything coordinated. Dobby and Winky (she's back to full health now) have organized seven house elves to help us out with the meals. Anyway, this will be the regular morning plan:*

### *Daily Schedule*

*7:30 I come down to the Gryffindor common room and check to see that everything is ready. Winky sends the house elves up with breakfast at 5-minute intervals.*

*8:00 H1 and R1 come downstairs to the common room and I send them off to the Arithmency classroom. Dobby had to show the prats where it was, since neither of them had ever taken the class or bothered to find out where the room was. (Next year I'm going to make Harry walk me to class!)*

*8:05 H2 and R2 come downstairs and I send them off to the Astronomy classroom, reminding them that it's the classroom, not the tower.*

*8:10 H3 and R3 come down and are off to the Transfiguration classroom.*

*8:18 H4 and R4 came down a little late the first morning since Ron overslept. I shoed them off to the Charms classroom.*

*8:20 H5 and R5 head off to the DADA classroom.*

*8:25 This week they're starting life magic, so H6 and R6 are off to Firenze's pseudo-forest classroom.*

*8:30 Send H7 and R7 out to the greenhouses, reminding them to stay away from the quidditch pitch.*

*After that I make the rounds of all the classrooms, looking in on them periodically to see how they're doing and take notes.*

-o-

*Something we forgot – Harry #1 has to go down and open the Chamber of Secrets each day for Bill. I'll send him there directly from the common room from now on.*

-o-

*The first problem we ran into was with physical training. Harry and I have planned an hour of exercise each day to try to get Ron into better shape. Unfortunately, Ron didn't agree that he wasn't in shape. The git seemed to think that quidditch kept him fit enough. Honestly! It's just riding around on a broom (or in Ron's situation as a keeper, sitting on a broom) for a few hours.*

*We have turned the Room of Requirement into a gym, with weight training and a track. It was quite a revelation for Ron when he saw how much more weight Harry could lift than he could. And how quickly he tired out when running. One lap around the track and he was ready to collapse. Reluctantly, he agreed that perhaps he could use some conditioning. Then I challenged him. It really shocked him when I outran him, and then matched him on half of the weight machines and beat him on two of them (I have pretty strong legs now).*

### *The 'gym' schedule*

*9:00 – 10:00 H1 and R1*

*10:10 – 11:10 H2 and R2*

*11:20 – 12:20 H3 and R3*

*Break for lunch*

*1:00 – 2:00 H4 and R4*

*2:10 – 3:10 H5 and R5*

*3:20 – 4:20 H6 and R6*

*4:30 – 5:30 H7 and R7*

*Harry carries the invisibility cloak with him all the time, so in case they run over a bit, they can avoid running into themselves.*

*They also take a break to go flying out on the quidditch pitch in the afternoons. Ron grumbled quite a bit when he saw I was only giving them half an hour.*

### *Quidditch Schedule*

*1:00 – 1:30 H6 and R6*

*1:40 – 2:10 H7 and R7*

*2:20 – 2:50 H1 and R1*

*3:00 – 3:30 H2 and R2*

*3:40 – 4:10 H3 and R3*

4:20 – 4:50 H4 and R4  
5:00 – 5:30 H5 and R5

*We've decided to try to have Ron learn the combat spells and their counters together. We'll do one major offensive spell each week, and 5 – 10 defensive shields or blocks for dark spells that we won't use but that might be used against us. Ron also needs to learn silent spellcasting. I think that's going to be the most difficult part for him. I hope he doesn't get too frustrated with it. Part of each day will be spent on speed and accuracy as well. They're going to be going through a lot of targets. I'll probably spend several hours each day just conjuring targets. Professor Flitwick said he'll help me with that. ...*

Hermione and Ron watched as Harry set up five small targets, then walked back ten paces. He turned and silently flicked his wand five times, and five silver streaks of light exploded the targets.

"Bloody Hell, Harry, how did you get so good at that?" Ron exclaimed, shaking his head.

"Practice." Harry shared a look with Hermione, then turned back to Ron. "The more you do it, the better you get at it. Start with making sure you hit the target, then work on getting the spells off faster. It doesn't do you much good if you can shoot five spells in five seconds but can't hit anyone." He set up five more targets, then stepped back and motioned Ron to take a shot.

*"Reducto! Reducto! Reducto! Reducto! Reducto!"* Ron got the spells off in ten seconds, but only two of them hit. He looked hesitantly over at Harry.

"That's fast enough for now. Let's work on your accuracy. Don't worry, when Hermione and I started this drill she could only hit one in five." He turned to wink at Hermione and she stuck her tongue out at him. That was only partly true. One in five was her *worst* result. Every other time she had hit more than that. By the end of the second day she was consistently averaging four of five. Now, like Harry, she never missed. But it was the right thing for Harry to say. Ron's shoulders straightened up a bit at that news, and he got a determined look on his face. Hermione nodded to Harry and left the room.

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Wednesday, PM

*I've decided to eat lunch with Bill and Fleur in the Great Hall. That way I can keep up with how they're doing. McGonagall, Flitwick, and Hagrid join us. I guess all the other professors are gone this week. Well, except for Trelawny, and I'm quite happy that she doesn't eat with us.*

-o-

*The Marauder's Map is very useful for this project. I can keep track of all 14 of them. Especially moving to and from the Room of Requirement for their exercising, and the quidditch pitch for their flying break.*

-o-

*The evening schedule is just a repeat of the morning schedule, except I have to make sure they come back to the common room at the right times so that each pair gets upstairs before the next one shows up. I've decided to send Dobby to remind them ten minutes ahead of time. By 10:00 they were all back in their dorms. I told them I wanted them asleep by 11:00. Ron #1 gave me one of his looks and a sarcastic "Yes Mum." Harry #1 followed up with "Yes Dear." A couple of stinging hexes to their bums while they were going up the stairs fixed that. Not surprisingly, none of the other six pairs gave me any trouble at all. (smirk)*

*Whew! That was exhausting. Six more days to go.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Day 2 – Thursday, AM

*Today is the day I've been anxious about. I hope everything goes well. It certainly started out well! ...*

When the first pair of boys came down the stairs at 8:00, Hermione met them at the bottom. "Happy Birthday Harry!" She gave him a kiss and then handed him two chocolate frogs, indicating that one was for Ron.

Harry gave her a hug, then returned the kiss and whispered in her ear, "Are you all set for your parents?" She nodded and hugged him again. Ron groaned and pulled him away towards the portrait hole.

The second pair of boys had expectant looks on their faces. This time Hermione gave Harry a bit longer kiss, and handed him four chocolate frogs. Ron's eyes lit up while Harry chuckled.

With each pair of boys, the kiss got better, and the number of chocolate frogs increased by two. By the fifth pair, Ron asked if they could have the frogs first, so he could leave while the two lovebirds were snogging. Hermione decided that would be OK.

For the seventh pair, Ron was out the portrait hole long before the kiss ended. When they finally broke apart, Hermione whispered, "I love you Harry. Happy birthday again. I wanted to make up for all those horrible birthdays you had growing up."

Harry pulled her tightly to himself. "Thank you so much. I love you too. I can assure you that this is one birthday – or eight birthdays I guess - that I'll remember for a long time."



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From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Thursday, AM (continued)

*Ron #2 is working on the Diffindo spell. I was watching Harry demonstrate how to control it when he started clowning around. He transfigured his clothing to give himself a black cape and a black mask like Zorro and started slashing Z's everywhere! I'm pretty sure he did it to help take my mind off what's going to happen at noon today. He's such a dear! ...*

"What on earth are you playing at?" Ron blurted out, as Harry finished adjusting his mask.

Harry brandished his wand like a sword, waving it back and forth and making lunging motions. "Stay back, evil villain! Or you will feel the cold steel of Zorro!" He turned and made three quick slashes with his wand, and a large Z appeared on one of the star charts in the Astronomy classroom, while Ron stood there gaping. He then surrounded it with several smaller Z's and stepped back to admire his work. Hermione's laughter caught his attention, and he approached her with an evil grin on his face.

Hermione immediately knew what was on his mind. Folding her arms protectively across her chest she attempted to give him a stern look. "Harry James Potter, don't even think about it!" However, she was unable to keep up the look, as the corners of her mouth began to curl up. She tried to work out if she would be able to reach her wand and put up a shield before he could slice through the top she was wearing.

But then Harry stopped and bowed low, sweeping his arm before him in a grand gesture. "Fear not, my fair lady, I would never dream of harming even a single hair on your beautiful head." The gallant effect was severely compromised when Hermione started giggling. She reached up and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, then began casting *Reparo* spells on the star chart as Harry started explaining to Ron who Zorro was, and how he was trying to illustrate fine control with the cutting spell.

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Thursday, PM

*I'm glad that's over with. Everything went according to plan. Hedwig arrived while I was in the Great Hall for lunch. I showed McGonagall the note from Mum and left. I went to Potter Manor and stayed there for an hour, discussing some things with Minnie, then came back and talked to Dobby. He agreed to help (naturally) and will wait until the Harry back home calls him. After that I found Harry #1 and told him that it was all OK. (Obviously, the other six Harrys already knew) He came over and gave me a hug, then we explained to Ron what had happened.*

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Day 3 – Friday, AM

*Harry #3 made a breakthrough with Ron on silent spellcasting today. It was brilliant. He told Ron to use the 'Up' command on his broomstick that we learned in our first flying lesson in first year. Then he made him try it silently and the broomstick jumped into his hand. Ron realized that he had been doing this without thinking about it for years! But once Harry pointed it out, he got some idea of how it felt, then they moved on to other simple spells that we use all the time without thinking about them. My fiancé is SO smart!*

*On a hunch I decided to check with Harry #6 who is in Firenze's 'forest' classroom with Ron #6 working on life magic. Sure enough, that Harry is using the same technique for wandless magic. He's having Ron wandlessly summon his broomstick. I think he would make a great teacher some day. He's really good at figuring out the best ways to get people to learn things.*

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Day 4 – Saturday, PM

*I am going to kill Fleur Delacour Weasley. Oh, it will be in the nicest possible way, but she's going to die. Perhaps I'll do it by slipping Bill some Viagra and locking them together in a room all day. Naked. Without their wands so they can't transfigure themselves some clothing. She'll die with a smile on her face.*

*She really got me good at lunch today. She is such an incredible tease! ...*

Just as Hermione was beginning lunch Fleur sat down next to her with a sly smile. "I must say, 'Ermione, I don't know 'ow you manage. You're really somezing." At Hermione's puzzled expression Fleur continued with a shrug. "'Ow do you ever manage to 'andle seven 'Arry's at once? I must say zat one of my Bill's ees enough for me. Especially at night." Hermione gave a nervous laugh. Surely Fleur wouldn't go there? But the French witch raised a perfect eyebrow and went on. "Weeth a man as ... powerful ... as 'Arry you must be completely worn out by ze morning."

Hermione's jaw dropped and her face turned red, a red which doubled in intensity when, to her horror, she heard a sound from her other side. From Headmistress McGonagall, to be precise.

"Ahem." Mortified, Hermione refused to turn around. If she had, she would have seen Minerva McGonagall, for one of the few times in many decades, struggling to keep a straight face.

Hermione glared at her part-Veela friend, but received only the most innocent smile in return. "Excuse me, Headmistress," she muttered, still without turning around. "Fleur, could I have a word with you?" As gracefully as she could manage, she rose and walked to the end of the table, with Fleur nonchalantly following behind. But before Hermione could say anything, Fleur spoke first.

“Well? I know zat you’re not sleeping een ze ’Ead Girl’s bedroom.” Recognizing that nothing she could say would dissuade the other woman, Hermione sighed and gave in.

“Okay. I didn’t know what to do. I considered setting an alarm and changing beds every hour, so as to spend one hour with each of him each night.” Fleur’s shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. Only Hermione Granger would plan out sleeping with a man to that level of detail. “Then I just decided to begin the night with one, and change beds during the night so I woke up with another.”

Fleur’s eyes were dancing with mirth. “And I suppose you’re making sure zat you spend ze same amount of time weeth each one?”

Hermione gave her a puzzled look. “Of course,” she answered, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“And are you possibly writing all of ze nights and times down een your journal so zat you can keep track of eet?” Fleur continued. Hermione, realizing she was being teased, nodded sheepishly. Fleur grabbed her into a hug. “Don’t ever change ’Ermione, don’t ever change.”

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Day 5 – Sunday, PM

*Harry and I have to be very careful about what we reveal to each other. The later Harrys have to make sure they don’t say anything to me about things that happen later in an earlier week, and I have to make sure I don’t tell an earlier Harry something that I learned from a later Harry. For him it was most difficult the first few days. For me, it got more complicated as time went on and I observed more things. As we move to the end of the week it won’t be as much of a problem.*

*There was a good example today. I noticed this morning that Ron #3 was doing well in hexes, but lagging behind in shields, but that Ron #4 was much better at shielding. Harry #4 thought about it and then told me it was my doing. “You’ll see,” was all he would say. This afternoon I went back to watch Ron #3 again and realized that he was taking it for granted that Harry could break his shields and didn’t try very hard. So Harry had me test him. Ron was embarrassed that I could break his shields effortlessly too. After that he was more motivated to work harder on shields.*

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Day 6 – Monday, AM

*Ronald Weasley is such an idiot. A likeable idiot, to be sure, but an idiot nonetheless. I’ve been joining them out at the quidditch pitch to fly with them. I really love my newbroom, by the way. I joked to them that I might even try out for the quidditch team next year. Unfortunately, that got Ron thinking. The git decided that he and Harry could have a quidditch match here, right now. It would be the Potters against the Weasleys. That is, all 7 Harrys vs. all 7 Rons! It took me quite a while to talk him out of it. ...*

“Hermione, it would be great!” Ron insisted. “Just think, a quidditch team of seven Harry Potters! You could sell posters and everything.”

Hermione gave an exasperated sigh, then threw a glare at Harry for good measure. He immediately put up his hands and shook his head in a ‘not my idea’ gesture. Then she proceeded to explain to Ron, in simple language, why they couldn’t do it.

“Ron, the basic rule of the time turner is that you can’t go back and change something you already knew happened.”

“So? We’re only going to play one game.”

Hermione forced herself to stay calm. “No, Ron *you* aren’t. There aren’t really seven of you. There is only one of you doing the same week seven times. If we had a quidditch match, you would play it seven times, each time in a different position. And since you’ve already been through the week five times, you already know it didn’t happen.” Ron frowned. He couldn’t think of a counter for that.

“And even if we had planned it from the beginning, it still would be too dangerous. Let’s say you played keeper the first time, then beater twice, then chaser three times, then finished as seeker.”

“I think I’d play chaser before beater ...” Ron began, but stopped abruptly at Hermione’s glare.

“It doesn’t matter!” she hissed. “By the time you played seeker you would have already seen Harry catch the snitch six times. (Ron looked like he wanted to object to her assumption that Harry would catch the snitch every time, but thought better of it.) You would know exactly when and where it happened. Would you try to do something different with that knowledge, so you had a chance to beat him to it?”

“Of course. What’s the point if you don’t try to win?”

Harry stopped Hermione from trying to pull her hair out. “The point, Ron, is that you would be changing something you already knew had happened. And if you change it then it didn’t happen, so then you wouldn’t know it, so you wouldn’t know to change it. It’s called a paradox.” he replied calmly, while restraining Hermione by wrapping her up in a hug. “According to the laws of time, you would end up unconscious or in a coma. It’s just not worth the risk.”

Ron knew from experience that he could never change Hermione’s mind on anything if Harry took her side, and besides, he could see now what the problem was. But he couldn’t resist one last comment to wind Hermione up.

“Still seems like it would have been fun, though.”

Harry was massaging her shoulders now, so Hermione was simply unable to gather up the proper amount of scorn for that comment. She was just too busy enjoying the massage, and fighting hard to keep from purring. She did manage to roll her eyes at Ron most impressively.

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Monday, PM

*Besides flying with the boys on the quidditch pitch, I've been flying as an owl every day. It's really given me another perspective on Hogwarts. I now know what the tops of all the buildings look like. Some pretty interesting views actually. I also visited with Hedwig in the owlry.*

*Harry and I have gone out to the Forbidden Forest some nights, too, with him in his jaguar form and me as an owl. (Harry #4 thought of it first, so I went once with him, then H5, then H6. Tonight was H7.) I think it will be a good idea for us to get to know that forest better. I have a feeling that Hogwarts might be vulnerable from that direction. We made contact with some centaurs this evening. For some reason, they're more hospitable now. I don't know if it's because they respect Harry (and possibly me also) more because he's an animagus, or they realize that we all need to put aside our differences and work together, now that Dumbledore's dead. It's too dangerous to keep up the feud any longer.*

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Day 7 – Tuesday, AM

*Ron has really learned a lot during these seven weeks, and is much improved at magical combat. Unfortunately, he's gotten a bit cocky. This morning Ron #7 challenged me to an all-out duel. Since he's been with Harry every day he knows he's no match for him, but for some reason he seems to think that he ought to be able to take me on. So bring it on, Weasley! It's time I put you in your place.*

*We're going to do it this afternoon. Since we're at the end of the week and it's the last time through, there's no problem with any of us knowing anything in advance.*

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger – Tuesday, PM

*I had my final lunchtime visit with Bill and Fleur today. Even though there was no Horcrux in the Chamber, they managed to get into all of the hidden rooms. Bill also spent time talking with Dumbledore's portrait, and going through his notes. They now have lots of information on Tom Riddle's plans, and good leads on where the other Horcruxes might be.*

*It seems that Dumbledore was initially dubious about the idea to turn the Horcrux project over to Bill and Fleur, but eventually went along with it. Harry has mixed emotions about the whole thing, as do I. He has the utmost admiration for Dumbledore, but he also resents some of the things he did. I'm not happy with the way he manipulated Harry, and the whole Dursley situation makes my blood boil. It's difficult for Harry to deal with the portrait. I think it was a good decision to leave all of that to Bill and Fleur.*

*They're going to leave this afternoon, right after my duel with Ron. (They want to watch.) They're concerned about Molly. The healers say she's ready to go home, but she's still delusional. I told them about Harry's offer of one of his houses and they think it's a good idea. If she goes back to Grimmauld Place, it will still seem like everything's the way it used to be. Being in a different house, and forced to confront the fact that the Burrows gone, might help her begin to accept reality.*

*With regard to my duel with Ron, bragging rights aside, it's a good idea. We'll use it as a way of determining how far along he's come. Harry agrees. He has no doubt that I could take Ron out easily, but wants me to stretch it out and give him a good workout. ...*

They decided to hold the contest out on the grounds near the lake, where there was plenty of open space. Harry reviewed the rules while Hermione and Ron loosened up. No injurious spells were allowed, such as explosion, slashing, or bone breaking hexes. Stunners and bludgeoning hexes were fair game. This would be a contest of power, speed, and agility, combined with blocking and shielding ability. They had discussed whether to wear their dragonhide armor, but Harry felt that it might lead Ron to rely on the armor to stop a curse instead of blocking it or dodging it himself.

While Harry was finishing, Hermione removed her robes to reveal an outfit consisting of thigh length spandex shorts and one of her stretch tank tops. She grinned at the stunned expression on Ron's face, and the amusement on Harry's.

"What are you doing?" Ron sputtered. "How am I supposed to concentrate on dueling when you look like that?"

"Sorry, Ron," Harry responded. "Distraction is a part of dueling. Feel free to strip down as much as you want." Ron glared at him while Hermione smirked. Then Harry motioned them to begin.

At first Hermione shielded while Ron threw a variety of hexes her way, in order to test his spell strength. She noted that even though he was using nonverbal spells, he moved his lips when he thought the incantation. She easily blocked them, but nodded in satisfaction at the variety of spells he was using, not getting into a discernable pattern.

After several minutes Hermione went on the offensive, flicking her wand to send out three stunners, which Ron blocked, then a disarming spell which he managed to duck out of the way of.

"Is that all you've got Granger?" he taunted, gradually becoming more confident. He sent another nonverbal hex her way and she recognized it just in time to block it. A *Diffindo*! Aimed right at her top. She heard Harry chortling off to the side and had to make an effort to suppress a smile.

"I suppose that was your idea Potter?" she shot over at him. She was planning on sleeping that night but caught herself just in time. Bill and Fleur were watching and she didn't need to give the French witch any more teasing material. She and Ron traded some more spells, each conjuring up shields to block the other. She had a good idea now of just how strong Ron's shields were.

"Two can play at that distraction game, you know," Harry yelled back. In front of her Ron nodded and smirked.

Her response was a sweet smile and a high powered stunner, which shattered his shield, along with a wandless bludgeoning spell that knocked him to the ground. She calmly stepped back and motioned him up and he quickly scrambled to his feet, suddenly looking more nervous.

Ron screwed up his face in concentration and gestured with his arm. Hermione felt herself being pushed back but called on her own magic to resist. Suddenly a tree root appeared behind her and she stumbled, but quickly decided to go with it and threw herself to the ground as Ron snapped off two stunners that sailed over her head. Continuing her roll she sprang to her feet as she threw up a shield with one hand and sent another series of bludgeoning hexes back with the other, causing Ron to break off his attack to evade.

But Ron had another trick up his sleeve. He sent a stream of water at her, which she diverted easily, and then launched another nonverbal spell, this time only thinking it. Hermione abruptly found herself dangling upside down in the air, a victim of the *Levicorpus* jinx. Thinking quickly, she cast *Protego* to intercept his expected disarming spell while thinking the *Liberacorpus* counterjinx which dropped her back to earth.

Now it was time to end it, Hermione decided. Dodging his next spell, she shot two powerful stunners at him sandwiched around a disarming hex. The first stunner broke his shield spell, so he had to evade the disarming hex while conjuring another shield, which likewise shattered. While he was fully occupied blocking the stunners and dodging the Expelliarmus, she reached out her free hand and wandlessly levitated him off the ground to a height of five feet. Alarmed, Ron temporarily neglected his own spellcasting as she mentally banished him away from her, then abruptly summoned him back, ending with him in his original position, only upside down. Holding him in place with one hand, Hermione swirled her wand to initiate a transfiguration spell.

"Hermione!" Ron suddenly found himself clad only in a Speedo style swimsuit and quickly drew his arms and legs together to cover himself. A final disarming hex relieved Ron of his wand, then with a saucy grin Hermione made one more gesture and Ron sailed into the lake as Harry joined her, beside himself with laughter.

"That was brilliant!" he announced, catching her up in a hug. Then he grinned and continued in as deep a voice as he could manage. "Impressive! But you are not a Jedi yet."

Hermione laughed and smacked him on the chest. "I know he's not a starfighter, but he's the biggest thing I've ever managed to levitate." Harry nodded and gave her a congratulatory kiss. A shout from the lake got their attention and the pair of them turned, still in each other's arms, to watch as Ron popped to the surface of the lake and thrashed around trying to regain his balance.

"You know, that looks pretty tempting," Harry declared, pulling back to look at Hermione. "And you look like you could use a swim yourself." Hermione had worked up a good sweat in the warm afternoon sunshine.

"I think you're right," she agreed. "Shall I transfigure you a swimsuit too?"

"Only if I get to transfigure yours," he replied with a gleam in his eyes.

"Harry, now behave," she protested, hitting him on the shoulder.

"Trust me, I'll do it right," he said with a warm smile. Hermione hesitated, then nodded. Harry stood with his arms out and she changed his clothing into the same Speedo style that she had given Ron (except that she made Harry's with two inch sides instead of four inch), then held her breath as she waited for him to do her. With two swirls of his wand she was wearing a black string bikini just like the one she had worn in Mexico. After a quick check she decided it was satisfactory – he had even made the top with a bit more coverage than the one on her actual suit. "Shall we join him, then?" Harry inquired when he saw that his efforts had passed inspection.

Just then Bill and Fleur caught up with them. "Ermione, magnifique!" Fleur called out, clapping her hands delightedly as she ran up to give Hermione a hug.

"Looking good, Hermione," Bill offered with a wolfish grin, eyeing her up and down. Hermione, though, had become accustomed to his flirtatious teasing and affected a pose with her head cocked and her hand on her hip.

"I think the two of you are overdressed," came her rejoinder. Fleur agreed and pulled out her wand to transfigure swimsuits for herself and Bill.

In the meantime Harry nodded toward the lake and gestured with his hand, tracing the path through the air that Ron had taken. Hermione indicated her agreement and raised her hand to levitate Harry and send him toward the lake. Meanwhile he did the same to her, and they floated in tandem on a graceful arc that deposited them into the cold water next to Ron, who was watching them in open-mouthed amazement.

"Sometimes I just don't believe you two," he finally managed. Then he remembered what he was wearing. And what Hermione was wearing, especially the fact that her bikini top was pointing out how cold the water was. His face remained a bright shade of red until Hermione took pity on him and transfigured him a more conservative pair of swim trunks. There was a splash as Bill took a running leap into the water, followed by Fleur wading into the lake in a more dignified manner. The arrival of Fleur immediately turned Ron's attention away from Hermione's swimsuit. Fortunately for her brother-in-law's mental stability, Fleur had not transfigured herself a thong bottom, but had mimicked Hermione's suit. Bill sent a wall of water crashing into Ron to break him away from his ogling of Fleur, and that started a water fight among the three males.

Hermione moved over by Fleur, away from the splashing, but kept an eye on them. Soon they settled down, and Bill spoke up. "Well, despite the fact that you got your arse kicked by a girl, that was some pretty impressive magic, little brother." Ron's head jerked up in surprise, and Hermione

felt a twinge of sympathy, knowing that the one thing that Ron yearned for more than anything in the world was recognition that he was as good as his brothers. "Seriously," Bill continued, "that is one incredibly powerful witch. I wouldn't stand a chance against her."

Ron turned to Harry, as if seeking confirmation. "He's right, Ron," Harry confirmed. "I know it's hard for you to think of her that way, since we've known her since she was an annoying little twelve year old ..." He was interrupted by a jet of water blasting into the back of his head and he turned to confront Hermione standing with her hands on her hips, pretending to glare at him, while Fleur giggled beside her. Harry lunged at Hermione, who backed away with a squeal, but slow enough so that he could catch her easily. The scene soon deteriorated into a tickling, hugging, and splashing match for the two couples, as Bill took the opportunity to attack Fleur also. Ron just leaned back and watched, smiling, happy to be an important part of such a great group, and proud that they thought him worthy of inclusion.

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Wednesday, August 6

The next morning the trio met with the Headmistress, somewhat puzzled to find themselves in her old Transfiguration office, rather than in the office of the Headmaster. (They would later deduce that McGonagall wanted their conversation to take place out of earshot of certain portraits.) Harry and Hermione exchanged a shrug and Harry stepped forward. "Professor McGonagall," he announced. "We've decided to accept your proposal and return to Hogwarts in the fall." Hermione noted that McGonagall's customary rigid composure slipped a bit as she permitted herself a large sigh of relief.

"You have no idea how delighted I am to hear that," McGonagall responded. "I really do think it will work out for the best all around." Then she motioned them to be seated. "If I could impose on a bit more of your time, though, I have several more issues that I would like to discuss with you, and get your input on." Ron dropped into the comfortable stuffed chair while Harry and Hermione sat down together on the sofa. The three students exchanged puzzled looks and shrugs indicating that none of them had any idea of what was coming.

"Now," the headmistress continued when they were comfortable. "I would like you to ponder this question. If you were the head of this school, what changes would you make?"

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## Hermione's Plan A Call to Arms (and Legs)

### Chapter 19, A Call to Arms (and Legs)

"If you were the head of this school, what changes would you make?"

McGonagall's question hung there before them, demanding their attention. The three students exchanged nervous glances. *Were they supposed to answer? Was she seriously asking their opinion or was this a rhetorical question?* "I assure you that I'm quite serious," declared McGonagall, realizing their uneasiness.

Hermione had some opinions to offer, but decided to allow Harry to go first, so she reached over and gave his arm a squeeze, and gestured to him to go ahead.

"Well, there are several things that I've thought of," Harry began. "One is security. I've heard so many times how safe Hogwarts is, or is supposed to be, but frankly it's been pretty dangerous from my point of view. How many different people have tried to kill me since I've been here? Maybe I'm a special case, but what Malfoy pulled last year just shouldn't have been possible. We're in a war, and you have to do a better job of keeping the enemy out of the castle. I'm almost certain that Malfoy had the Dark Mark already last summer. So I'd say number one is screening the students better – don't let any Voldemort supporters come back, whether they're active Death Eaters or not. And that includes the staff as well." McGonagall frowned, but nodded. Hermione could see that she was embarrassed by the fact that some of her colleagues had turned out to be Death Eaters.

"Secondly," Harry continued, "there's too much division in the school. There are a lot of good things about having different Houses, but the way things are now there's too much of an atmosphere of rivalry instead of cooperation. Some rivalry is OK, but it's gotten out of hand. It needs to be more of a friendly competition instead of a life or death struggle."

"You'll be happy to know that I quite agree with both of your points, Mr. Potter," McGonagall revealed. "Professor Flitwick and I are working on devising ways to identify Voldemort supporters among the students, and the staff will be subjected to a thorough scrutiny. Mr. Lupin and Miss Tonks will be spending a great deal of time over the next month scrupulously examining the school and grounds for weak points in our defenses. I believe that Mr. Lupin, in particular, is well acquainted with possible secret passageways into Hogwarts." Hermione caught Harry's eye and smiled. She wondered just how much the sharp Transfiguration professor knew about the Marauders and their exploits.

"You might want to bring in Fred and George Weasley on that project also," suggested Harry with a grin, and the ghost of a smile crossed McGonagall's face as she nodded to acknowledge the merit of that idea.

"With regard to your other point, I think you will agree that one of the main obstacles to developing a better atmosphere in the school is no longer with us. I might add that I have also persuaded Mr. Filch that it was time for him to retire. I feel that it must be possible to enforce rules in a school without having a hatred of the students." She paused as the three students exchanged a look of surprise. "For all of his many fine qualities, I'm afraid that Albus was somewhat lax in his supervision of the staff's treatment of students. I intend to be considerably less tolerant of abuses of this nature."

Here McGonagall leaned forward over her desk, warming to the subject. "But I would also like to take a positive approach to this issue. I think we can promote activities that encourage students to overcome barriers. For example I plan to establish separate lounges geared to year level rather than houses, with spaces for both studying and socializing. In this way we can preserve the close relationships one develops with housemates in the common rooms, but also allow for the establishment of ties with classmates from other houses. I would like to keep the point system, however, divisive though it seems to be, as I feel it encourages excellence in students' various pursuits."

"One possibility would be to make assignments that require inter-house cooperation, and give points tied to how successful students are in working with other houses," Hermione suggested.

"Thank you, Miss Granger, that is exactly the sort of suggestion I was hoping for," McGonagall responded encouragingly. "I'll direct the staff to begin to develop such assignments right away." Hermione beamed at the praise from the headmistress, as Harry gave her hand a squeeze and Ron grinned and reached over and clapped her on the shoulder.

"Another idea that I had was to encourage more cross house clubs and organizations," McGonagall went on. "In that regard I am hoping that you might reform your defense study group. I'm sure I don't have to mention the additional benefit that would be provided by that particular club. The three students nodded, and Harry informed her that they were already intending to do something along those lines. "I am also planning some all-school social activities as well, but I'm not ready to be more specific on those at this time," McGonagall finished.

Hermione was eagerly making notes on all of this information. Clearly the new headmistress had been giving this a lot of thought. She hoped that another ball might be in the offing; this time she would be certain to dance with Harry. She noticed, however, that McGonagall hadn't said anything about instructional quality yet. Knowing what she was probably thinking of, Harry indicated that he was finished and that Hermione should take her

turn.

"Professor, I'm wondering if you intend to make any changes in terms of the educational experience," Hermione offered, trying to word the statement as politely as possible. "There are many fine teachers here at Hogwarts, but ... well, there are also some who aren't very effective in the classroom." She paused, but McGonagall encouraged her to continue. "There are two possible problems," Hermione stated. "Professors who know their material but can't teach very well and professors who don't know their subject as well as they should."

"I understand your concern and I agree with you, Miss Granger," the headmistress acknowledged, to Hermione's relief. "Let me give you some examples, and tell me if you believe that there are others." She paused, and Hermione nodded.

"The most obvious culprit of the former type was Severus Snape. You could also put Professor Binns in that category, I believe. And while I hate to say it, Rubeus Hagrid has some problems in that area as well. In his case, though, I believe that he is willing to listen to suggestions for improvement, so I intend to hold off on replacing him. Mr. Snape is obviously out, and it's long past time for Professor Binns to retire." All three students clearly caught her refusal to use the word 'professor' with Snape's name. Since Harry and Ron had been repeatedly chastised for doing exactly that, it was an unmistakable indication that things were indeed changing at Hogwarts. There were also sighs of relief regarding Hagrid. Even though they all agreed with her assessment of his teaching skills, they did not want to lose him.

"As to the other type," McGonagall continued, "it is possible that Professor Trelawny ought to be included. I confess, however, to some degree of bias against her discipline, so it is more difficult for me to assess. I believe that Miss Granger, at least, shares that bias." This brought smiles to the faces of the students, as Hermione was well known for her disdain for Divination. "Therefore I am going to keep her on, but see if I can persuade her to tone down her overly dramatic approach to the subject." McGonagall looked at Hermione to see if she had any additional examples.

"Muggle Studies," Hermione added.

"Indeed?"

"The professor teaching that class clearly doesn't know enough about muggles. Take electricity for example. The only thing he said about it was that it was what muggles used instead of magic. So he dismissed it as not worth learning about. In a real study of the difference between wizards and muggles, electricity vs. magic would be the centerpiece of the course. The only thing he really understood was their system of government. And even then he thought that the House of Lords was more important than the House of Commons." She paused and noticed that McGonagall was nodding in the manner of a listener who didn't have the slightest idea of what the speaker was talking about.

Hermione took a breath to calm herself down before she said something insulting. "Professor, with all due respect ... Frankly, I don't think anyone raised exclusively in the wizarding world could possibly do an adequate job in that course," Hermione stated firmly. Beside her, Harry nodded emphatically. "In order to teach that class the professor ought to be a muggleborn, or at the very least a halfblood who has spent a significant amount of time in living in the muggle world. For example, Ron's dad is very interested in muggles, and headed the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office at the Ministry, but he is woefully ignorant of muggle culture. He can't even pronounce common words properly."

"In my opinion," added Harry. "Muggle Studies ought to be a required course for every first year student who hasn't been raised muggle. Mr. Weasley is a perfect example of how inadequate the wizarding world's knowledge of muggles is. If a person whose job involves muggles is so uninformed, what does that say about everyone else?"

"And we both feel strongly that there ought to be a similar course required of first year muggle raised students called something like Wizarding Studies," asserted Hermione. "We were under a tremendous handicap when we started here. I don't know what Harry and I would have done without Ron explaining things to us." This brought a smile to Ron's face, replacing the frown caused by the comment about his father.

"This is very interesting," McGonagall admitted. "I must confess that I had never thought about it that way before. I'm very glad that you brought this to my attention. Now," she said, turning to Ron, "do you have any ideas you'd like to share Mr. Weasley?"

"I think we should have more quidditch," declared Ron. Harry burst out laughing while Hermione rolled her eyes and huffed in exasperation.

"Now, now, let's give Mr. Weasley a chance," scolded McGonagall. Duly chastened, Hermione quickly assumed a neutral expression. "Could you please elaborate?"

"Well, I think there are too few games involving too few people. And because of that, each game becomes so important that we go crazy. Players make themselves sick worrying about how they're going to do because so much is riding on each game, and it also leads to that bad feeling between houses you were talking about earlier. We practice for months for one game. The whole thing's out of balance. It would be more fun if we could just play sometimes without the pressure." Once she got over her initial reaction, Hermione was amazed at the thoughtful analysis Ron had just delivered. And what's more, he was absolutely right.

"I think you may be on to something Mr. Weasley," McGonagall agreed. "I was thinking of something similar. I'd like to see more students have the opportunity to play. What about having a development squad, say limited to first through third years, for each house? And some sort of limitation on practice time compared to game time."

"We could have reserve teams, too, and maybe they could also play each other," Ron suggested.

"How about also having time for pickup games, just for fun?" Harry added.

"Thank you, you have given me a lot to think about," McGonagall declared, standing up to indicate that the meeting was coming to an end. "All three of you, I very much appreciate all of the ideas you have shared today. And I'm especially grateful about your decision to return to Hogwarts. Miss Granger, let's stay in touch about your curriculum ideas, and you Mr. Potter, if you could share your thoughts regarding security issues with Mr. Lupin

and Miss Tonks. And Mr. Weasley, please give me some thought to how I might reorganize quidditch. And try to enjoy the rest of your summer, however much *time* you have left. The three students grinned at her for the time reference, and left her office to head for home.

-ooOoo-

Later that week Molly was released from St. Mungo's and the Weasley family moved into the Black family mansion in Birmingham. Winky moved in with them to take up her duties as the Weasley house elf again, while Dobby took over the maintenance of Grimmauld Place and the other Black family properties, now that Kreacher was gone. Dobby joined Winky in getting the Birmingham mansion livable, and Bill and Fleur stayed for a few days to make sure everyone got settled in all right. The mansion was unplotable, like all of the Black family properties, and had a direct floo connection to Grimmauld Place. There was quite a bit of floo traffic back and forth as different Order members looked in on the Weasleys, doing whatever they could to help Molly adjust. Most of that time was spent preparing her for the release of Arthur, who had been brought out of his coma and was scheduled to come home the following week.

Molly seemed to have come to some sort of compromise with reality. It had been easy to persuade her that Bill and Fleur were married – that at least was happy news that she had no problem accepting. She eventually accepted that Arthur had been injured in a battle with Death Eaters. She had convinced herself that Charlie had been in some mishap with his dragons and was still in Romania recovering. She refused to consider the possibility that any of her younger children would be involved in any way in the war. She also could not accept that the Burrow had been destroyed. She either believed that they were staying away because of the danger of a possible attack or that there had actually been an attack that had caused some damage which was being repaired, depending on which day you talked to her. Mostly the members of her family tried to avoid the subject.

Bill and Fleur discreetly informed Harry and Hermione that they should limit their visits, and not be too affectionate towards each other when they were there. Molly asked about Harry often, worrying that he wasn't getting enough to eat at his relatives or that he would be lonely if he wasn't with Ron or Ginny. Whenever she got a chance she would try to talk to Ginny about how things were going with Harry, and offer advice on how she could move their relationship along. Ron firmly quashed any similar suggestions on pursuing something with Hermione, so Molly backed off on that front.

She had never really seen eye-to-eye with the muggleborn witch, so she wasn't as set on that pairing. Getting Harry and Ginny together was her main priority and her primary concern about Hermione was that she would get in the way of that match. She knew that Ron and Hermione were all wrong for each other, but thought that Hermione would be a good first girlfriend for her shy son. They would break up long before things got serious, but in the meantime it would have kept something from developing between the other two members of the trio until Ginny could solidify things with Harry.

Fleur rescued Ginny as often as she could while she was around, and the sisters-in-law grew closer as they spent more time together. Fred and George stayed in London, Ron spent as much time as possible with Harry and Hermione, and Tonks, along with Remus back at Grimmauld Place, was busy planning a wedding and preparing for her new teaching position at Hogwarts. Fleur, therefore, was the one who was in the best position to shield Ginny from her mother's unrelenting pressure. Unfortunately, that support vanished when the newly married couple left for Albania and Ginny was left to resist the force that was Molly Weasley all on her own.

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The first gathering of the reconstituted DA took place that Saturday. The mood was dampened considerably by the news that there had been more Death Eater attacks on Friday evening. Among the homes attacked was that of Cho Chang, and she and her entire family had been killed. Saturday morning's *Daily Prophet* reported that half of the families attacked had acted on Harry Potter's suggestion and purchased emergency portkeys, and the members of those families had largely escaped without serious injury. Apparently the Changs were not among them. Harry and Hermione discussed this news that morning at breakfast.

"What do you think?" Hermione asked with some apprehension.

"It might be another message to me, I don't know," Harry responded dejectedly. "None of the other families had any connections to me. I do feel bad about Cho, but not that much more than about the others that died. What does that say about me? Am I that unfeeling?"

Hermione moved around behind his chair and knelt down and put her arms around him. "You are certainly not unfeeling, I can assure you. It's been more than two years, from our point of view, since you had anything to do with her, so she's really no more than an acquaintance at this point. I know you're worried that all of the deaths will harden you, but I don't see that happening. You still feel all of them." She moved in front of him so she could see his face, and locked eyes with him until he nodded his agreement. "I do think we should say something about it at the meeting this morning. Make a point about how we're all in danger, and make sure they know that they might be bigger targets by associating more closely with you. Then let them make up their own minds."

-ooOoo-

The Potter mansion, out in the Welsh countryside, had been very quiet for some fifteen years. That changed abruptly when a series of young witches and wizards began appearing out of thin air on this warm August morning. For this first meeting, they had been instructed to go to Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes at staggered intervals, in two's and three's, where they were handed portkeys. Harry and Hermione, along with Ron and Ginny, watched them arrive and greeted them.

"You have to give me a backrub," Hermione teased in a sing-song voice as the last students arrived. She had beat the target number by one, as there were a total of twenty-six former DA members present, and so had won their bet. Everyone who had been in the original DA had shown up except Marietta Edgecomb and Zacharias Smith, and of course Cho Chang. After allowing the students to mingle and greet those whom they hadn't seen since the school closed in June, Harry called them to order. He and Hermione had decided to deal with the unpleasant news right up front. After a few words about how good it was to see everyone again, Harry got serious.



"I'm sure that by now everyone has heard about Cho," he said, nodding to the cluster of Ravenclaw students who would be expected to be the most affected by the news. "There are different ways that you could choose to react to this attack. You could decide that being here is too dangerous, that it will make you a bigger target. I won't deny the possibility that Cho's family was attacked and killed at least in part because of her association with me." There was an exchange of nervous glances among his audience. "These three people standing up here with me are proof of that. You all know about how Ron and Ginny's home was destroyed, and members of their family killed or injured, but you probably didn't know that Hermione's parents were also nearly killed last week when their business was blown up." The nervous glances escalated to anxious muttering as this news was assimilated. It might have got out of hand were it not for the stern glares from the three who had just been named. As their eyes locked with those of various students in the crowd before them, the message was clearly sent. *It happened to us and we're still here.*

"Another response to attacks like this is to decide to fight back. To make the enemy regret their decision to attack you. And to do that you need to prepare, to train. And also to do things to protect yourselves and your families. That's what we're going to do here."

"This is not about learning defense in order to get a good grade on OWLs or defying a miserable excuse for a professor. It's about learning how to stay alive and defying a group of evil killers." Harry paused for a moment, and looked at Hermione on his right, then at Ron and Ginny on his left, then at Neville and Luna at the front of the group of students, and finally at Fred and George and the other Hogwarts alumni standing off to the side. (They had closed the store for the morning so that they could all be here for this initial meeting.) "It's your choice. For me, and for those of you who asked me to do this, we have made the decision to do what is right rather than what is easy."

Harry leaned over and said something to Hermione, then turned and walked out of the room. Hermione exchanged a look with Ron, then glanced over at Fred and George and nodded, then took a step forward. "Harry and I have spent more time than you can possibly imagine training ourselves to become the best fighters we can be. You might even say we've turned ourselves into fighting machines. I will admit," she smiled over towards Lavender and Parvati who were looking at her in amazement, "that we have taken the time to do one or two other things as well." This line got some genuine laughter, and even a whistle from Seamus. "But we are deadly serious about this. We have just finished a very intensive week of training for Ron, and we are willing to dedicate the rest of our summer to doing what we can to improve your defensive skills as well. Neither Harry or I, nor any of the others up here are in this for fame or money. We aren't charging anything for this. We're here because we want as many of you as possible to stay alive to graduate and go on to lead long and happy lives, as we hope to do as well. We'll give you some time to decide what you want to do." With that she turned and followed Harry out of the room.

At that point Fred and George stepped up to join Ron and Ginny and related how they and their fellow Hogwarts graduates had requested that Harry and Hermione do this, and they described some of the things they had seen the pair do in the fight at the Burrow. Then Ron also attested to the battle skills that his friends had acquired. In the end, everyone decided to stay. In fact, they had already pondered the alternatives Harry had offered, and made the decision before coming that morning. But Harry's comments had spelled it out in very clear terms, and they all appreciated his forthrightness. Seeing how the conversations were going, Ginny shooed Ron into the other room to fetch his best friends back.

In the next room Harry was pacing back and forth when Hermione came in and stopped him by stepping in front of him and throwing her arms around his neck for a hug. "Did it sound OK?" he worried. "Was I too harsh?"

"You were great, Harry. You did just fine," she reassured him with a quick kiss. "You said what needed to be said and gave it to them straight. It's up to them to decide what to do with it." Just then Ron came in with a big grin on his face.

"C'mon you two," he announced cheerfully. "Your fan club awaits." Hermione felt Harry's body relax a little in relief and they shared a smile as she led him back to the main room where they once more resumed their place before the assembled students. Several of the students, particularly the girls, smiled as they noticed that the two of them were still holding hands.

"Today is mostly an organizational meeting," Harry began, "but I want to make a few points and give you some information. First, Hermione has some replacements for your charmed Galleons that she's going to distribute. These will have better communications ability and will also serve as your portkeys to get here to the training site. This estate is effectively a secret from the rest of the wizarding world and we want to keep it that way. She'll be talking to you about that later."

"Second, how many of your families have emergency portkeys?" About half of the hands went up. "Those that don't, take care of that immediately. Pay for them yourselves if your parents are reluctant. If all else fails, talk to me and I'll make one for you myself. This is absolutely essential. You all read the *Prophet* story. Cho and her family would probably still be alive if they had them." There were general nods of agreement, and not a few chagrined students vowed to themselves to rectify that situation at their homes before the day was out.

"Next, Fred and George have some interesting hats for you. They've agreed to sell them at cost. Justin, Dean, and Colin have already been distributing similar ones to families of muggleborns, but you should all have them too. They're one of the reasons that Ron, Ginny, Fred, and George came through the attack on their house without any injuries." There was an interesting reaction from the students this time. Their initial response was laughter, given the twins' reputation for pranks, figuring the hats had some humorous jinx on them. By the time Harry finished his statement, though, the primary expression was one of wide-eyed wonder. But it was nothing compared to what was next.

"The last item I want you to think seriously about acquiring is this." With those words, Harry, Hermione, and Ron removed their robes to reveal their dragonhide armor, to a chorus of gasps. The reactions were perfectly split along gender lines. All of the males' eyes went immediately to Hermione, and the trim figure displayed by her form-fitting garment, and every male brain shared the same thought. *That's Hermione Granger? That's what she's been hiding under her robes? Wow! Looking good!* The females were all entertaining similar thoughts regarding Harry and Ron. After gaping for several seconds, each group shifted their gaze to the opposite gender, with reactions of equal amazement, but with some jealous thoughts replacing ones involving desire.

Eventually the hormones were brought under control and the assembled students began to appreciate the protective function of the apparel. And the cost. "I won't deny that these things are very expensive," Harry admitted. "But so is a world class broomstick, and these are going to be a bit more useful this year. Some of your families have the money to buy something like this; I'll try to help out anyone else and work out some kind of loan. If you intend to go into a battle alongside me, I'd like to see you as well protected as possible." There was another murmur of conversation as

the teens in front of him considered this statement. They realized that Harry was asking them to make some difficult choices that day. And he wasn't finished yet.

"Now, it may have occurred to you that my focus so far today has been on protection, and not on learning spells. I assure you that we will be learning spells too, but there are a few more points we want to make first. And we're going to do that with a little demonstration." With that he called for a volunteer, and after some looks were exchanged Ernie Macmillan stepped forward. To his amazement, Harry asked him to shoot stunning spells at him. To help persuade Ernie, Harry pointed out that his dragonhide armor would keep him from getting hurt.

*"Stupefy!"* Once more the assembled students were in for a surprise. They had been expecting Harry to demonstrate a shielding spell, but instead he just stood there as the spell missed. Harry motioned Ernie to try again, and this time he dodged. In five tries Ernie never hit him once. Then Harry motioned Hermione forward. To Ernie's embarrassment and everyone else's amazement, he couldn't hit her either, as she displayed agility that none of them would have dreamed she possessed.

"I hope you learned a couple of things just now," Harry called out over the excited conversations that had broken out. "The essential point is that a spell has to hit you to have any effect. From the spellcaster's point of view that means that accuracy is at least as important as power or knowing a lot of spells. From the other point of view, if you can keep from getting hit you won't get hurt." He turned to Hermione and they shared a knowing smile. "We're going to spend a lot of time on target practice. But we're also going to spend a lot of time on conditioning."

"Conditioning?" Ernie blurted out. "You mean like exercise?"

Ron smirked and stepped forward, putting a commiserating arm around Ernie's shoulder. "Ernie, believe me, you have no idea what these two are about to put you through."

It took a while to convince everyone that they were serious about the whole exercise thing, with the pureblood students being the most resistant to the idea. Harry and Hermione split them up along gender lines to further explain their plan. Among the guys, the muggleborns Dean and Justin were the most enthusiastic, while purebloods Neville and Ernie were pretty dubious. Seamus seemed OK with it, and Colin and Dennis Creevey were willing to go along with anything Harry said. The Ravenclaw contingent, Terry Boot, Anthony Goldstein, and Michael Corner took a wait and see attitude. Fred, George, and Lee were of the 'whatever it takes' school of thought.

Hermione had a harder sell with the girls. Angelina Johnson and Ginny were the only ones who showed a definite interest, Angelina because she was the athletic type, and Ginny because she had seen most closely what the workout program had done for Hermione. Katie and Alicia had similar feelings to the twins and Lee – whatever it took. They had played quidditch under Oliver Wood, after all, so they were used to long hours of training. All of the rest needed convincing, although it was difficult to tell exactly *what* Luna was thinking.

"All right," Hermione began, "I understand that a lot of you are not exactly enthusiastic about this. And we aren't going to force you to do anything. But there are some definite advantages to being fit." Once they were closer to her and got a good look at her now shapelier figure that was revealed by the skintight armor, the other girls definitely realized what one of those advantages might be. Hermione, seeing the looks she was getting, knew she didn't need to say anything more along those lines, and instead focused on the advantages of being in shape in terms of surviving a fight. But she also had another point to make.

"Regardless of how much you decide to work out, you should consider getting some muggle style exercise clothing. Robes like you're wearing are a real detriment in a serious battle. You should wear something close-fitting for all of the training we're going to be doing. Ginny and Angelina?"

The two girls stepped forward and removed their robes. Ginny was wearing a normal scooped neck tank top and a small pair of shorts that looked very good on her. She felt rather exposed, but was resolved to get used to it. Angelina had a spandex T back tank top that showed off her well developed shoulders and arms, and paired it with snug fitting capri length bottoms. Meanwhile, Hermione pulled off her dragonhide armor to reveal a sports bra, and spandex bike shorts like she had worn during the duel with Ron. The rest of the girls were shocked into silence as she summoned a tee shirt from her bag and pulled it over her head.

"Well," she asked with a grin. "Any questions?"

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The girls broke up into smaller groups after Hermione discussed schedules for using the workout equipment that Harry and Minnie had been installing in the mansion. She assured them that there would be times when they could come to work out without any boys present – except Harry of course. The general consensus was that they didn't mind having him present, since he would be showing them what they needed to do and besides, as Hermione pointed out, he was used to seeing her dressed like that every day. She also assured them that she and Harry would be available full time to train anyone who showed up. They felt that they needed both daytime and evening sessions in order to work around the students' other obligations and the work schedules of the six graduates.

Katie and Alicia stayed with Angelina while Luna, Hannah, and Susan clustered around Ginny. Padma approached Hermione but hung back while Lavender and Parvati spoke to her first.

"Well," Lavender smirked, gesturing to Hermione's bare legs. "I see you're shaving your legs now."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Leave it to you, Lavender, to cut through all the unimportant details and get right to the heart of the matter," she said sarcastically.

Lavender would not be deterred. "But you have to admit that this is quite a change for you. You never used to care very much what you looked like, and now ..." she peered more closely. "My word, you're even wearing make-up! What have you done with Hermione Granger!" At an exasperated sigh from Hermione, Lavender stepped back a little and moderated her tone. "Well my point is, you look great. I mean it. We're very impressed." Hermione relaxed her attitude somewhat, as she could tell that her two roommates were honestly complimenting her appearance. Lavender

continued, "But what we want to know, is this a cause or an effect? Did Harry fall for you as a result of your making yourself more attractive, or does being in love make you want to look good for him?"

Hermione frowned for a few moments as she tried to work up an answer. It was actually a good question. "Some of both, I suppose," she admitted. "You know that Harry and I have been close for a long time, but I did do a few things to make him notice me that way. And no, I'm not going to tell you what they were," she added with an evil grin as the two girls' faces fell. "And now that we're together, you're right, I do enjoy looking good for him. Being so happy is part of it too." She leaned closer conspiratorially. "And it is a lot of fun seeing his reaction to ... certain things." She smiled in a knowing manner as their eyes went wide before they burst into giggles.

"Hermione!" Lavender gasped. "You have to tell us! You can't tease us like that!" But Hermione simply shrugged and reached down to gather up her dragonhide armor and began to fold it. Once she calmed down, Lavender made one more try and gestured at Hermione's outfit. "Given your clothing preferences, I thought maybe you would be naked under that skintight armor – which looks very good on you, by the way."

Hermione gave them another wicked smile. "Who knows, maybe when it's just Harry and me training by ourselves I am?" That statement had the desired effect, rendering the two gossips speechless.

Parvati recovered first, and tugged on Lavender's sleeve, motioning toward where Harry and Ron had been intercepted on their way to rejoin Hermione. Hannah and Susan had spotted them coming and left Ginny to hurry over and comment on how good they looked in their dragonskins, running their hands over Ron's chest while Harry watched in amusement. Lavender immediately decided to forego any more teasing of Hermione and protect her territory.

Padma now came forward. "Hermione, I was wondering, would you and Harry be willing to have any more students join us?" She then explained about her meeting with her fellow Ravenclaws.

"It's interesting that you should ask that," Hermione responded. "I just received a similar inquiry yesterday from Tracey Davis on behalf of her and Daphne Greengrass."

Padma gave her a curious look. "And you would be all right with that?" The whole castle was aware, of course, of the animosity between the Gryffindor trio and certain Slytherins.

"Harry and I have talked about trying to do things to overcome house barriers," Hermione replied. "Professor McGonagall actually encouraged us to use this group as a way of achieving that. I guess I see this as a test of whether we're really serious about that idea. I must admit that I was surprised, but honestly we haven't really ever had any trouble with those two. I confess that I know Tracey better than Daphne."

"Oh, as far as I know neither of them have ever supported Malfoy and that gang," Padma assured her. "They've tried to stay neutral as much as possible, which has caused them to be ostracized in their house as you might imagine." A wry smile crept onto her mouth. "As far as Daphne is concerned, I think she'll give Lavender a run for her money in the 'empty-headed blonde knockout that all the boys fantasize about' category." That remark made Hermione wonder if the small dark skinned, black haired witch didn't have some self esteem issues of her own. She had never been popular with the opposite sex like her twin sister had, even though she was equally as pretty. Personality wise, she was much more like Hermione had always been, and focused more on her studies than on fashion and boys.

"Well, I'm going to talk about this some more with Harry and get back to you. Perhaps after we get this bunch on track we can think about adding more." Padma thanked her and turned around, only to spot Luna, now standing apart from everyone else. She was staring wistfully at Ron, currently surrounded by three flirting girls.

Padma walked up and put her arm around Luna's shoulders. "Come on, Luna, he's not worth it," she consoled the eccentric blonde girl as she led her away.

Just then Harry arrived, still chuckling at Ron's predicament, along with Seamus and Dean, while Neville, Colin, and Dennis wandered over towards Ginny and the quidditch girls. "Looks like Ron has some admirers," Harry laughed. Seamus and Dean were doing some admiring of their own, taking a good look at Hermione. Wisely, they kept those opinions to themselves since she was engaged to the wizard next to them, who could take them apart without breaking a sweat.

"He's not the only one," Dean responded. "There were a few witches here that were eyeing you up pretty good. I thought Parvati and Padma were going to pass out. And Katie looked like she was going to start drooling."

Harry snorted his disbelief. "Oh, right, like they fancy me." Hermione lowered her head and shook it back and forth while trying to hide a smile, and Dean and Seamus looked at Harry as though he was daft.

"Only since third year!" Seamus insisted. To Harry's skeptical expression he continued. "What, you don't really think Parvati didn't have any other offers of dates to the Yule Ball, do you? She was holding out for you. Everyone figured you'd be too shy to ask anyone besides Hermione until it was too late, and then she'd be available for you. I still don't know why you didn't ask Hermione, though."

Hermione turned bright red. "Um, I guess Parvati did know I was already going with Viktor. But I didn't encourage her. I thought you would end up with Cho."

This time Dean spoke up. "And don't tell us you didn't know that half the girls in the castle fancied you. By last year it was so obvious that even you must have noticed."

"But ... but except for Cho no one ever said anything," Harry objected, now bright red himself.

"That's because of your bodyguard," Seamus grinned, gesturing at Hermione. "After what happened with you and Cho when she dared to criticize

our dear Miss Granger, all the girls knew they didn't stand a chance with you unless she approved of them. And the only girl she ever approved of was Ginny." Harry and Hermione locked eyes briefly, then Hermione dropped her gaze to her shoes, a small smile on her lips. There was a bit of truth to what Seamus was saying. Meanwhile Harry's mouth was opening and closing silently.

"Well thank Merlin you two finally worked things out," concluded Dean. "Now the rest of us will have a chance with the other girls." Hermione noticed a slight wince from Harry, who was undoubtedly thinking that Dean probably still felt that Harry had stolen Ginny from him. Well, he was welcome to her now. She reached out and took Harry's hand and squeezed it to let him know they really didn't have to worry about all of this any more.

"Well, Mr. More Fanciable Than Ever," she announced with a grin. "Let's wrap this up and get back to work." The other two Gryffindors grimaced at the 'back to work' remark and shot sympathetic looks at Harry. To their surprise, he didn't seem to mind a bit. For his part, Harry just smiled.

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## Hermione's Plan Potter's Army

### Chapter 20, Potter's Army

For the remainder of August Harry and Hermione continued to lead double lives. As they had promised the DA, they were at the mansion twenty-four hours a day in order to be on hand to train any of them who came, whenever they could make it. When Hermione passed out the pendants that were an improved version of the original charmed Galleons, she explained that one of their functions was as a portkey that would bring them to the mansion any time they wished. The pendants also served additional communication purposes. As with the originals, Harry or Hermione could send them simple text messages, but they could also be used by individual DA members to call for help if they were in trouble. Finally, in these instances, they would serve as apparation targets for any potential rescuers.

On their alternate days, the couple spent most of their time in Cambridge, but also attended to any business that came up. They spend the weekends with the Grangers at the Brighton beach house. A good bit of their free time, in either timestream, was taken up with studying. While Harry had suspected it before, he discovered that it was indeed true that Hermione read all the way through every one of her course books the summer prior to each academic year. Needless to say, this meant that this summer he did likewise. Come fall, he would surprise himself at how well-prepared he was for his coursework, and how easily he was able to master the class material. He even agreed to let Hermione teach him some of the basics of Arithmency and Ancient Runes. This was all made considerably more palatable by the fact that studying with Hermione was quite a bit more enjoyable now that they were a couple than it was back when they were just friends. She had some very interesting ways of rewarding him for the successful completion of various assignments.

Of course, their classwork was the not the primary focus of their study, as they continued to put the majority of their time into training. They were both aware that during their year abroad they had become much more magically powerful than they had been, but it was not until the training sessions with Ron that they realized just how far they had come. They were now by far the most powerful witch and wizard of their generation, and they could tell that their magical ability had increased even more since they had returned. Hermione had long thought that Harry was destined to be a great wizard, going back all the way to their first year, although she had not expected to find herself similarly categorized. In Harry's case, it was simply a matter of finally applying himself fully. Excelling at anything always required a combination of natural talent and hard work, she knew. In her case, the hard work had always been there, but she had finally accepted that, while not as strong as Harry's, she must also have had a stronger than normal magical potential as well.

During the coming months, they would continue to hone their abilities, and test themselves against more, and more powerful, opponents. But there was ultimately only one final examination for this course of study, and it was not in the least bit academic. In the end, they would have to confront Voldemort. And that examination would have one of two outcomes. Pass or fail. Life or death.

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The Potter mansion was indeed busy day and night as the members of the DA took advantage of Harry's offer. Ron and Ginny generally came over every morning and stayed until mid-afternoon. They had discovered that Hannah and Susan lived not very far from the Black family house in Birmingham where the Weasleys were now staying. The four of them decided to come and go together, much to Hannah and Susan's delight.

The six older members, who all had jobs in Diagon Alley during the day, came every evening. Although Fred, George, and Lee managed to keep everyone's spirits up with the well-timed joke, they were all deadly serious about their training, and there was little clowning around when it came to learning the things Harry was teaching. The rest of the students came at varying times, although Hermione noticed that Padma was particularly diligent in her attendance. Neville and Luna were also among the most faithful participants, and it was quite a change to see Luna so alert and attentive as she was during these sessions.

They began the training by having the students dodge spells, generally using tickling hexes or the jelly legs jinx. Among the girls, Angelina and Ginny were best at this, followed closely by Katie and Alicia. Apparently the skill of dodging bludgers on a broomstick carried over to dueling. Little Dennis Creevey was the best among the boys at avoiding getting hit, followed by his brother Colin. Initially no one could hit Dennis except Harry or Hermione. It wasn't entirely size based, as Dean Thomas was pretty agile also. There was quite a bit of grumbling from the other boys about this exercise, but Harry stood firm in his insistence that the best way to defend yourself from a spell was to make it miss you. He discovered that the best results were obtained by pairing up members of the opposite sex. Both genders tended to take the exercise more seriously that way, neither wanting to be shown up. As a result, both the spell casting accuracy and the agility of the members improved dramatically by the end of the month.

Initially there was quite a scramble for partners as both Hannah and Susan wanted to pair up with Ron, and had Lavender also been present at that time it might really have got out of hand. Harry defused that problem by declaring that Ron was one of the instructors, and that everyone's progress would be tested by seeing how they fared against him. Both he and Ron therefore constantly roamed among the dueling pairs, with Ron stepping in as an opponent for each participant while Harry watched and offered advice. Since there were so many more boys than girls, Hermione rotated among the surplus males. That had the effect of keeping their egos in check. While she always held back initially, allowing them to hit her occasionally and missing them once in a while, whenever they got too cocky she blew them away.

Hermione carefully charted the progress of all of the members, noting when they had mastered specific skills, and attained a certain degree of

fitness. Once they had reached a specific level of readiness, they would be formed into combat teams, but Harry was not willing to send anyone into combat until he felt that they were prepared. As more and more of them became proficient in basic fighting skills, he created response teams. These teams would be on call in case of Death Eater attacks, which were presumed to be a matter of when, not if.

-ooOoo-

“Thirty minutes. That’s pretty good for your first time, Luna. Ginny, I know you can do better than that.” Hermione made a notation in her journal as the pair of girls came to a stop in front of her.

“Right. I was just showing Luna the course,” Ginny shot back, catching her breath. Hermione nodded that she understood.

“It’s a lovely course,” Luna added enthusiastically. “I’m sure I’ll go faster in the future, but there were just too many fascinating things to see this time.” Hermione just smiled while moving on to the next runner coming into view.

“Good work, Padma, that’s two minutes better than last time,” she called out. “Where are Parvati and Lavender?” After a pause to get her wind back, Padma revealed that she had left the two behind, since they were spending too much time resting and talking at the different stops. Hermione nodded and tossed her a towel, and the petite dark skinned girl joined Ginny and Luna for some stretching. Both Ginny and Padma were pushing themselves to the limit on these exercises. While Hermione had expected it from the fiery Gryffindor, Padma’s dedication was a pleasant surprise.

There was still a great variety in the amount of enthusiasm the DA members had for physical conditioning. On the plus side, the girls had all fallen in love with the spandex exercise wear, and for that reason at least, they were all giving it a try. Of course, it had taken very little time for the males to discover that wonderful combination of spandex and the female figure, which meant that they all participated in the physical training wholeheartedly. In the case of the girls, they were further encouraged when Tonks showed up to add her endorsement to the exercise program. It didn’t hurt a bit, Hermione noted with an inner smile, that the metamorphmagus took a particularly shapely form during the times she spent promoting it. Even so, most of the girls, and many of the boys, were not overly enamored with the running track and the weight machines that had been installed at the manor.

At a suggestion from Dean Thomas, Harry and Hermione had therefore created this running/walking trail with fitness stations scattered along it at various intervals, which was much more popular. Both of them could complete the circuit while running the entire way and quickly snapping off the required number of repetitions of the designated exercises. Ron, being quite tall and rather gangly, was not nearly as fast as Harry, for whom being able to run away from Dudley had been a necessary survival skill while growing up. Even so, after his seven weeks of training, Ron was also reasonably good at the course, and his time of fifteen minutes for the circuit was set as the standard for the males to get a passing grade. Initially, Harry intended on setting a longer time as the standard for the females, but upon seeing first Angelina, then Ginny, beat Ron’s time after less than week of practice, he reconsidered. By the end of the summer, even Lavender and Parvati, who were the least fanatical about the physical training, had their time under twenty minutes, which he decided was adequate.

Of course it wasn’t all work. From their year of intense effort during the training in Mexico Harry and Hermione knew that fun breaks were also important. One of the diversions available was flying. There was a large open space for quidditch on the grounds, and Harry stocked the manor with a good selection of broomsticks. Initially the students who hadn’t been on their house teams sat back to watch the past and present Gryffindor quidditch players, but Harry encouraged everyone to give it a go. To everyone’s surprise (except Harry) Hermione was the first one to take him up on it. That broke the ice and soon everyone was in the air tossing the quaffle around. They always made sure to divide up the teams so that there was an even mixture of experienced and novice players on each team, and in time everyone was able to play at a passable level.

-ooOoo-

“How are the two of you holding up out here?”

Harry and Dan were out on the deck participating in the male bonding ritual of cooking meat over fire, commonly known as grilling steaks for dinner. Hermione and Emma were in the kitchen where Emma was making a salad and Hermione was getting some place settings together to take out to the patio table on the sundeck. Hermione had taken the opportunity to ask about how things were going and Emma paused before answering.

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Their weekends at Brighton had fallen into a routine. On Saturdays, weather permitting, they would spend the day out on the beach in front of the cottage. While the location was not private enough for them to sunbathe nude, Emma and Hermione did go topless. On their second weekend there Hermione had worn the thong bikini Fleur had talked her into buying. Emma had agreed that it did look good on Hermione, but even though she was in very good shape for a woman nearing fifty, she did not think she could bring herself to wear one. Dan, of course, had other ideas, and thought a thong bikini would be a fine addition to her wardrobe. He had talked Hermione into helping him pick one out for his wife at the boutique where she and Fleur had bought theirs, and Emma was going to receive it for her next birthday.

On Sundays they would spend the morning at the church in town that Dan and Emma had begun attending, then spend the afternoon catching the sun out on the sundeck at the cottage, where Hermione and Emma would work the London Times crossword puzzle while Dan perused the latest football standings and commented to anyone who would listen about the relative merits of Arsenal and Manchester United. For his part, Harry stretched out in his lounge chair and alternated dozing off with watching Hermione. She could feel his eyes on her and would look up and smile at him on occasion. Although she had trouble believing it, he had told her several times how much he enjoyed watching her solve a puzzle, the way her eyes narrowed and her brow creased, and with a particularly difficult one the way she bit her lower lip and chewed on her pencil. He also made her blush when he informed her that it was even more enjoyable watching her do all of this in the nude. If the weather did not cooperate, they would retire into the house and play cards. In the evenings they would all watch a movie together. They also frequently made use of the hot tub that Dan had had installed on the sundeck.

Dan and Emma had settled easily into the community, and it was no problem pretending that they were there on a month long holiday, since that was true for many of the visitors to the popular beachside resort area. To be on the safe side they had adopted new names. When Emma had learned that Hermione had chosen a literary alias for her false identity (Jane Porter) she had picked out one for herself as well – Dorothy Gale. Both teens were delighted with the inside joke relating to the name’s origins. Dan, meanwhile, had chosen the name Keith. It wasn’t from any book or movie, he said, he just liked the name. So Keith and Dorothy they became, at least for the next month.

It was never questioned that they would go to church with her parents whenever they were visiting on a Sunday, and it was easy for Hermione to fall into the routine again. It was quite a bit different for Harry, who had never been to a church service in his life. His approach, like it was for anything else new, was to quietly observe, taking everything in and learning as much as he could before saying or doing anything to call attention to himself. So he listened attentively to the scripture readings and the homilies and the prayers, and followed along on the songs when Hermione showed him how to find them in the service book. There was one song that morning, though, that had particularly grabbed his attention. It was one of the many hymns based on the 23rd Psalm and it had a rather catchy refrain. *‘Shepherd me O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.’*

Hermione had noticed that Harry had gone very quiet, and remained seated at the conclusion of the service, deep in thought. “What are you thinking about?” she had asked him quietly, while sitting back down next to him.

“Those words,” he responded softly. “That’s how I feel sometimes. Beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life. I want to be able to look ahead, past all the fear and death, and try to see my life in the future. But it’s so hard.” Dan and Emma had returned when they discovered that Harry and Hermione were not following them out of the church, and Emma sat back down on Harry’s other side and put her hand on his arm, while Hermione gave him a small hug.

“I know,” she said. “I feel that way a lot too.”

“So that song – it’s about asking for help in getting past those things.” This came out partly as a statement and partly as a question.

“It’s a prayer,” Hermione replied. “That’s what people do in prayers. They ask God for help with their burdens.”

“Do you ever pray?” Harry was curious about this concept. Hermione knew that he had grown up relying only on himself, and had trouble asking anyone for help.

“All the time,” Hermione responded as her eyes moistened. “I pray for you every day.”

“I do too,” Emma added. “Ever since I met you.” Harry was clearly overwhelmed by these revelations, and was silent for some time.

“Does it help?” he finally asked.

“It helps me,” Hermione replied while her father put his arm around her. Emma nodded in agreement. “I like to think it helps you too.”

Harry was silent again. “Thanks,” he said simply. Then he added. “I think I’d like it if you kept doing it.” First Hermione, then Emma, gave him hugs and Emma pulled him to his feet while Dan helped Hermione up. Together they all left the church in silence, each deep in thought over the exchange.

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Hermione’s thoughts were brought back to the scene in the kitchen as Emma responded to her question. “Actually, that’s something your father and I wanted to talk to you about.” She joined her daughter in carrying the plates and salads out to the sundeck where Harry and her husband were just finishing up with the steaks.

“We’re doing just fine,” Emma began. “There’s plenty to do here, and I’ve found a Jazzercise class that meets every day.” Hermione smiled at her mum and shared a grin with Dan. Emma was an aerobics fanatic, which explained why she had such a great figure. Every summer she nagged Hermione to join her classes, and only now that Hermione was herself in such good condition from her year of hard exercise did she realize the value of her mother’s workout habit.

“We’ve contacted three other dental practices and managed to reschedule our patients with them, and have Amanda sending out letters to everyone apologizing for the inconvenience,” she went on. “Of course, since the bombing was on the news everyone knew the reason and was very understanding. Two of the practices have hired on Mary and Stephanie to help with the increased load. And we’re making steady progress with the insurance. It helped that we told them it wasn’t an emergency situation so that we didn’t need the money right away.”

“But we’d like to do more to help you two out,” Dan continued, picking up the conversation from his wife. “From the way you’ve described your training sessions for your classmates, we think we have something to offer. Emma could help out with your workout sessions, especially with the girls, and I could help you teach accuracy in shooting your spells.” Hermione nodded thoughtfully. Dan was a long time member of a local hunt club, and regularly did target shooting. One of the things Harry had been trying to stress was marksmanship.

“We could come over a couple of days a week, or however much you needed us,” Emma added hopefully. Hermione looked over to Harry and he smiled at her and nodded.

“It sounds like a good idea to me. The mansion is at least as safe as this beach house, and you’ve told me several times we can use all the help we can get.” Turning to Dan he continued. “We can work out the details later, but right now let’s see how these steaks turned out. Maybe these two beautiful ladies want to just stick with their salads to keep their nice slim figures, but I’m hungry.”

He winced as Hermione’s fist connected with his arm, and turned to her to see her stick her tongue out at him while she grabbed the plate with the

steaks and took one for herself before passing it to her mother. Everyone laughed as Harry pouted while he had to wait for the tantalizing beef to make its way around the table back to him, but eventually his hunger was satisfied.

-ooOoo-

The next week Harry decided to have the DA start practicing more dangerous offensive spells. His concern was that they also needed to learn the corresponding blocks and shields, which meant that they would have potentially lethal hexes and curses cast at them. Fortunately, most of the students had taken his advice and obtained dragonhide armor. Bill and Fleur had bought a set for Ginny before they left, and Fred and George, of course, were able to afford their own. They also loaned the money to Lee, Katie, Angelina, and Alicia.

Susan Bones's mother and father were as supportive of her training as any of the parents, having lost so many of their family members to Death Eater attacks, and they bought a set for both her and Hannah. Neville's gran and Luna's father did likewise, Mr. Lovegood going so far as to take a loan out with the Quibbler as collateral to purchase a top of the line set for both Luna and himself. The Patil's parents were quite well off, so Parvati and Padma were also well equipped. Hermione later learned that it was Padma who had pushed for the garments most strenuously. Parvati, of course, had no objection to the skintight protective clothing, as it hugged her slim figure quite nicely. The Patils also provided a set for Lavender.

Among the males, Ernie's family could easily afford a set of the expensive armor, and Justin's family was very wealthy in the muggle world. They offered to provide extra sets for other needy students, which led to Colin and Dennis being equipped as well. Harry quietly arranged for Seamus and Dean to get some also, and they both pledged to pay him back when they graduated and began their careers. Harry confided to Hermione that all that mattered to him was that they survive long enough to actually graduate and *have* careers.

Hermione scowled as the students came back out of the rooms that had been set aside as dressing rooms. All of the boys (except Harry, thank goodness) were gawking at Susan and Lavender. *Honestly*, she huffed to herself, *there ought to be more about a girl to attract a guy's attention than just large breasts*. She personally thought that Ginny looked very good in the snug fitting outfit, as did Parvati and Padma. She decided that she would ask Harry later for his opinion. That made her smile. For most couples, asking the male which other girls he thought looked best was a question that said male should avoid at all costs. But she figured that she and Harry were secure enough in their relationship that it wouldn't bother her if he answered honestly.

After talking it over with Ron, Harry and Hermione had decided that Reducto, the explosion hex, would be the DA's primary offensive spell. If they kept the spells low powered enough, the dragonhide armor would be able to absorb most of the blast while they worked on perfecting their shields. They also needed to work on Diffindo, the cutting curse, and the protective coating would be very important there as well while the students learned to control it.

Dan and Emma watched the training session in amazement. While they had seen Harry and Hermione do simple magic at home, they had never witnessed an actual duel where the two of them shot spells at each other. They were standing back away from the training session along with Madame Pomfrey, whom Harry had asked to be present for this initial exercise involving 'live fire'. Since all three were health professionals, they had immediately hit it off together, and soon Poppy was telling them about some of the incidents that had landed Harry in the hospital wing. They had, of course, read Hermione's version of most of these in her letters home, but it was interesting to hear a more unbiased account. The school nurse also confided to them her suspicions that Harry had been malnourished as a child, and how pleased she was to see him looking so healthy now. The Grangers were surprised how freely she was sharing this information, being used to strict patient confidentiality laws, but decided that either the practice was much different in the wizarding world or the school nurse considered them to be family members of Harry, given their daughter's betrothal to him.

"What are you lot up to over here?" Hermione and Harry had called a break and come over to join her parents on the sidelines.

"Oh, just swapping trade secrets," teased Dan. "Your nurse here was just telling us what you look like as a cat." In fact, that subject had not come up but the reminder of her mishap with the polyjuice potion during her second year had the desired effect of turning his daughter's face bright red. One of a father's primary duties, after all, is to embarrass his children at any opportunity. Dan's grin was abruptly terminated when Emma slapped him on the back of the head.

"Madame Pomfrey was just telling us about healing potions," Emma offered. "I was thinking that was something we might be able to help make. Both of us had to take two years of chemistry at university, and your father was actually quite good at it. Potion making sounds pretty much like chemistry lab."

Hermione had never thought about it that way, but decided her mum was right. Harry looked more dubious. "I don't know, potion making didn't seem very scientific to me," he objected. "Just throwing random ingredients into a cauldron and hoping it turned out all right."

Dan laughed at the glare Hermione shot Harry's way. "Actually, there are an awful lot of pre-med students who think the same thing about organic chemistry," he joked. Emma rolled her eyes at this comment but had to agree that he was right about that. Meanwhile Hermione was not about to let Harry's statement go unchallenged.

"You know Harry, if you had actually studied the theory of potion making you might have understood the underlying principles and properties involved," she declared, beginning to go into lecture mode. "Just because you hated the professor was no excuse for shortchanging your education." Harry just stood there with his head down and took it, knowing she was absolutely right in her assessment of his learning priorities in past years. Seeing this, Hermione caught herself and stopped her scolding. That was in the past, and Harry had completely reformed his attitude toward studying since then. Her face softened and she reached out to give his hand a squeeze to reassure him that she wasn't still angry about it.

Dan, not aware that Hermione was finished chastising Harry, tried to bail out his future son-in-law. "Well, it does make a difference in how well you learn if you have a good professor. Take, for example, the chem prof we had first year. That guy loved doing demonstrations in class and made it as much fun to learn as he could. He especially liked blowing things up. I remember this one time he mixed hydrogen and oxygen in a balloon and lit it with a candle. The resulting explosion was so loud people came running in from other classrooms to see what was going on."



At this comment Harry and Hermione shared a look, and Harry spoke up. “You know, that reminds me of something we were talking about the other day. Do you think muggle explosives might be useful to us? And how easy would it be to get hold of some?”

This elicited a groan from Emma. “Oh no, don’t get him started on that.” Hermione tried to hide a smile. She knew that her father’s interest in chemistry had developed into a fascination with explosives. But Dan suddenly turned serious.

“Unfortunately, even though the government tries to control stuff like that in this country, it’s all too available. I’m pretty sure the explosives that those terrorists used to blow up our office were a type that could be put together from fertilizer and fuel oil by anyone who knows enough chemistry. Let me think about it a bit. Maybe talk to those two inventor friends of yours. What were their names?”

This time it was Hermione’s turn to groan, while Harry smirked. “I think I should introduce you to Fred and George.”

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Dan and Emma turned out to be excellent potions brewers, and were soon supplying a wide variety of healing potions that Madame Pomfrey taught them how to make, which became very useful as the dueling practice grew more intense. They had found a complete potions lab in the basement of the manor house, which was not surprising given that Lily had been Slughorn’s prize potions student. While checking it out, Hermione had come across Lily’s copy of *Advanced Potion Making* and found that it had lots of shortcuts and tips written in the margins just like Snape’s had. When she showed it to Harry she conceded somewhat sheepishly that she supposed that these shortcuts were probably all right to use. Harry managed to refrain from any snide retorts about her disdain for the similar useful tips written by the Half Blood Prince, and Hermione was so pleased with him for his forbearance that she gave him a hug and a nice kiss in appreciation.

Dan had also brought in a device that he said gun clubs used for target practice. When you pulled a rope it launched a circular disk into the air that Dan called a clay pigeon. He spent quite a bit of time using it to teach the students to shoot spells at moving objects. Of course, Harry picked it up the fastest but soon explosive hexes were raining bits of clay all over the grounds of the Potter estate. For her part, Emma soon had all of the girls doing aerobics with her, as well as some of the more insightful boys. While most of the guys shied away from anything that resembled dancing, a few realized that exercising with a large group of spandex clad, sensuously writhing young witches was not exactly an unpleasant experience.

Dan also started talking with Minnie about putting in a swimming pool. He was undecided about whether to make it an indoor pool or an outdoor pool when Hermione suggested that they make it a combination, with part of the pool in a greenhouse like enclosure. They decided to keep it a secret from Harry for a surprise, and Minnie was delighted with that idea. Hermione thought it best if they waited until after this summer, when all of the DA members were no longer on the grounds every day. She was concerned with how the non-muggleborn witches and wizards would react to the concept of the string bikini. She figured that Lavender would love it, and that Ginny would be initially shocked but come around once she realized the advantages. She suspected that Parvati and Padma would be quite uncomfortable and didn’t really know what Hannah or Susan would make of being so highly exposed. She had long since given up trying to guess how Luna would react to anything. Based on her experience with Ron and Bill, she was fairly certain of how the wizard-raised boys would react to the sight of the revealing swimwear.

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Shortly after beginning their offensive spell practice they received an owl from Professor Flitwick with an offer to help them with dueling. Hermione recalled reading that the diminutive professor had been a dueling champion when he was younger, and the pair accepted his offer immediately and sent a portkey back with the owl. When the Ravenclaw head of house arrived he told them that he had been impressed with what he saw at the castle during Ron’s training. While helping Hermione make targets for Ron and Harry to practice on, he had been inspired to make dueling dummies for them. When they saw what he had created they were delighted.

The dueling dummies were simple statues that he had charmed to be animated. Some of them were very agile and were intended to give the students practice hitting their targets. Some of them were equipped with shields. The more advanced models shot back stunners in the direction that the spells that were shot at them came from, in order to teach duelers not to stand still while fighting.

Harry first had the DA members practice on individual dummies, and again Hermione recorded their progress with each type and who needed more work in a certain area. Then the students were matched up against a randomly selected dummy without knowing which type they were facing. Later they went against a mixed group of target dummies, both individually and then in pairs and groups. By the end of the summer there were full-scale melees taking place in the fields and woods of the Potter estate. The most impressive one matched a team of Fred, George, Lee, Katie, Angelina, and Alicia against a mixed force of twenty-four dueling dummies. In the dark. The sky was lit up with spellfire for nearly an hour before the Gryffindor sextet emerged victorious.

Gradually some teams began to develop as the students grouped themselves during the training. The six graduates who worked in Diagon Alley were the obvious response team for any attacks there. As a group, they were also the furthest along in their training. Among the students, Padma, Ginny, and Neville were the most dedicated. Padma had taken over the leadership of the Ravenclaw contingent, which included her and the three boys – Terry Boot, Anthony Goldstein, and Michael Corner. The rest of them weren’t quite ready, in Harry’s opinion, to be designated as a response team.

Ginny, Neville, and Luna all trained together, and they made a pretty good grouping. Neville also came over every day, not so coincidentally arriving at about the same time as Ginny did, and stayed even longer. He was training with a zeal that bordered on fanaticism, and had become one of the most powerful wizards in his year. He had also undergone some physical changes that were quite possibly even more startling than the changes Harry had undergone. He was easily the most dedicated of any of the males with the weight machines, and the once chubby boy was turning into a stocky six foot tall well-muscled young man. While Dean and Ron were still taller, and Dean also made good use of the weights, Neville was probably stronger than either of them. Ginny was so serious about her training that it sometimes scared Hermione. Her personality seemed to have changed dramatically since the attack on the Burrow, and she rarely laughed and joked anymore. When Hermione asked Ron about it, he confided that Molly was still giving Ginny a hard time about Harry. As far as that situation was concerned, the summer couldn’t end soon enough. The sooner they got away from their unfortunate home circumstances and back to Hogwarts the better. Luna was serious about her training, but

she was still – well – Luna. Even as she mastered everything that they threw at her she always had some off the wall comment to make that had everyone scratching their heads.

On the other hand, Ron was constantly surrounded by what Harry referred to jokingly as his harem – Susan, Hannah, Lavender, and Parvati, although Parvati was only there because Lavender was. Unfortunately the other three girls were spending more time flirting with Ron than mastering the spells. While Hermione couldn't really blame Ron for basking in all the attention he had always yearned for, she did wish that he could get the girls to take it more seriously. In any case, Harry put Ron on a response team with Ginny, Neville, and Luna.

The other Gryffindor boys – Dean, Seamus, Colin, and Dennis – also worked well together. Ernie and Justin usually joined them. While they weren't quite ready for combat yet, the six of them would make a solid team eventually.

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As the training went on and they all began to coalesce as a tight knit fighting force, Ernie, Padma, Neville and Lee, representing each of the houses, and the graduates, came to Harry and Hermione with a proposition. Several other students waited eagerly in the background.

"We think that we need a new name," Lee suggested. "All of us agree that the name Dumbledore's Army isn't accurate anymore." Harry frowned and Hermione knew he wouldn't be too happy about where this was going. She moved closer and clasped his arm in a show of support.

"What did you have in mind?" she asked when Harry remained silent.

The four representatives glanced nervously at each other before Neville gathered his courage and stepped forward. "Potter's Army," he stated in a firm voice. The others nodded quickly, and beyond them Hermione could see the onlookers following suit. She also felt Harry beginning to tense up. He was very aware that the proposed name was accurate, but he also had a deeply seated reluctance to being the center of attention in such an obvious way.

"Well," she broke in. "I was thinking of something along the same lines, but different." Everyone turned their attention to her, and she felt Harry's unspoken hope that she could get him out of this dilemma. "I mean, this is going to be an official organization when we get back to school and I don't think either of the names 'Dumbledore's Army' or 'Potter's Army' will sit well with certain people at the Ministry." This generated a round of chuckles and managed to dissipate the tension as she continued. "I know with the DA we also sometimes called it the Defense Association, so I was thinking we should rename it the Practical Defense Association, or PDA for short, since that's essentially what we're studying now." While Harry looked relieved, the others were clearly not happy that she had derailed their efforts to acknowledge his leadership of the group. She raised her hand to forestall their objections and went on. "But that doesn't mean that among ourselves we can't have a different meaning for that acronym."

Looks of understanding began lighting up the faces of her listeners, as the significance of her proposed abbreviation began to dawn on them. Padma was the first to catch on. "Like Potter's Defense Association?" she suggested with a grin.

"Possibly," Hermione replied with a matching grin. Then she heard Harry's groan beside her, and turned to him with an apologetic smile. He hesitated, then returned a reluctant smile of his own, acknowledging that she had done the best she could. Soon other members of the newly christened PDA were coming up with additional variations, all of which began with 'Potter'.

"Potter's Defense Army?" "Maybe Potter's Dedicated Army." "How about the Potter/Dumbledore Army?" "No, Potter's Demented Army." "Nah, sounds too much like dementors." "I've got it, Potter's Delusional Associates." That got a round of laughter. Seamus brought the house down with his suggestion – "Potter's Death Eater Annihilators".

Eventually the laughing crowd began to disperse, leaving Harry and Hermione standing together and she looked over at him to see a look of pride mixed with some apprehension on his face, but also some amusement as well. When he noticed her watching him he turned to her and smiled.

"You know, I can think of another common muggle phrase that is often associated with those three letters," he commented with a gleam in his eye.

"Oh?" she teased, knowing full well what he was getting at. "And what might that be?"

"Public Display of Affection."

"Hmm," she replied, affecting a thoughtful expression while putting her arms around his neck. "I think that would also do nicely."

"It works for me, too." He concluded by lowering his head to hers and offering a very thorough demonstration of that particular phrase.

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## Hermione's Plan Information, Both Useful and Disturbing

### Chapter 21, Information, Both Useful and Disturbing

The alternate life that Harry and Hermione led away from the Potter manor was no less hectic than the other was. As the month of August went on, they would have several encounters that would have significant consequences, both immediate and for their future lives.

After a followup exchange of owls with Connie Hammer discussing the claims they had made during their meeting, the Director of the DMLE invited them to come in to give testimony on the Umbridge accusations. Eventually she was able to convince the skeptical pair that she was on their side, citing her long friendship with Amelia Bones. Besides being Susan's aunt, Harry remembered and respected her as being fair during his trial two years earlier.

The standard procedure allowed the use of pensieve memories in place of direct testimony, and the teens accordingly withdrew and deposited their recollections of Umbridge's most grievous offenses. Then they offered to confirm their memories with Veritaserum. Hammer was shocked, as almost no one willingly took the truth serum, fearing what they might be forced to divulge. She readily accepted the offer, however, with the provision that they would be placed under the potion one at a time, so that the other could watch to ensure that no inappropriate questions were asked.

Once this was concluded, Harry asked for a favor in return. "We would also like to speak with Peter Pettigrew."

Hammer hesitated. Pettigrew was one of their highest security prisoners, and access to him was restricted to only herself, Robards, and a few senior Aurors. And yet this was Harry Potter, whom she owed big time, who had captured Pettigrew in the first place, and who had a right to confront him if anyone did.

"Pettigrew is in a secure facility that only a few of my most trusted people are aware of," she responded cautiously. "I am reluctant to give anyone access to him unless it is absolutely necessary."

Harry and Hermione shared a glance, silently pondering how to proceed. "It is very important," Harry replied evenly, turning back to Hammer. "There is some information we need to know that he might have."

"Perhaps we can help each other, then," Hammer countered. "What do you know about the location of Severus Snape?"

Hermione's eyes widened but she said nothing. She inwardly cursed herself for her slipup, because Hammer definitely noticed her reaction. But Hammer's attention was primarily focused on Harry. After only a brief pause, he answered, "I don't know where he is."

"But you do know something," she persisted. "I am fully aware that he was involved in the attack on the Weasley home, and that he was captured. Certainly you at least know who is holding him."

"I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that," he insisted. "Look, I know that you need to keep things secret. You have to accept that I need to also. I'm sure that whoever is holding him is on our side, and has a good reason for not turning him over to you yet, if he's even still alive. All I want to do is talk to Pettigrew. I don't have to know where you're holding him. You can blindfold me when you take me to him if you like."

Hammer nodded slowly, apparently considering his suggestion. "You know, I could have asked you this while you were under Veritaserum," she pointed out.

"No you couldn't have," Hermione broke in. "I would not have let you." Now Hammer turned her attention to the other member of the duo, a touch of surprise showing in her stern expression. The older witch locked gazes with the younger, each measuring the other. *'You think you could have stopped me?'* the clear challenge from one. *'Yes, I do.'* the confident response from the other. Finally Hammer broke it off, apparently satisfied with the results of her scrutiny.

"I see." The Director relaxed her stance and the two teens followed suit. "It seems that you are both quite capable of protecting sensitive information. For your information, Mr. Moody has been keeping me well informed of the Snape situation, unofficially of course. I will take you to visit Mr. Pettigrew."

Hammer went on to reveal that the important Death Eater prisoners, both the ones captured recently as well as the ones taken prisoner in the Department of Mysteries a year previous were not being held in Azkaban, or at the Ministry, but at a secret location. She led them to another room that contained nothing but a desk and bare walls, but which required several unlocking charms to enter. From a drawer of the desk she removed a long eagle feather quill and waved her wand over it in a silent incantation, resulting in the familiar glow of a portkey being created. When the three of them had taken hold, she tapped it twice with her wand, and they disappeared from the room in a blur of color.

They reappeared in a similar room, and after Hammer replaced the quill in the corresponding desk drawer, they emerged to find themselves in

what appeared to be a castle dungeon. "This is one time when Moody's paranoia served us in good stead," she commented as she led them along a dimly lit corridor. "He set this facility up during the first war, and told almost no one about it. Once he learned that I was attempting to set up a more secure prison last year, he revealed it to me. Not even the Minister knows all of the details – he knows that it exists but not where it is or how it is accessed." She paused before a seemingly blank section of the rough cut stone wall and peered intently at it before tapping a diamond pattern on four unseen points on the surface. The wall split and moved apart and they stepped through to find themselves facing a cell.

The wall resealed itself behind them as they looked into the cell containing Peter Pettigrew. He appeared not to realize that they were there, and Hermione deduced that there must be a charm that mimicked the effects of a two way mirror that muggle police used in their interrogation rooms. Her assumption proved correct when they felt a shimmer as they moved closer to the cell and the startled Marauder turned Death Eater looked up at them. Hammer stayed behind the masking charm while Hermione and Harry confronted the man who had betrayed his parents as well as the Weasleys.

"Hello, Peter," came Harry's voice beside her, sounding considerably calmer and more composed than she was feeling right now. "We have some questions for you."

"I have nothing to say to you, Potter," snarled the small man. Hermione noted that he looked much older than she remembered, an indication that his life the past three years serving his dark lord had not been particularly invigorating. She wondered if he regretted the choices he had made, and if so, which ones. She shook her head to get her mind back on the reason they were here.

"Well, if we can't do it the easy way, we'll have to do it the hard way," Harry responded, more forcefully this time, while raising his wand. "*Legilimens!*"

Pettigrew's head snapped back in surprise, but he quickly reacted to the mental assault by shutting his eyes and tightening up his face in concentration. Resistance to mind probes was evidently a key part of Death Eater training, Hermione found herself thinking, recalling how Harry had told her of how he had witnessed Malfoy's own skill in Occlumency. She watched impassively as Harry battled with the trapped rat for the memories he sought. After a minute, without changing her expression, she initiated the second part of their plan. Subtly, she reached out with her own mind probe, wordlessly incanting the spell herself, and eased her way into Pettigrew's memories. Harry was creating a diversion, pounding away at Pettigrew's memories of his mother and father, and their casting of the Fidelius charm with him as Secret Keeper, seemingly desperate to learn how he had betrayed them. She, on the other hand, was searching for a more recent memory.

Finally, she had it – a dusty room in Riddle Manor, where Pettigrew was cautiously feeding a special morsel to Nagini. A brooch that had once belonged to Godric Gryffindor, now infused with a fragment of an evil soul, secreted for safekeeping inside a creature that Voldemort felt a particular affinity for and shared a special connection with, the massive serpent.

Carefully, Hermione withdrew her probe without changing her expression. Then, once again back in her own mind, she turned to Harry whose own mental assault on Pettigrew was wavering and put her hand on his arm, as if to console him. "Harry, you should give up, it's not working."

Harry slumped down, red-faced and exhausted, as the mental connection between him and Pettigrew broke and she caught him before he fell. But he angrily pushed her away, refusing her assistance, and turned and stormed back through the charmed barrier. Hermione took one last look back at Pettigrew, who had collapsed onto his small bed, but who now drew himself back up and sneered at her.

"He's too weak!" the rat-faced man gloated. "He'll never defeat the Dark Lord." Hermione grimaced and turned away quickly, disappearing through the barrier herself before she lost control.

Back on the other side Hammer gave them both an inquiring look, but Harry only nodded at her grimly and she reopened the stone wall. But once they were safely back out in the corridor his demeanor changed instantly, and he caught Hermione up in a big hug as a large grin broke out on her face.

"Did you get it?" he asked eagerly, as he pulled back far enough to look at her. She beamed at him and nodded.

"Got it."

Back in Hammer's office the DMLE Director had some more information for them. She had observed them closely during the Pettigrew episode and concluded that here was a pair not to be trifled with. "There's something else you should know," she began. "Severus Snape is being transferred to our custody this week and is scheduled to go to trial eventually. Unfortunately we don't have a very strong case against him on the most serious charge." Harry scowled and Hermione moved closer to him and took his arm. "You see, we have no direct evidence that he killed Albus Dumbledore." Before either of the teens could object that they had heard his confession themselves, she added, "we do have a confession that was obtained by illegal means, but we cannot use that in a court hearing. You see," she said almost apologetically, "we are bound by similar rules of evidence as the muggle court system. Our justice system would be a nightmare if we could just give Veritaserum to anyone we wished and force an admission of guilt. The potential for abuse is enormous." Hermione nodded in agreement, but Harry's look of anger remained, likely due to his recollection of how he himself had been treated by the wizarding justice system.

"Would eyewitness testimony be more useful, then?" Hermione asked, not relaxing her grip on Harry's arm. She knew he would not be happy having to relive that horrible night, but she also knew he would want to see Snape pay for his crime. Hammer's eyes widened.

"There were witnesses?" she shot back. "Besides other Death Eaters?"

Harry now managed to bring his anger under control and sent a look of gratitude mixed with unhappiness toward Hermione. "The Professor and I were alone at the top of the Astronomy Tower," he stated in a halting voice. "Then Draco Malfoy burst in and disarmed Dumbledore while he was immobilizing me. I was under an invisibility cloak and he didn't want me to be discovered. Draco was supposed to kill Dumbledore, but he lost his nerve as the Professor tried to talk him out of it. Then four other Death Eaters arrived, and taunted him a bit. Finally Snape came up and killed him while he sat there leaning up against the wall pleading with him." Hermione's hand tightened on his arm as she felt him getting close to losing his

composure. "I had to sit there, and watch the whole thing unable to move or do anything ..." Harry buried his face in his hands and slumped forward, while Hermione quickly moved to wrap her arms around him, her own tears trickling down her cheeks. Her heart ached, both for the memory of the dead headmaster and for the pain her Harry had suffered.

Even Hammer's normally stern visage had cracked, and she looked on in silence as she allowed the students before her, who had experienced more horror than anyone ought to have to endure, to recover their composure. At length Harry pulled himself together and deposited his memory of the fateful night's events in the evidence pensieve, taking care to begin it right after the landing on the Astronomy tower. Once the Director had viewed it she had even more questions. *'Why were they there in the first place?' 'Why was Dumbledore so weak?'* But Harry stoutly refused to say more, and a glance at Hermione's fiercely protective expression indicated that she could expect no more persuasion from that quarter. Knowing that she now had all the evidence she needed to put Snape away permanently, and Draco Malfoy as well, she thanked them for their assistance and bid them good day. Emotionally drained from the events of the day, the young couple returned home and cuddled together for the evening, and decided to relive some happy memories in Harry's pensieve.

-ooOoo-

An unexpected invitation came a few days later from the Department of Mysteries. The Unspeakable Croaker was interested in having a conversation with them, and since they owed him a very large favor for the time turner, they responded affirmatively. It was a grim-faced pair of students, however, who rode the elevator down to the ninth level. All of their memories of this place were bad, and their hands subconsciously found each other and clutched fiercely in mutual support. The Rotating Room delivered them to a hallway filled with offices that they had not encountered on their previous visit and they managed to relax somewhat.

Once in Croaker's office they willingly provided information on the performance of the time turner and noted his satisfied reaction. Then he moved on to the primary reason for the meeting. "How much do you two know about Dementors and Inferi?" the wizened little man asked abruptly.

"Well, I've faced both of them," Harry replied with a furrowed brow, as he thought back over his encounters. "Hermione was with me for some of the times. We first ran into Dementors third year, and were actually attacked by more than a hundred of them at the end of the year. I was also attacked by two during the summer before fifth year." He looked over at Hermione for confirmation and she nodded in agreement. "As for Inferi, Professor Dumbledore and I had to fight off a bunch of them at ... well let's just say they were in a cave. That was the night ..." his face fell and he swallowed hard but continued. "Later on that night was when he was killed."

Croaker regarded them with an intense stare. "And how did you fight them off?"

"During third year I learned how to conjure a Patronus," Harry answered. "I was able to drive the Dementors away with it. That was when we used the time turner, which we told you about before. I couldn't get the Patronus to form the first time, but the second time I could. It was easier the following year, but then it was just two Dementors. Later in fifth year I taught Hermione and a few others in our defense club to conjure a Patronus too." Hermione smiled as he sent a look of pride her way.

"Professor Dumbledore drove away the Inferi with a flame spell," he continued. "Hermione and I have since learned that spell in case we ever run into any again." He shot a puzzled glance at Hermione and she shrugged. "Why do you ask?"

"I've been instructed to share the information that we have on how to combat them with you," the Unspeakable revealed. "Everything you have said is correct, although a Patronus is difficult for many wizards and witches to conjure in the presence of a Dementor. I expect that you are aware of the difference, having done it yourself." Harry nodded grimly and Hermione's thoughts were taken back to that night by the lake when Harry had attempted to protect her and Sirius. His efforts had netted only a mist, while hers failed completely. It was only later, when he was able to cast from the opposite shore, beyond the range of the mind-numbing fear produced by the close proximity of the nightmarish creatures, that he succeeded.

"We're training a group of friends this summer, and I expect that by the end of the month at least half of them will be able to conjure a fully formed Patronus," Harry revealed. "And the rest of them will at least be able to get a fair amount of mist. When I learned I practiced against a boggart which helped simulate the actual conditions. I reckoned Moody or Remus could get us one so everyone else can do the same."

Hermione anticipated Croaker's next question and added, "Harry's boggart is a Dementor." Croaker's mouth quickly snapped shut and he turned to regard her thoughtfully before turning back to Harry.

"You will find that as your situation in life changes the things you fear also change," he commented. "I suspect that your greatest fear may no longer be that which it was at the age of thirteen."

Harry frowned, then his eyes widened as he turned an agonized look toward Hermione. In that look she realized that his greatest fear would now be the same as hers would be. For each of them it was the fear that the other would not survive the final encounter with Voldemort. She was certain that if she encountered a boggart it would turn into Harry's lifeless body, and for him it would be her own death.

Croaker broke into their sorrowful exchange. "Even so, your idea is sound. Just make sure you teach them to conjure their Patroni as soon as they know Dementors are in the area. But there's something else you can do. Both Dementors and Inferi are creatures of the dark. They despise the light." He had their attention once again. This was the same thing Dumbledore had told Harry about the Inferi, but they hadn't made the same connection with Dementors. Yet both times Harry had been attacked it had been at night.

"So we can use flame curses on Dementors, too?" Hermione asked.

"You can, but even more effective is the Solarus spell. It creates a blindingly bright light." Hermione immediately took out a quill and parchment, and caught Harry's grin out of the corner of her eye. Without missing a beat she reached out and swatted him on the arm with her right hand while making notes with her left. "Unfortunately it is not selective as to who is blinded, friend or foe, so it must only be used in extreme circumstances."

"Couldn't you wear protective goggles?" inquired Harry. Croaker's puzzled look indicated that he didn't understand the reference.

"Muggles who work with devices that give off bright light, such as welders, wear a face shield that protects their eyes," Hermione explained. Croaker obviously still wasn't entirely clear as to the specifics, but he gave her a patronizing smile and shook his head.

"My dear, I am certain that there is nothing that muggles can devise that could contain the power of this spell," he assured her. Hermione wasn't at all convinced that he was right, since muggle technology was capable of amazing things, but recognized the combination of arrogance and ignorance that the wizarding world so often displayed toward anything muggle and knew it was pointless to continue that line of discussion.

"Leaving that aside, what will this Solaris spell do to them?" Hermione persisted. "Can they be destroyed? And how are they controlled?"

"Bright light, from any source, is painful to both Inferi and Dementors, and they will shy away from it." Croaker responded, all traces of humor now gone. "However, I do not believe that you could control Inferi, nor would you want to. Only powerful dark magic can reanimate the dead. It is true that the Ministry had some semblance of control over the Dementors, but that was a cruel bargain. They only stayed with us because we promised them souls to feed on. The current dark lord is able to offer them much more than we could. As for your other question, it is certainly possible to destroy Inferi, but not easily. You already have the tools you need for that. A powerful blasting curse can rip them apart, and a bludgeoning hex can knock them down. Fire can burn them. But if they are not completely destroyed they will continue to attack. Remember though, that mind based spells have no effect. They cannot be stunned and are immune to any of the Unforgiveables." Both teens listened in rapt attention, with Hermione jotting down notes as fast as she could.

"As for Dementors, a strong enough Patronus can attack, injure or even possibly kill one. It was believed that Albus Dumbledore's Patronus was of sufficient strength, although I am not aware that he ever attempted to destroy one." He turned an appraising eye to Harry and continued, "We do have a method to test the strength of one. I am curious to see how you might fare. It is not at all common for a single Patronus to be able to drive off more than one or two Dementors, yet you claimed to have dispersed a far greater number than that."

Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance and she nodded her encouragement. Croaker led them to another room filled with instruments, some of which reminded them of the silver instruments that Dumbledore had kept in his office. Hermione made a mental note that they still needed to find out what the two instruments he had left Harry actually did. Croaker motioned to a pair of gold rectangular objects that had a mirrored surface on one side and with a gesture from his wand a gold beam appeared between them. "Cast your Patronus and send it through the beam," he instructed.

Hermione leaned over to Harry and whispered, "Try your old one first." Harry nodded, concentrated briefly, and called out the incantation. A large silver stag burst from his wand and cantered off through the beam and turned to look back at him as if awaiting further instructions. Croaker leaned over and looked at the reading on one of the gold boxes.

"Not bad," he said, clearly impressed. "An 82. Definitely good enough to drive a large number away, but not enough to injure one." At Harry's prompting Hermione stepped up next and sent her otter through the beam. Croaker checked the readout again. "70. Still quite a bit above normal. The average score for a strong witch or wizard, such as a fully trained Auror, is 50. I would say that the DMLE will be very interested in the two of you once you graduate." He caught himself and a grin cracked his face for what might have been the first time in years. "Well, they would be interested in the pair of you in any case, but even if you weren't who you are these scores would catch their attention." He was about to shut down the detector when Harry stopped him.

"Now try your other one," he told Hermione. Focusing this time on a particularly pleasant episode with Harry, Hermione cast the charm once again and her lion jumped from her wand and leapt through the beam. The stunned Unspeakable peered at the display and his jaw dropped.

"105! Unbelievable! A fifty percent increase. That's strong enough to seriously damage one. Any Patronus over 100 has that ability. How did you do that?" Instead of answering, Hermione smiled at Harry and motioned him to go next. A moment later an enormous lioness sprang through the beam to join her mate. Croaker almost didn't dare to look at the number, and when he did he had to grab onto the table to support himself.

"123! Another fifty percent increase!" he gasped. Somewhat shakily he drew himself back to his feet. "Dumbledore is the only one I've ever seen score higher. Who are you people?"

Harry and Hermione shared a very satisfied look before turning back to Croaker. "What does it take to destroy one," Hermione asked.

"According to the charts, 150, but we've never actually seen one destroyed," he answered, still looking back and forth between them in disbelief.

"How about if they attacked one together?" Harry inquired, gesturing to the pair of lions who were now rolling around together on the floor, playfully biting at each other.

"I... they're not..." Croaker paused. It wasn't supposed to be possible to direct Patroni to cooperate with each other, but he wasn't sure of anything when it came to this pair. "I don't know," he finally admitted.

It was a very thoughtful young couple that left the Ministry building that afternoon.

-ooOoo-

"We got a message from Bill and Fleur," Hermione announced as she went through the day's post one morning in mid August. The newlyweds had been gone for more than a week and were considerably sending back a progress report.

*Dear Harry and Hermione,*

*We're having a fabulous time here along the Adriatic. We wish you could see it, but we understand that you have other things to do this summer. Fleur says to tell Hermione that she would really enjoy the beaches in Croatia and Montenegro. (I think Harry would enjoy the*

scenery, too!) We're gradually working our way south.

*We also want to take this opportunity to thank you again for the lovely engraved commemorative cup you gave us for our wedding. It's simply exquisite. It's as though the artist who made it managed to put a bit of himself into it.*

*We are having such a good time that we think we will extend our trip for another few weeks, so we may not get a chance to see you again before your classes resume in the fall.*

*Thanks again for being at our wedding and for everything you've done for our families.*

*Bill and Fleur*

"OK, I think I got most of that," Harry mused, scratching his head thoughtfully. "But what was that about the beaches?"

Hermione gave him a sultry smile. "There are some topless beaches in both Croatia and Montenegro. Perhaps we can go there and try them out some day." She laughed at the grin that appeared on Harry's face, then turned serious. "But the coded part was the bit about working their way south, and Albania is directly south of Montenegro. That's where they are actually searching. They seem to have a lead on Hufflepuff's cup and they think they'll have it in a few more weeks' time."

-ooOoo-

"Harry?"

Hermione paused and looked over her shoulder. They were both getting dressed to go visit the Longbottoms for tea. Since she wanted to make a good impression on the Longbottom matriarch they were wearing dress robes (but not formal) and she had decided that she ought to wear a bra with them. Following Fleur's advice that if she had to wear a bra, it should be a sexy one, she had decided on one of the fancy bra and knicker sets the French witch had helped her pick out. She had pulled on a light blue thong and had just now slipped the matching bra over her shoulders. It was a tiny bit of lace and nearly transparent fabric, cut very low to display her quite nicely. Now she was standing in front of the mirror and as she finished fastening it stopped to regard her figure. Unlike the occasion all those months ago (her time) on the evening she had arrived home from school she was now reasonably satisfied with what she saw. Harry certainly was, she noticed with a smile as she caught him looking at her. In fact, she noted as she allowed her eyes to glide down his body, his appreciation for her current state was quite evident. She returned her gaze to his face and her smile broadened as he flushed slightly, knowing that she had caught him, and he grinned at her.

"Yes?" he finally responded, coming up behind her and putting his hands on her waist. She briefly forgot what she was going to ask him as he started kissing her shoulder and sliding his hands up and down along her bare skin while his lips worked their way to her neck. Just as his roaming fingers reached the thin material that covered her breasts she managed to pull herself together and with not a small touch of regret turned in his arms to face him.

"Not now," she scolded in a mock stern voice as she hit him gently on the chest. "We have to finish getting ready. She smiled again at the playful pout he gave her, then he pulled her in for a brief hug and released her with a nice little kiss.

"You were about to ask me something," he reminded her as he stepped back and made no effort to hide his inspection of her brief attire. She felt a tingling in her breasts as they responded to his gaze, making a firm impression on their abbreviated covering. Before he could reconsider his forbearance she reached over to the back of the chair and grabbed her dress robes and began pulling them over her head. Ever helpful, he stepped up to help her get them adjusted properly, and also managed to sneak in another kiss on the back of her neck.

"I was wondering what you thought of the girls in the PDA." She noticed the puzzled look on his face at the abrupt change of subject and hastened to clarify. "How you think they look. The other guys seem to appreciate the way they look in their exercise clothing and their dragonhide armor but you didn't have much reaction."

"Oh," he replied as his confusion cleared, seeing the connection now. "I guess they look OK. Not as good as you do," he added quickly, as a worried look flashed across his face. Hermione shook her head and smiled.

"You're sweet," she said as she leaned up and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "But I'm curious. Which ones do you think look the best?" She smiled warmly at him, trying to dispel his nervousness with the topic and assure him that it was all right for him to tell her.

"Besides you, you mean?" he clarified. Hermione rolled her eyes and motioned for him to continue. "Well, they all look pretty good." She gave him a look that made it clear that he wasn't going to get out of it that easily. "What do you think?" he tried.

Hermione huffed and decided to try a different approach. "It seemed to me that a lot of the guys were rather interested in the way Susan and Lavender filled out the dragonhide armor," she offered. This got a smile out of Harry and he visibly relaxed.

"Yeah," he agreed, "some of them just barely managed to keep from drooling." He sat down on the sofa and she sat down next to him, silently urging him with her eyes to continue. "I don't know. I mean, I like to look at a nice figure as much as the next guy but I guess I'm not so focused on size as much as some guys are, if you know what I mean." Hermione knew exactly what he meant and reached over and gave his hand a squeeze.

"I though Ginny looked particularly good," she suggested casually.

"Yeah ..." Harry began before he caught himself. "I mean yes, I suppose you're right." Hermione punched him on the arm and smirked. "Come on, Hermione," he protested. "You know I think Ginny's attractive." Hermione responded by taking hold of his arm and giving him a quick hug.

"I'm sorry for teasing you about it Harry," she said apologetically. "But I honestly wondered what you thought. I think that Ginny has a very nice figure

but it seems like all the guys care about is big breasts.”

“Yeah, some do,” he agreed. “But I think for a lot of them it was the initial shock. Quite a few of them were making comments about Ginny and Parvati later as well. Padma too, although she doesn’t try to call attention to herself the way Parvati does. Personally, I guess I prefer the kind of figure the three of them have. And you of course,” he added anxiously. Hermione giggled and leaned over to give him another kiss on the cheek. He was trying so hard to say the right things.

“So,” she asked slyly. “Of all the girls in the PDA ... besides me ... Ginny is the one you’d want to see on a topless beach?”

To her surprise, Harry actually took some time to think about this question. “Does Fleur count?” he asked with a grin. Hermione grinned back and shook her head so he thought a bit longer. “I don’t think so,” he finally replied. “I think it would be too awkward. With someone like Fleur, I’ve never had a relationship with her so I could admire how good she looked and not be worried that she’d take it the wrong way. With Ginny I’d be worried that she’d see how much I enjoyed looking at her and think there was more to it. Does that make sense?”

“Actually, it makes a lot of sense. You’ve thought along these lines before?” Harry nodded. “OK, then besides Ginny. Who would you most like to see?”

“Daphne.” Hermione’s eyebrows shot up. She hadn’t even considered the blonde Slytherin. She and Harry had just met with her and Tracey the day before and arranged for them to begin coming to the training sessions. But it made sense. Hermione had shown the two Slytherin girls the exercise clothing that the other girls wore during training and the dragonhide armor. Daphne had tried on one of her tank tops and had filled it out very nicely. Since she was taller than Hermione, the top even revealed a strip of bare skin around her waist.

As she thought about it, she decided that Daphne more closely resembled Fleur than any of the other PDA girls did, and Hermione thought that Fleur had a perfect figure. Evidently Harry did also. “She just looks good all around,” Harry explained unnecessarily. “And she’s taller and ... well ... more developed than Parvati or Padma. On a topless beach ...” he shrugged. Hermione decided that he was right. The smaller breasted girls would be overshadowed by Daphne in that situation. She decided that this discussion had gone on long enough, and that she was happy that Harry’s ideas on what made a girl look attractive were so closely aligned with hers.

“Well, enough of that,” she said rising to her feet. “We need to get going. But thank you for being so honest. I really appreciate that.” She smiled up at him and took his hand as they walked toward the door.

“So, did I pass?” he asked nervously. She laughed and gave his hand a squeeze.

“You passed.”

The week before Harry had pulled Neville aside and sat down with him to tell him about the prophecy. That had led to a long discussion with his friend about the consequences of Dumbledore’s fateful interview for a divination teacher. It had cost both of them their parents and they ended up sharing with each other details of their childhoods that Neville had never told anyone, and Harry had told only Hermione. One of the things that Neville had mentioned was that the Longbottoms were an old pureblood family and that his grandmother held a seat on the Wizengamot. Since they had been wanting to learn more about that body, this had prompted him to contact her with a request to meet that led to this afternoon’s invitation to tea.

Mrs. Longbottom greeted them very graciously and led them to her drawing room, apologizing for Neville’s absence. Actually, they knew that he was at the Potter mansion training, but didn’t feel the need to explain that situation. When Harry expressed his puzzlement that he hadn’t seen her at his trial after the Dementor attack before his fifth year, she explained that she had intended to attend, but that the time was changed at the last minute and she wasn’t notified. She remarked that several of the Wizengamot members who would have been expected to be sympathetic to him were also somehow not made aware of the time change and offered her opinion that it was not a coincidence. The teens both agreed with her completely. Then she dropped the first of her bombshells.

Because of his inheritance from Sirius, Harry now had the rights to two places on the Wizengamot, the Black seat and the Potter seat. However, he didn’t need to worry about that for now since he couldn’t use them until he turned thirty. His father was never old enough to take his seat, and Sirius was an escaped convict so he couldn’t either. But the catch was, he could only hold one of the seats, not both.

The two teens looked at each other in amazement. Now that she thought about it, it made sense, Hermione decided. She didn’t know why it hadn’t occurred to her before. The Wizengamot seats were held by old pureblood families, and both the Blacks and the Potters certainly qualified on that count. Two seats! Just think of the changes they could lobby for from such a position – the treatment of other magical species for example. But he could only hold one or the other. Unless ...

“Could Hermione hold the other?” Harry asked the question just before Hermione did.

“Yes,” the stern faced elderly woman replied. “But she must decide whether she will be Lady Potter or Lady Black. It must be one or the other. Whichever title she assumes, she may take that seat. You could then take the other.”

“Oh, so the other title, Lady Black or Lady Potter, would just be vacant then?” Hermione surmised.

“Not necessarily,” the Longbottom matriarch replied with a sour look on her face. She seemed reluctant to continue, but stiffened slightly and went on. “The other title could be used by Mr. Potter’s second wife.”

The second bombshell stunned the pair into shocked silence. They barely heard Mrs. Longbottom as she explained that, although she personally found it distasteful, wizarding custom permitted, even encouraged, a man who was heir of two different noble lines to take two wives, so as to perpetuate each line separately. If not, one of the lines would die out, unless the patriarch produced an illegitimate heir or made some other such arrangement. She concluded that Sirius Black had likely not been aware of this detail, since he had become estranged from his family before he



came of age, and the knowledge was closely held among the noble families.

By unspoken consent the uncomfortable situation they all found themselves in was soon alleviated as Neville's grandmother stood and thanked them for stopping by and they numbly responded their thanks for the invitation. Without really noticing how they got there, the troubled couple found themselves once more in their living room. Hermione saw that there was a dazed smile on Harry's face as he sank into the sofa, and all the anxieties that she had overcome during the year in Mexico came rushing back with a vengeance as she thought that he might marry someone else besides her overwhelmed her.

"H ... Harry?" she choked out in despair. "What are we going to do?"

Belatedly, Harry overcame his own shock at the news to realize the effect it would have had on Hermione. Desperate to calm her down, he jumped up and put his hands on her shoulders, trying to think of what to say. In his panic, he blurted out, "Look, we don't have to do anything right now, do we? This isn't something we have to worry about for the time being. Let's just forget about it and deal with it in ten years or so."

Unfortunately, this was not what Hermione wanted to hear. To her dismay, he had not reassured her in the slightest. Gasping back her sobs, she tore herself away and shot him a look of betrayal and raced from the room.

"Wrong answer!" she shouted. This definitive statement was punctuated by the slamming of the bedroom door, followed by muffled weeping within.

-oooOOOooo-

A/N This is where I originally intended to end this chapter. However, I decided that a cliffhanger like that would be just too mean, so I'm continuing to the end of this scene. Hence, this chapter is quite a bit longer than normal.

-oooOOOooo-

Hermione had no idea of how long she had been lying on the bed crying. Her tears had long since run out and her chest ached. She just couldn't stem the flow of miserable thoughts coursing through her mind. *He's going to marry another girl. He's going to marry another girl. She'll be prettier than me. He'll want to be with her more. He'll forget about me. He's going to marry another girl.* Sometimes her train of thoughts would turn to speculation. *Who will it be? Ginny? He said he still found her attractive. Daphne? She looks a bit like Fleur and he's even more attracted to her. What about Fleur? Would he get her to leave Bill for him? Stop it, that's ridiculous! Howabout Gabrielle? She'll probably grow up to look like Fleur and when he's 30 the five year age difference won't matter. No, you're just kidding yourself. It will be Ginny. It has to be Ginny. He's never gotten over her. That's why he was smiling. He'll marry perfect little Ginny and eventually forget about me.*

As the afternoon turned into evening the room began to darken, matching her mood. She had missed supper, but she wasn't the least bit hungry. The hole in her stomach had nothing to do with lack of food. Then she began to think about going to bed. Without Harry. Then she started crying again.

Finally her rational side began asserting itself, and engaged in a debate with her panicked gut reaction emotional side.

*'He's going to marry another girl.'*

*'No he's not, he's going to marry you. See the engagement ring on your finger?'*

*'Well, he's going to marry someone else later.'*

*'How do you know that? Did he say he wanted to marry someone else?'*

*'He was smiling when he thought about it. He must have been thinking about who else he wanted to marry.'*

*'How do you know what he was thinking? You didn't stay around long enough to find out.'*

*'Well, why didn't he come in here and tell me then?'*

*'You locked the door.'*

*'He could have unlocked it if he wanted to.'*

*'How is he supposed to know that you want that? Is he supposed to read your mind?'*

*'Yes.'* Hermione winced. This sounded really lame. Her emotional side was weakening.

*'Hermione, grow up!'* Now this voice was sounding disturbingly like her mother, although it was something that her mother had certainly never, ever needed to say to her before. *'When people lock doors it means they don't want to be disturbed. He's respecting your wishes, and is probably sitting on the other side of that door feeling just as miserable as you are.'* Hermione felt herself beginning to waver. For the first time she thought about what Harry might be feeling. *'What exactly is this supposed to accomplish? Are you punishing him? Or are you punishing yourself?'*

*'Well, I'm certainly miserable.'* Now Hermione finally started to look at what she was doing. She knew very well that this was not the way to settle disputes in a relationship. She had read the book on successful marriages her mother had given her. Nothing was ever solved by walking away and not talking. That was the way marriages failed. She had the horrible feeling that perhaps she wasn't as ready to get married as she had thought. It was time to change that.

Harry's head sprang up as he heard the door open and Hermione stepped back into the living room. His hair was a fright; he had evidently been running his hands through it constantly in his anxiety. In fact, he just generally looked awful – probably about the same as she looked, Hermione found herself thinking. His eyes – Hermione gasped as she caught the look of anguish and despair radiating from those blazing green eyes. His body jerked as he tried to leap to his feet despite his being stiff from sitting in one position so long, and he stumbled against the end table before coming to a halt facing her. She could see his hesitation; uncertain of what he should do to make this better.

"Hermione, I'm so sorry ..." Without being aware of moving Hermione found herself in his arms with her head buried in his shoulder, both of them holding tight to the other as if their lives depended on it. "Hermione, I love you. I don't want anyone else but you. You have to believe me. I'd be lost without you. I don't know what I'd do without you." Hermione, too choked up to respond, nodded her head over and over again against his chest, her cheek rubbing against the wet spot on his shirt where it had soaked up her tears. She could feel warmth spreading through her, replacing the cold ache that had filled her heart.

"It's OK," she eventually managed to say. "I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have reacted the way I did. That doesn't solve anything." She felt him relax and rest his head on top of hers and she pressed into him just a bit harder, tightening up her arms around his back. They would get through this, just like they would get past any other obstacle life threw at them – together.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked tentatively. She nodded again and pulled away slightly. Deciding they ought to sit down for this she led him over to the sofa. "Are you hungry?" he asked. She hadn't been before but decided that it would be a good idea, so they both moved into the kitchen to put together a light snack before they sat down to tackle this troubling issue.

"I just want to say right up front," Harry began, clearly determined to avoid his previous mistake. "That I can't imagine falling in love with or marrying anyone but you."

"Then why ..." Hermione began, but Harry's touch on her arm stopped her.

"Ten years ago, could you have possibly imagined being where we are now, and doing the things we've done? We're talking about something that's at least ten years away. So I can't rule out the possibility that things could change enough between now and then that something like that could happen. I admit that I don't see how it could. But you're always the one who figures things out. Do you think you could try to look at it with me?"

Hermione took a deep breath. Given her emotional involvement in the question it would be difficult to analyze this dispassionately, but she would try. She managed a weak smile and nodded, and he reached out and gave her hand a squeeze.

"There's something I need to say right up front also," she replied. "I know that there are some cultures where multiple wives are common, but that's not the kind of culture we were raised in. It seems to me that a relationship like that demeans the women involved. You and I are partners in this relationship, but as soon as you have a situation with one man and two women it becomes an unequal partnership." She looked at him for confirmation and he nodded that he understood. "At least that's the way I feel now. You're right that a lot of the things have changed in our lives since we learned about magic, but I don't think that's something I'll ever be able to accept." She took another deep breath. "However, I'm willing to discuss it as a hypothetical possibility."

Harry reached out and put his arm around her and pulled her up against his side, and she laid her head on his shoulder. "Thank you," he responded. "That's all I would ask from you right now." He paused for a moment to gather his thoughts.

"OK. I don't think I'll ever want to marry someone if I don't love them," he began. She nodded her agreement. "Let's take Ginny as an example."

"Could you use a different example?" she interrupted pleadingly.

"Oh, sure, of course," he replied immediately with an apologetic look. "You pick one."

"Hmm, how about Eloise Midgen?" Harry made such a face that she burst out laughing, easing some of the tension. "All right, let's use Luna, she's safe."

"How so?"

"She fancies Ron, not you."

"Ah. Of course," Harry said with a thoughtful expression, undoubtedly considering Luna's behavior around Ron in light of this assertion. "I should have figured that out myself. Do you think Ron knows?" Hermione just gave him an *'are you kidding?'* look and he chuckled. "So anyway how would I fall in love with Luna? If I'm married to you I wouldn't exactly be going out on dates. I just don't see how it could happen."

"We never actually went out on a date but you fell in love with me," Hermione pointed out. Despite her reluctance, she was beginning to see a possibility.

"But that's different, we got so close as friends, we ... oh, I get it. It would have to be someone who started out as a friend and then we grew really close to." Hermione raised an inquiring eyebrow at his use of the word 'we'. Harry picked it up. "Yes, I mean we. It would have to be someone we both were really close friends with. Like we are with Fleur now."

Hermione was pretty sure now where this was going. "Or Ginny," she said with a sinking feeling. But Harry surprised her.

"I don't think so," he countered. "I don't want her to wait for ten years, hoping it might happen, when nothing might ever come of it. It wouldn't be fair to her and I wouldn't do that to her. Like I said, I'm not even going to consider it for at least ten years, and it will probably never happen. I don't see her staying single that long." Hermione, relieved, agreed wholeheartedly. Then she followed that thought to its logical conclusion.

“But that brings up another point, Harry. We can’t let anyone know about this. Not only Ginny, but lots of other girls who think there might be any possibility that you might have a second wife will be all over you.”

Harry groaned, and Hermione reached over and patted his arm consolingly. They had both been sure that they wouldn’t have to deal with any of that this year, now that they were engaged.

“So we’re in agreement, then?” Harry summed up. “We’re not going to think about it for at least ten years, and after that it would only be if there was someone who we both grew very close to. And even then we’d talk about it and make sure we both agreed before we took it any further.” Hermione nodded, and felt her spirits lighten for the first time since they had left the Longbottom home. “We’ll tell absolutely no one about it for now, and if any girls suss it out early I’ll just refer them to you,” he finished with a little grin. Hermione managed a small smile and he scooted closer and wrapped his arm around her while she leaned contentedly into him. She couldn’t believe how exhausted she was.

“Want to go to bed early?” he offered. Yes, she decided, that was exactly what she wanted to do. She wanted nothing more than to snuggle up with him and hold each other all night long.

After they had removed their clothing and she was in her preferred position, tucked up under his arm with her head resting comfortably on his chest Harry spoke again. “Hermione, I want to make sure you know that if nothing ever comes of this, if we never find someone who we’re both comfortable with having as a second wife, that would be OK. I’d let one of the lines come to an end before I’d do anything to hurt you. Or I’d give up one of the titles. You mean more to me than any of that.”

Hermione felt the tears leaking from her eyes again, but they were from happiness this time, and the ache in her chest was a good one. She squeezed him as hard as she could, and felt his arm tighten around her back. “Thank you Harry. I love you so much.”

“I love you too.”

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## Hermione's Plan Summer's End

### Chapter 22, Summer's End

Harry and Hermione's series of meetings ended up with a visit with Mad Eye Moody at Grimmauld Place. One of the things he wanted to discuss with them was Voldemort's tactics in a fight. They reviewed Harry's pensieve memory of the duel in the graveyard as well as one of Moody's from the last war. Moody pointed out that he tended to open with an Unforgivable Curse. Even if his opponents evaded it they were off balance and he had the advantage. Harry and Hermione nodded solemnly. If they were prepared they could block it without being distracted. And they now had the methods to block anything.

The two students also showed Moody the silver instruments Harry had inherited from Dumbledore. Moody informed them that one of them was a ward monitor. Dumbledore had used it to keep track of the strength of the wards on Privet Drive, but it could be set for any location they wished. At Hermione's query he allowed that they could set it to monitor more than one location simultaneously. A wand tap would easily shift it from one to the next. After a bit of discussion, they decided they would set it up to track the Granger home, the Longbottoms, the Lovegoods, and Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes.

The other object, which when activated emitted a puff of smoke, was a dark detector. They could set it to focus on a given location, and it would determine the level of dark activity at that location. Harry recognized it as the instrument Dumbledore had used when Mr. Weasley had been attacked at the Ministry. Somehow he had been able to determine that Voldemort was possessing Nagini at the time. Essentially, they would be able to ascertain if Voldemort was present at the site of an attack. This would make a big difference in deciding on their response.

Moody brought up one other item before they left. "Do you two have wand holsters?" he growled. "Not still keeping your wand in your back pocket are you?"

"Nope," Harry responded. "Hermione got me one for my birthday, and picked up one for herself too." Both teens pushed up the sleeves of their robes to show top of the line Auror models that Tonks had helped Hermione pick out. They could be strapped either on their forearms or their legs, delivered the wands into their hands with but a thought, and had built in anti-summoning charms. Moody nodded his approval.

"You should also have backup wands, hidden somewhere else on your bodies," he insisted. He then led them to a cupboard where he revealed a trunk that was filled with wands. "Picked up some of Ollivander's stock when he left," was his only comment. After several tries, each student found a suitable wand, although neither one's worked as well as their original. They had also discovered that they could use each other's wands reasonably well. They headed home after thanking the ex-Auror for his help.

-ooOoo-

"Hermione?"

"Hmm?" They were back at the flat in Cambridge, and Hermione looked up from where she was making notes about what Moody had said with one hand, and giving her spare wand a few practice flicks with the other.

"You ... which hand do you use for your wand?" Harry asked with a puzzled look on his face.

"Oh, well, I can actually use either hand, so I try to alternate so I'm equally proficient with both of them."

"And the same with your writing?"

Hermione gave a sheepish nod. She had wondered if he had noticed this. "Yes, I'm ambidextrous."

"What made you decide to learn to do that, or did it come naturally?"

Hermione decided that his question was out of genuine curiosity, and not because he thought she was strange. "Do you promise not to laugh at me?" Harry gave her an odd look, evidently wondering why she asked that, but nodded quickly. "Well, when I'm writing long essays, my hand gets tired. So back in first year I came up with the idea to learn to use my left hand, too. That way when one got tired I could switch to the other ... Harry, you promised not to laugh!"

Harry had his hand over his mouth and was trying his hardest to control himself, but his shoulders were shaking with repressed mirth. Hermione crossed her arms and pouted, turning away from him. This made Harry come up behind her and try to give her an apologetic hug. She shook him off once, but then relented. Knowing he needed to do something nice to get back on her good side, he began rubbing her arms, then moved his hands up towards her neck, working his thumbs into the area between her shoulder blades. She decided to forgive him this time.

"I'm sorry," he pleaded. "But that is just so ... so you. You have to admit it is somewhat amusing. But I think it's right brilliant of you."

She turned to face him. "You really think so?"

He lowered his head to her upturned face and gave her a kiss. "Of course. In fact, it's such a good idea that I think I'll start practicing using my wand with either hand also. You never know when that ability might come in handy."

Hermione beamed at him and returned the kiss and wrapped him up in a big hug. Then with a satisfied smile she returned to her notes, while Harry drew his wand to try a few left-handed spells.

-ooOoo-

The week after their meeting with Director Hammer, they received a follow-up owl, thanking them for their testimony. It also informed them that it was DMLE policy that there be no public announcement of any Death Eater trials, or the results of such trials. When they read this, they now realized why they hadn't heard anything about the disposition of the charges against the eleven Death Eaters captured during the battle at the Department of Mysteries the year before. Hermione surmised that it was for security reasons. A public trial would be too tempting of a target for an attack. However, the idea of secret trials was quite worrisome for both of them, for obvious reasons.

-ooOoo-

Meanwhile, back at Potter Manor the training went on. The other PDA members were gradually coming to realize what Fred, George, Ron, and Ginny already knew from what they had witnessed at the Burrow: Harry and Hermione were far more advanced than any of the rest of them. Their performance in the spellcasting practices, in both power and accuracy, as well as their effectiveness against the dueling dummies, left no doubt that they were formidable opponents. A hint of just how formidable was revealed by an exhibition duel the pair agreed to participate in after two hard weeks of training. The group's initial enthusiasm was beginning to wane, and their commitment tested, by the reality that it takes a lot of effort to improve significantly at anything. Tonks had noticed this budding discontent, and came up with an idea to boost morale.

She proposed that she and Remus engage Harry and Hermione in an exhibition duel, hoping that the PDA members would be inspired by the superior skills that their leaders had developed from doing exactly the type of training they were currently undergoing. She reasoned that it would be a relatively even matchup. She was very much mistaken.

"How do you want to work this?" Harry asked as he and Hermione were stretching to loosen up before the duel. She was wearing a similar outfit to the one she had dueled Ron in at Hogwarts – tight shorts and a spandex T-back tank top. Harry was wearing gym shorts and a snug-fitting tee shirt. "Overwhelm them right away or draw it out a bit?"

"I think we should take the opportunity to try a few things," Hermione replied. "I have some ideas I've been wanting to test out." She quickly explained to him what she had in mind, and the pair came up with a strategy that would showcase some of their abilities, but not give away too much.

Flitwick had eagerly agreed to officiate the contest, and had put up strong shielding charms in front of a small set of bleachers that he had conjured up for the onlookers. As word of the duel spread, other Order members also came to watch, including McGonagall, Pomfrey, and Hagrid from Hogwarts, Aurors Moody, Shacklebolt, and Hestia Jones, as well as Hermione's parents. From his years on the Gryffindor quidditch team, Harry was accustomed to performing in front of much larger crowds than this, and fell back on his usual methods to maintain his focus despite his pre-match jitters, which he shared with Hermione. Having Fred and George walk up right beforehand and joke about it helped a lot.

"This is it," shouted George.

"The big one," added Fred.

"The one we've all been waiting for," they chorused together, imitating Oliver Wood's warm-up speech perfectly.

"Get the snitch or die trying," concluded Fred as they both took turns clapping each of the combatants on the back.

"Wood actually said that?" Hermione asked as they walked out to the dueling site.

"Yep," answered Harry with a wistful smile, recalling the days when winning or losing a quidditch match was the most stressful thing in his life. "I think it was the time I broke my arm." Hermione responded with one of her exasperated sighs and a characteristic eye-roll and Harry chuckled and put his arm around her as they arrived in the make-shift arena.

As with the duel between Hermione and Ron, life-threatening curses would not be used. The two couples arranged themselves twenty paces apart and Flitwick shot gold sparks out of his wand to signal them to begin.

At first nothing happened, as all four of them dropped into an alert stance, waiting for the other side to make the first move. Harry and Hermione were comfortable at this distance, and so didn't move closer. After a few moments the two teens launched a half dozen stunners in a staccato burst, alternating between the two of them, which Tonks and Remus easily deflected. Then the older pair did likewise, and the teens split apart to evade the spells as they passed through the area where they had been standing. This continued for several minutes, each side varying the strength and type of spells, taking the measure of their opponents. When this stopped, both sides paused to catch a breath. Or at least appeared to.

Neither Remus nor Tonks noticed the small gestures Harry and Hermione made with their free hands, being more focused on their wands. Neither did they notice the vines that emerged from the ground beneath their feet. They did feel the sensation of being pushed back, and leaned forward to resist. But when each took a step back to brace themselves against this mysterious force, the vines came into play, tripping first Tonks and then Remus. As the Auror struggled to regain her balance, she grabbed onto the werewolf, and ended up taking him down with her. It was only an instant before they could scramble back to their feet, but in that instant they were deluged with a cascade of water that appeared from nowhere, drenching them and knocking them back to the ground.

Although the teens could have ended the duel then and there, while the adults were distracted, they stepped back and allowed them to recover. They were not idle during that time, as they set up their next maneuver. Hermione silently cast a narrow anti-disapparation ward in a fifteen foot radius around their soaked to the skin and thoroughly irritated foes. More visibly, Harry created a ten foot wide flaming lasso that effectively confined them to that exact spot and limited their maneuverability. Remus and Tonks shared an uneasy look. They both realized that they were in big trouble now.

Without warning, the younger pair fired off a barrage of bludgeoning spells at the now quite apprehensive older couple. With considerably more effort this time, Remus and Tonks blocked this attack and shot back a counterattack of the strongest spells they could. This time, neither Harry or Hermione made a move to evade or block. But just as they were about to be hit, both disappeared.

Apparating without a sound, they reappeared immediately one on each side of their surprised opponents, and fired off a second barrage of the bludgeoning spells. Before they could be targeted again, they repeated the maneuver and continued to do so, each time reappearing in a new position, always on opposite sides of their foes and striking a powerful blow each time.

Remus and Tonks were both stronger physically than the average witch or wizard, Remus because of his lycanthropy and Tonks because of her physical conditioning, but they began to wear down. Finally Remus figured out the pattern of the assault. Harry was taking the two o'clock, six o'clock, and ten o'clock positions of the circle, while Hermione was appearing at the corresponding four, eight, and twelve o'clock positions. Gathering his strength, he anticipated where Harry would appear next and launched a powerful stunner, which arrived just as Harry fired off his next salvo of hexes. To everyone's amazement, Harry instantly put up his other hand, even as the hexes were leaving his wand, and wandlessly conjured a shield to intercept the bright red streak of light.

Now that the apparation strategy had been deduced, Harry and Hermione switched to the next part of her strategy. Remaining where they were, they flicked their wands to raise a massive rocky barrier from the ground in front of each of them. Using them to shield themselves from potential assaults from the older couple, they prepared their next attack.

From Hermione's side of the ring a flock of birds suddenly appeared, circled her head twice, and then shot straight at her beleaguered challengers. While they dealt with that assault, she also conjured a swarm of bees and sent them in a follow-up wave. Meanwhile, on his side, Harry created an assortment of snakes and instructed them to slide under the flaming lasso and attack the humans inside.

Remus and Tonks were so preoccupied with this new threat that they had little time to get off any offensive spells of their own, mostly shooting explosive hexes at the rocky barriers and trying an occasional disarming spell, hoping for a lucky hit.

Now satisfied with the chaos her birds and bees were creating, Hermione next took a page from Cedric Diggory's battle with his dragon during the First Task and transfigured some of the rocks from her barricade into dogs. By now Harry had stopped renewing the fiery lasso and an exuberant pack of dogs leapt onto the by now thoroughly bewildered couple who were beginning to regret ever having met this pair of irritating teens. At this point Hermione noticed that Harry was intently conjuring something behind his barrier and apparated over to a point where she could take a look while still keeping an eye on her opponents. What she saw severely strained her ability to keep her mind on the battle.

Harry had transfigured one of his rocks into a long rectangular tube that narrowed down to a point at one end. Four other rocks were transfigured into flat pieces that were wider at one end than the other, and he was currently attaching these to the long tube in an X pattern. Seeing her watching him, he looked up and gave her a wink, and then returned his attention to putting the finishing touches on his creation. Hermione put her hand over her mouth to try to stifle her laughter and popped back to the opposite side of the couple who were finally disentangling themselves from the pile of dogs and snakes. Just for good measure, she decided to add a few goats and a wild pig to the mix.

A final volley of blasting hexes disintegrated the last of her transfigured animals back into bits of rock and the last snake was vanished just as Tonks tried to sneak another disarming hex past Hermione's guard. She dismissed this attempt as easily as she had the rest and while she distracted the Auror's attention with three quick stunning spells she concentrated on yet another hex in her mind. *'Levicorpus!'* The unfortunate couple now found themselves suspended upside down in midair, just as Hermione had been during her duel with Ron two weeks previously. And even though they were both near exhaustion they managed to keep their wands and their composure, despite being blinded by their robes hanging down in their faces. Fortunately, both were wearing standard wizarding trousers under their robes, contrary to the practice of many purebloods. Several *Diffindo's* shredded their robes and freed their vision, but before they could do anything else a silent *'Liberacorporus'* from Hermione dropped them on their heads, putting them into a bit of a daze. Hermione stifled another laugh when she noticed that Harry had 'helped' Tonks a bit with the cutting hex, and had sliced off the bottom six inches of her shirt, resulting in a cutoff top that exposed her bare midriff.

While the two weary combatants were shaking their heads and wishing they were anywhere else but there, Harry finished his masterpiece. With a gesture of his hand, a four foot 1/10 scale model of an X-wing starfighter rose from behind his barrier. While it hovered briefly, a quick flick of his wand and a nonverbal replicating spell created an entire X-wing squadron. Another gesture and they all shot at the stunned pair of victims on the ground. For her part, Hermione made a circular motion with her wand and the four wing tips of each starfighter glowed bright orange, followed by a barrage of stinging hexes that shot out at the hapless couple as each starfighter bore in on its target in turn and then peeled away.

To their credit, Tonks and Remus each managed to shoot one of the starfighters out of the sky with explosion hexes before Harry and Hermione finished the performance with silent *Expelliarmus* hexes which disarmed the older pair. While the two students each caught one of their opponent's wands, formally ending the duel, the exhausted couple sank to the ground in relief.

As the two young champions approached their vanquished foes, Remus managed to pull himself into a sitting position, from which he stared at them in amazement for several seconds before gathering his wits and congratulating them. For her part Tonks remained lying on her back with her arms folded across her bare midsection and her eyes closed. At length she opened them, looked up into a pair of innocent smiles, and groaned. Her response was short and to the point.

"I hate you Harry Potter."

the two teens couldn't hold back any longer and burst into laughter, which was quickly joined by the good-natured Tonks, and eventually also by the normally more somber Remus. At that point the throng of cheering students reached them, now that Flitwick had taken down the shield barrier. Amidst all of the congratulations and back pounding, the two young leaders of the light side shared a smile, knowing that they had made a statement. They intended to win this fight.

The four muggleborns, Justin, Dean, Colin, and Dennis, were particularly impressed with the squadron of starfighters, so Harry gave them each one of the remaining models as a souvenir. Hermione reminded them that the transfiguration would not be permanent, but that they could use them to practice their own transfiguration skills. With all the revelry it was soon decided that a celebration feast was in order, and Minnie enthusiastically went about preparing a sumptuous meal, commenting happily that it had been years since there had been a dinner party at Potter Manor. Dobby, who had been one of the spectators at the duel, insisted on being allowed to help. After a quick negotiation, Minnie permitted him to assist her, but made it clear who was in charge. Hermione noted with interest the way Dobby curbed his normally over-the-top helpfulness and deferred to her. It was an insight into the house elf hierarchy that she had not previously witnessed.

During the feast, Moody insisted on using the duel as a teaching opportunity, and Hermione was all too willing to accommodate him. She commented on several aspects of her plan, from keeping your opponent off balance by doing the unexpected, to the importance of nonverbal spells, to the use of short-range apparation in battle. She also touched on how inappropriate robes were in a combat setting. Along those lines, she noted to herself with amusement that several of the girls had paid close attention to the alterations Harry had made to Tonks' clothing, and suspected that cropped tops would soon be a preferred item in the exercise sessions. When she began to lecture on the applications of transfiguration in combat, many in her audience were beginning to get restless.

They were all rescued by Fred, who called out, in a perfect deadpan voice, "Yeah, my favorite part was when Hermione introduced them to the birds and the bees."

This effectively brought the lesson to a hilarious halt. It also may have set a Hogwarts record for simultaneous spit takes during a meal.

-ooOoo-

In the general conversation after the party Hermione spotted McGonagall involved in what appeared to be a serious conversation with her parents. Just as she approached them, they each reached out and shook hands with the stern professor, and then turned to smile at her.

"Miss Granger, please allow me to introduce you to our two new Muggle Studies professors," announced the headmistress.

"You ... what ... how ...?" Hermione stammered as her parents laughed while looking immensely pleased with themselves.

"Why Miss Granger, it was your suggestion after all that I appoint someone with more knowledge about the muggle world. Who better than the muggle parents of one of my most distinguished students?" McGonagall answered while permitting herself the smallest of smiles. "As for how, they will be able to access the castle in the same manner as parents of muggleborn students have always done for graduation ceremonies. The Hogwarts headmaster or headmistress can create charmed medallions that negate the muggle repelling charms."

"Oh yeah, I remember reading about that in *Hogwarts, A History*," sounded Harry's voice as he came up behind Hermione." She whirled around to face him with a look of disbelief, only to see the grin on his face and realize he had been having a go at her.

"Oh, you ..." she sputtered and folded her arms across her chest in a huff. She quickly gave it up though, and joined in the general excitement and congratulations.

"Now we'll be able to keep an eye on you two this year and make sure you don't get yourselves into any trouble," smirked Dan.

Hermione managed to pull herself together enough to give him the appropriate teenage daughter response – a sigh, an exaggerated eye roll, and an exasperated, "Oh Dad!"

-ooOoo-

The last week of the summer the PDA expanded to take in four new members – Lisa Turpin and Su Li from Ravenclaw and Tracey Davis and Daphne Greengrass from Slytherin. It was a testament to Harry's leadership and everyone's dedication to the task before them that the Slytherin pair was accepted without dissent. It also helped that Ron, the most outspoken anti-Slytherin in the PDA, kept his opinions to himself and welcomed them enthusiastically. The enthusiasm with which Daphne returned his welcome certainly raised some eyebrows, however, and several of the males were overheard muttering about how some guys had all the luck.

The newcomers were integrated into the teams reasonably well. Lisa and Su naturally joined the Ravenclaw group, bringing their membership to six, with three of each gender. Harry was reluctant to split up Daphne and Tracey, so they joined with the other girls that hung around Ron to bring that group up to six as well. Lavender, Susan, and Hannah were not thrilled about the new competition from Daphne, but all of them thought that Tracey was a good addition. She served sort of as a housemother, keeping the other girls on task, which relieved Hermione greatly. Even though Ron trained with this group, he was officially part of what all of the students called the Ministry team – the six that had fought the Death Eaters at the Ministry of Magic. This was clearly the number one team, and even without Harry and Hermione participating could best any of the other teams in the exercises.

Harry and Hermione were quite satisfied with their final groups. All five were now at full strength with six members each. The Ministry team, the graduate team, and the Ravenclaw team were mixed gender, and they also had an all male and an all female team. For training exercises involving mixed gender pairings, these two teams combined. The PDA was gradually turning into an imposing fighting force.

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Dan Granger had been keeping himself busy thinking of ways that muggle items could be of use to his children in their battle. (He had long since taken to thinking of Harry as a son.) When Hermione had told him about the high intensity light spell, he had responded that muggles could make some pretty intense lights too. Unfortunately, they couldn't think of any way to use that information for defensive purposes. The problem was that muggles couldn't see Dementors, so wouldn't know when to set off a flare. They did contact Kingsley Shacklebolt to pass this information on to the Prime Minister for possible use by British security forces.

Dan did find some photocells in a science supply catalog that they used to measure the intensity of the students' *Solarus* spells. They determined that welding goggles were indeed strong enough to protect one's eyesight from the spells, although Harry's spell was bright enough to make the test subject see spots for several minutes afterward even with the goggles. Harry sent several pairs of welding goggles to Fred and George with the suggestion that they see if they could incorporate something like them into a shield hat.

Another possibility that occurred to Dan was sniper rifles. Some internet research had turned up information on the Barret M82 high caliber sniper rifle. The key feature was that it had a range of 1800 meters (a little more than a mile). It also fired a .50 caliber bullet that would pierce light armor, and presumably also troll hide. When he shared this information with Harry and Hermione, he suggested that if they knew an attack was imminent, they could set up sniper positions well out of sight of the enemy, who wouldn't have any idea of what was hitting them. Harry and Hermione immediately realized that the towers of the castle would be an ideal site to deploy weapons of this type. And they fully expected Hogwarts to be attacked sometime in the next year.

And so it happened that at the end of August Dan and Emma took one of the most bizarre trips of their lives. On Monday afternoon (8/25) they departed for Mexico, where they spent three days at a resort near Tulum, returning to Britain on Friday (8/29). Actually, Emma spent three days at the resort, while Dan spent three days there and two days in Texas. Meanwhile Harry and Hermione took a slightly longer trip, leaving on Sunday, spending five full days in Mexico, and returning the following Saturday with their flight actually arriving early Sunday morning. In fact, they spent five days on the beach and five days visiting their Mayan friends, while Harry spent an additional two days in Texas with Dan.

When the two men with English accents purchased half a dozen sniper rifles at the gun show, along with an entire crate full of ammunition, it naturally caught the attention of the American officials from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. As expected, a check with the FBI and Scotland Yard showed that they had been using false identities and a dummy bank account, although the account had more than enough funds to cover their purchase. The two men seemingly vanished into thin air, and the frustrated officers eventually moved on to other cases. Of course, it is rather difficult to track a shipment of rifles when they leave the country two days before they were purchased, hidden in a magical trunk being carried by a man under an invisibility cloak.

After a long bus ride into Mexico, Dan watched in amazement as Harry took the trunk and disappeared, only to reappear seconds later with his Firebolt. Dan was thrilled with the subsequent ride across the Yucatan jungle, just skimming the treetops at better than 100 miles per hour. (Harry later told Hermione that he probably could have side-alonged Dan, but he thought that he might enjoy the broom ride. Hermione agreed.) He was also fascinated when they stopped for a rest break and Harry transformed into a jaguar and ran around to stretch out and get a little exercise. If anyone had bothered to check, Dan was sitting at a pool with Emma and Harry was lying on a beach with Hermione at the time the guns were being purchased in Texas.

Harry and Hermione timed their flights so that they left London at 9:00 AM on one Sunday (8/24) and arrived back at 6:00 AM the following Sunday (8/31). After clearing customs they used the time turner once more and ended up leaving the airport on the original Sunday exactly one hour after they had arrived. It had to be one of the most efficient holidays in history. The following day (8/25) the pair stopped off to see her parents just before they left for their flight, and then came by again on Saturday (8/30) after they had returned. Hermione slipped the time turner over Dan and Harry's heads, they said goodbye to Emma, and the three of them disappeared, going back to Monday (8/25). Dan thus spent the week at the training site instructing the DA members in the proper use of the sniper rifles while simultaneously vacationing with his wife in Mexico, and purchasing the same rifles in Texas. On Sunday morning (8/31) Dan rejoined her, that afternoon they attended Remus and Tonks's wedding, and that evening they took a portkey to Hogwarts to take up their new teaching positions. Meanwhile Harry and Hermione were simultaneously in Mexico, Cambridge, and at Potter Manor (with Harry also in Texas for two days).

For some reason, in later years whenever Hermione attempted to explain this sequence of events to anyone they always left holding their heads in their hands and muttering about a headache.

-ooOoo-

There was quite a mixed reaction to the Barret sniper rifles among the members of the DA. The wizards and witches who had had little or no contact with the non-magical world mostly regarded them as interesting curiosities, and had little interest in learning how to use one. On the opposite extreme, Justin Finch-Fletchly had hunted with his father, who belonged to an exclusive hunt club, and was very familiar with firearms. He took to the sniper rifle immediately and became very proficient with it in short order. He also appreciated more than any of the others the penetrating ability of the .50 caliber ammunition. Harry showed some potential with the rifles, but didn't pursue it since he knew that he would have a bigger role in any battle than sitting up in a sniper nest. Dean Thomas was also interested in the role of the sniper, and with a lot of practice would eventually become almost as good as Justin. The real surprise was Ginny.

Even though she had never been exposed to any kind of muggle weapon, let alone a high powered rifle, the small girl took to the shooting with a passion, and turned out to be a superb marksman. Before the end of the week she was routinely nailing one-meter targets from a distance of 1000 meters or more. The problem was that the 30+ lb rifle was quite a bit for her to lug around. But Dan pointed out that his intention was to pair the students in sniper teams, with one shooter and one spotter, who would also carry the ammunition. Neville immediately volunteered to be Ginny's spotter and said he would carry both the rifle and the ammunition. Given that he was the strongest of all the students, Dan went along with this pairing. Seamus was paired with Dean and Ernie agreed to be Justin's spotter. The DA now had three sniper teams. But unknown to anyone but himself, Dan planned that he and Emma would be a fourth team. He had finally found a way to become involved in the final battle and he intended to make the most of it.

-ooOoo-



The wedding of Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks was held on the final day of summer vacation, August 31, at Potter Manor. Harry had been quietly licensed to make portkeys by the Department of Magical Transportation (they had seen the consequences of turning him down once and had no desire to repeat the experience) and he created them for all of the guests, thereby preserving the secrecy of the location. Most of the guests did not even know that they were in Potter Manor, as Minnie had cleverly disguised the ballroom where the event was being held and removed any family heirlooms that might identify it. Once again she graciously allowed Dobby to assist her with the preparations.

Despite the relative secrecy, there were a good number of attendees. About a dozen Aurors, including Head Auror Robards and DMLE Director Hammer were invited, as were the entire Order of the Phoenix. The whole Weasley family save Charlie, who was still in St. Mungo's, and Bill and Fleur, in Albania, were on hand, as were selected other families of Hogwarts students including the Lovegoods and Longbottoms. Remus had asked Harry and Hermione to stand up for them, and Tonks had lined up Hestia Jones and Kingsley Shacklebolt. The ceremony was much less elaborate than that of Bill and Fleur, but Hermione thought that it was moving just the same. She also noticed that Harry could not keep his eyes off of her for the entire ceremony. Tonks had admired the halter style gown Hermione had worn to Bill and Fleur's wedding and so it doubled as her bridesmaid gown, and they ordered Hestia a matching one in a shade of violet. Harry also wore his dress robes from the previous wedding, since they had already been selected to match Hermione's robes.

During the reception Harry spent most of his time with Hermione at the head table, but agreed to dance with several others, including Tonks of course, as well as Ginny and Luna. Likewise Hermione danced with Remus, and also Ron and Neville. She observed that Molly looked very happy while she was dancing with Ron and Harry was dancing with Ginny.

"Don't worry about it," Ron leaned forward and whispered in her ear when he saw what was bothering her. "She'll come to grips with it eventually." But Hermione noticed something else. Ginny was clinging to Harry during their dance, seemingly in desperation. Harry was trying his best to calm her down, but to little avail. Hermione reflected that Ginny had not seemed to be herself for some time. Later she asked Harry if he had said anything to her.

"I asked her what was wrong and she first said it was nothing, she was fine." Hermione raised an eyebrow and Harry gave a small chuckle. "Yeah, that's what I told her – I've used that line enough myself to know when it doesn't mean anything. Anyway," he continued, "eventually she admitted that things have been really stressful at home. She's still very worried about her mum and dad."

Hermione supposed that that might be true, but she wasn't entirely convinced. Molly's mental condition was bothersome, to be sure, and Arthur was still incapacitated. He was now getting around on what appeared to be a modified flying carpet crossed with a divan chair. When she and Harry managed to get him alone and talk with him he seemed to be in good spirits, and thanked them for everything they had done for his family. When Harry inquired about his prognosis, he reported that the Healers had explained to him that nerve restoration was much more complicated than bone restoration. There were Healers working on the problem, but since there wasn't much demand, there being relatively few wizards in his condition, it was a lower priority. Hermione knew immediately that by the next day Gringotts would be informing St. Mungo's that a new source of funding had arisen for research into this particular medical condition, with the donor insisting on it being of the highest priority.

During the course of their making the rounds at the reception they were pulled aside by Mad-Eye Moody, who passed them some urgent information. It was a warning from Viktor Krum that Voldemort had successfully recruited a large batch of new Death Eaters from the continent, including quite a few Durmstrang graduates. Viktor had risked his life to get this information to them, and had disappeared within the last few days. Hermione gasped at the possible loss of her good friend and Harry stepped up behind her and put his arms around her in support.

"The last message he got out," Moody said in a low voice, "was that it looked like a major attack was being planned for any time now. We think it might be timed to disrupt the opening of the school tomorrow, so be alert."

"Constant Vigilance!" the pair responded softly but firmly, and Moody nodded his approval before limping away. Hermione noted that the Aurors among the guests were discretely taking their leave.

Harry caught Ron's eye and nodded to a balcony. In a few minutes Ron joined the couple where they stood, looking out over the peaceful grounds of the estate. Hermione had her arms crossed and was hugging herself nervously, while Harry stood behind her running his hands up and down her arms to calm her down. They quickly relayed Moody's message and then they all fell silent, pondering the looming assault.

"One last golden day of summer, I reckon," Ron commented as he leaned forward, resting his hands on the carved stone railing while watching the shadows lengthening across the lawn of the estate from the sun hanging low in the western sky.

"It has been quite a summer, hasn't it?" Hermione allowed, trying to shake off the foreboding feeling.

"Yeah. Just how long was this summer for you guys anyway?" Ron asked, turning back to them.

Harry screwed up his face in thought and scratched his head, but Hermione had been keeping track all along and had the answer instantly. "68 weeks for me, 74 for Harry."

"Blimey, that's ..."

"Almost 16 months for me, 17 months for Harry. Nearly a year and a half. Amazing, isn't it?"

Ron just shook his head. Then he looked up. So, your list that you showed us that first day. How did you do on it?"

Amazingly (at least to Ron; Harry was rarely amazed by anything Hermione did anymore) Hermione withdrew the battered piece of parchment from a hidden pocket in her bridesmaid robes and began to read:

"Let's see, **Find and destroy the Horcruxes** . Well, we got one, and Bill's working on the rest. As for the sub headings, **Go through any**

**materials Dumbledore may have left behind** – check.

**Research Horcrux creation and possible destruction using resources we haven't tried yet** – that's been taken care of. So the first item is under control."

She folded down the parchment and continued. "Next, **Destroy Voldemort** – well, obviously we haven't done that yet. But we're moving in that direction. With regard to these subheadings, **Train with Harry to learn more, and more powerful spells** – check.

**Look into ways of boosting magical power** – we've made a lot of progress there.

**Consult with Aurors, for example Moody, re battle tactics** – done that.

**Figure out what the power he knows not is** – well," she smiled up at Harry, "I think we have an idea."

She continued on down the list. "**Find a place to live and train after we leave Privet Drive** – I'd say we've certainly got that covered.

**Keep Harry focused and on track, but don't let him get discouraged.**" She paused and looked up at Harry with another smile. "How did I do dear?"

Harry grinned back at her. "You were fantastic." He leaned down to give her a kiss but was interrupted by Ron loudly clearing his throat. "You took care of **Make sure Harry takes some time to have fun and enjoy himself once in a while** pretty well too," Harry pointed out after giving Ron a mock glare.

Ron grimaced and shook his head again. "So, was that the last item on the list?"

Hermione turned around and beamed a brilliant smile at Harry, which he returned as his hands found their way to her waist and hers came up around his neck. "Not exactly." Without turning her head away from Harry she took her wand out and waved it over the parchment, canceling the charm that kept anyone other than Harry or herself from reading the real last item, then floated it over to Ron as she replaced her hand around Harry's neck.

Ron glanced down at the parchment and saw the words fade into view. After a second another loud groan told her that Ron had finished reading the last item.

Help Harry get over Ginny and fall in love with me

"I can't believe you wrote that down," Ron protested.

"Well, you know me, Ron, I like to plan everything out," Hermione teased.

"I'd like to point out that she's done a smashingly good job on that one," Harry said with as straight a face as he could manage.

After a nice hug, and respecting Ron's sensibilities by refraining from a kiss, Hermione pulled away and turned toward her red-haired friend. "Do you want to see my new list?"

"So what's this one called, 'Hermione's Plan Part 2'?" Ron joked.

"Sure, why not," Hermione bantered in return as she pulled out another piece of parchment. On either side of her, Harry and Ron leaned forward to see what she had come up with this time.

Finish with the Horcruxes – Bill

Smoke old Snake-Face's Arse

Graduate Hogwarts

Get Married

Live Happily Ever After

Harry wrapped his arm around her and pulled her against his side. "Sounds good to me."

Ron made an unintelligible noise that Hermione took for general agreement. She wrapped her other arm around him and the trio stood there in silence, watching the sun set, prepared for the challenges of the coming year.

**End of Part 1**

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## Hermione's Plan An Eventful Beginning

### Chapter 23, An Eventful Beginning

If anyone had been paying attention on that morning in Kings Cross (which due to the Notice-Me-Not charms no one was), they would have seen two teens appear without a sound next to Platforms Nine and Ten. Instantly on the alert, the pair scanned the station carefully before taking hold of each other's hands and disappearing again through the wall between the two platforms.

It was unusual, Hermione thought to herself, not to be here with the Weasley family. For the past three years she had been staying with them at the end of the summer, and the year before that she had met them here. Apparently Harry was having similar thoughts.

"It sure is different not to be doing this at the last minute," he commented. "Rushing around everywhere, racing through the barrier with no time to spare, accompanied by a lot of redheads." They shared a grin that vanished all too quickly as they recalled the events of the previous night. At least none of the Weasleys had been seriously injured in the attacks.

The couple cut an imposing figure as they strode confidently down the platform. Both were dressed in new robes, tailor made of the finest fabric. They were also perfectly fitted – gone were the loose, shapeless robes of their early years. Many heads would be turned by the muscular chest and shoulders of the Head Boy and the newly revealed curves of the Head Girl. Both sets were black trimmed with Gryffindor scarlet and gold, and Harry's also featured the Potter family crest. He had wanted Hermione to wear the Potter crest as well but she demurred, telling him she preferred to wait until they were actually married. Their Head Boy and Head Girl badges were also prominently displayed.

As they made their way alongside the great scarlet steam engine the conversations around them, which had been muted to begin with, stopped as people turned to look at them. Glancing around, they noted the heavy Auror presence and Harry nodded to a few of them that he recognized. All of the red-robed Aurors, even the ones they didn't know, nodded back respectfully. There was not a single Auror on the force who didn't know who Harry Potter and Hermione Granger were, or just how much they owed to the young couple. Some even came up and thanked them for everything they had done, and pulled open their robes slightly to reveal the dragonhide armour that had become standard issue for the wizarding police force due to Harry's efforts.

There were not many people on the platform yet as it was still early. The new Head Boy and Head Girl were taking their responsibilities seriously, and had come an hour before the scheduled departure time to make sure everything went smoothly. More than that, though, they knew that their mere presence would be reassuring to the families who were nervously sending off their children to a place that they hoped would be safe from Death Eater attacks like the ones that had occurred last night. They split up to go and greet every family, trying to reassure them that their decision was the right one. While they thought it was likely that Hogwarts would be attacked eventually, they were hopeful that most of the students would be safe in the castle, at least safer than they would be if their homes were attacked.

Hermione noticed as Harry stopped by a young girl who appeared to be by herself, with a tight hold on a new trunk. She smiled as he stooped down to her level to talk with her, and watched as he explained something to her, then gestured toward the train. Finally, he stood again and pointed over at Hermione and the girl looked in her direction and nodded with a determined look on her face. Taking her hand, he led her over to another family who was also there with their obviously first-year daughter, and left them together. Then he walked over to where Hermione was standing. Over his shoulder she could see the first young girl's eyes widen as her new friend excitedly told her the identity of her benefactor.

Before he could say anything, Hermione spoke up. "Let me guess – muggleborn first year, right?" Harry merely grinned at her and nodded. She gave him a quick hug and they broke apart to resume their circulating.

As 11:00 approached the crowds grew heavier, and the Heads began to urge the students to board the train. If there were an attack, the Aurors would be able to respond more easily if the platform were clear, and the students would be better protected inside the train's compartments. At 10:45 Harry climbed up onto a trunk to make such an announcement. He added that the prefect meeting would be delayed as they had some other business to take care of first. Nineteen of the onlooking students exchanged knowing glances, being fully aware as to the nature of that meeting. As usual, the Weasleys were among the last to arrive. Hermione hustled Ron and Ginny aboard while Harry submitted to a hug and a plea to take care of himself from Mrs. Weasley. After one final check and a wave at the Aurors, who were clearly relieved that an attack had not materialized, he signaled the engineer and boarded the train, where Hermione awaited him in the doorway.

The couple slowly made their way the length of the train, working their way through the excited students, all of whom wanted to get a look at the pair who had created such a stir during the summer. After accepting scores of congratulations and enduring dozens of requests from squealing girls to see her ring, they finally arrived at the Heads' compartment, where the PDA members awaited them. By the time Harry and Hermione entered the compartment, everyone had figured out that one of them was missing – Neville Longbottom. There was a loud buzz of voices as those who knew what had happened hastened to fill in those that didn't, but it quickly quieted as Harry moved to the center of the compartment.

"First of all, for those of you who don't know, Neville is going to be OK." An audible sigh of relief swept through the group, and a few of the girls discreetly wiped away a tear or two. "He's in St. Mungo's right now, but he is going to be transferred to the Hogwarts infirmary sometime today." Harry permitted himself a small smile as he continued. "They didn't want to do it at first but some of the healers there owed me a favor." This was

greeted by a snort from Ron, which was quickly cut off by an elbow from his sister. Then they both nodded gratefully to Harry and Hermione in acknowledgement of how that favor had been earned and he continued on to recount the events of the previous night ...

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Bong! Bong! Bong! The crashing sound of the alarm had Harry and Hermione leaping from the bed before they were even awake. Instantly they realized that this was the attack Moody had warned them about. Hastily pulling on their dragonhide armor, they raced down to the control room where the detection instruments were installed. Minnie was already there, wringing her hands as she tried to figure out how she could help. Harry stopped to tell her to have refreshments on hand for whoever wanted anything, and also to have medical supplies ready. Hermione waved her wand over the ward detector, cycling it through its preset locations.

"Hogwarts is OK ... my house is fine ... here we go – Longbottom Manor is under attack, also the Lovegood house. There's no sign of any activity at any of your properties ... wait, one more – uh oh, they're finally hitting the twins' shop. No telling where else on Diagon Alley might be involved. That looks like all of it." Harry joined her as a series of thumps signaled the first of the PDA members' arrival.

"OK, let's assume that the Diagon Alley response team can handle things there. We're not getting any distress calls on the pendants yet, just the attack alert," Harry announced as Ron, Ginny, and Padma hurried over. "We do have emergency calls from Neville and Luna. What are you getting on the dark detector?"

Hermione watched as an inky black puff of smoke blew out of the delicate silver instrument. "Oh my God!" Hermione gasped. "The Longbottoms' location is nearly off scale!" She shot a frightened look at Harry. "Harry, he must be there himself."

"Come on, Neville, bail out," pleaded Harry while he watched the ward detector continue to cycle. "It's not worth sacrificing your life for."

"Longbottom wards are down!" shouted Ron, looking over his shoulder.

"Bollocks!" cried Harry, before he turned to face them. "OK, here's the way we'll handle it. Hermione and I will apparate to Neville's location. The anti-disapparation wards were just blown away along with everything else. That had to really weaken him, so maybe we can take him by surprise and keep him off balance long enough to get Neville and his gran out. Ron and Ginny, you two know the woods around the Lovegoods' the best. Apparate there and assess the situation from a distance. Padma, you're in charge here," he instructed as Ernie Macmillan popped in. "As soon as some more members get here, form a reserve force. We'll all keep in contact and let you know if we need help. Keep an eye out for further attacks, too."

His eyes darted around the room as he paused briefly. Hermione knew he was frantically working the scenario in his mind, trying to think if there was anything else he should do. "Get a floo connection open to Chief Auror Robards, but don't have him send any Aurors until we report back with a better feel for the situations," he added quickly. And remember," he finished as he faced at his three best friends, "we don't need any more dead heroes." By now Justin and Dean had arrived and Padma waved them over to join her and Ernie as the four rescuers vanished from sight.

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Harry let Hermione describe the situation they found at Longbottom Manor. "We apparated into the drawing room, keeping ourselves disillusioned," she began. "We heard screaming from the front hall and arrived there just in time to see Voldemort disappear. We assume that he decided that the situation was under control and he left to return to his hideout and recover, since it would have taken an extraordinary amount of power to get those wards down that fast." She paused and looked around, receiving nods from everyone that they understood.

"Mrs. Longbottom was unconscious on the floor with two Death Eaters standing over her. There were two more across the hall along with Belatrix Lestranger, who had just put Neville under the Cruciatus curse." Her fists clenched tightly at this statement, and a wave of magic rolled off of her, causing the nearest students to stagger back slightly. Harry immediately reached out and put a hand on her shoulder to calm her.

She took a deep breath and continued. "We first took out the pair by Mrs. Longbottom with silent stunners. Then we each threw a pair of *Reducto*'s at the other three Death Eaters by Neville, two hexes to each side of him. That knocked two of them out of the fight, but Belatrix managed to duck out of the way. Then she turned to take us on ..."

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"Well, well, well, what have we here?" came the annoying voice of the witch Harry hated most. "What a pleasant surprise. Now I have the opportunity to do what I didn't get a chance to do a year ago. And I even get to make you suffer by taking your Mudblood ..." she didn't get a chance to finish her vile insults when she was staggered backward by a wandless bludgeoning spell. Instantly she abandoned her taunts and hurled a nasty looking curse at Harry, which Hermione blocked with a quick flick of her wand. The evil witch's eyes widened slightly at the ease with which her young opponent had stopped her attack. Meanwhile, Harry was scanning the room and the stairwell for unseen foes, not wanting to encounter any unpleasant surprises. As long as no one hit them from behind, the two of them would be able to take Belatrix.

"Look at me Potter!" Belatrix shrieked, as though insulted that he would even dream of ignoring her. Her wand was a blur as she sent a bright purple flame his way, followed by two more bursts of silver light. Hermione knew very well what that purple flame could do, and she blocked it forcefully as Harry ducked out of the way of the other two hexes and came up firing two bone-breaking curses of his own, while sending another wandless bludgeoning hex. Belatrix blocked the curses but was knocked from her feet by the bludgeoning hex. She sprang back up immediately and threw three more curses at Hermione before turning to face Harry again. Hermione's shield barely held under the impact as she braced herself, then prepared to launch her own attack.

But Bellatrix had overlooked one very important player in this contest. She had held Neville under the Cruciatus curse for a good twenty seconds, which should have left him a quivering mass of fried nerve endings. But Neville was no longer the clumsy frightened boy she had last seen at the Department of Mysteries. He was now a superbly conditioned, mature, confident wizard with enough strength of both mind and body to pull himself

up to his knees, determined to make his presence count.

*"Reducto!"* She never saw it coming. The explosion hex blasted into her back, shredding her spinal cord and paralyzing her instantly. She collapsed to the floor, unable to control any of her limbs as her wand clattered uselessly away. It took only a few seconds for her body functions to shut down, and she stared at them with hate-filled eyes, unable even to give vent to any final insults. As Hermione stood over her to make sure she was finally gone, Harry kept an eye on the doors to the other rooms.

"Two more ... upstairs ..." Neville gasped, having sunk back to the floor. He had put all the power he could muster into his hex and was fading quickly. "After ... jewelry ... Don't know ... more outside ..."

Harry nodded to Hermione and she quickly contacted Padma for backup. In a few seconds Dean, Seamus, Ernie, and Justin appeared while Harry had created a portkey to St. Mungo's. Neville leaned his head back, a grim but satisfied expression on his face. The two Gryffindors picked up their roommate and his grandmother, who was unconscious but breathing normally, touched the portkey, and the four disappeared in a swirl of color. Harry instructed Ernie and Justin to secure the lower floor and try to determine what enemies still needed to be dealt with outside the mansion. Then Harry and Hermione disillusioned themselves and went off to dispatch the two remaining Death Eaters in the house.

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As Hermione finished up the tale of the battle at Longbottom Manor, Harry nodded to Luna and Ginny to relate their tale. The battle at the Lovegood home was considerably less dramatic than that at Longbottom Manor, although quite a bit more entertaining. Luna's father was evidently one of Fred and George's best customers, and the approach to their home was saturated with traps and tricks of all kinds. Mr. Lovegood had set up a safe room/control bunker that included magical screens that showed what was happening in all four directions, with charms that would set off snares and explosions with the touch of a wand.

In no time at all the ten Death Eaters that had assaulted his home were pranked, stunned, upended, transformed into a variety of animals, and immobilized in rapidly solidifying swamps. Ginny and Ron had apparated into a clearing in the woods where Ginny and Luna used to play when they were younger, and approached the house while disillusioned for a better look. They were just in time to see a giant chicken that was running from a flying flaming snake spitting red and gold sparks take a tumble into an oozing mass of tar. From their hidden position, Ginny and Ron cautiously moved around and systematically stunned and tied up all the Death Eaters that were caught in the various traps. When the noise and shouting had settled down, Ginny contacted Luna with her pendant and received a signal back that everything inside the house was fine as well, while Ron reported in to Padma.

Now that they knew that the attacks on the homes of their two teammates had been repulsed without major damage, and that Neville would make a full recovery, the other students were able to appreciate the hilarity of the situation at the Lovegoods' and unrestrained laughter filled the crowded compartment.

Harry waited until the mirth had mostly died away before calling for their attention once more. "The attack on Diagon Alley was considerably more damaging," he reported solemnly. "Fortunately no one on our side was seriously injured. George came over early this morning before we came to the station and filled us in on what happened there." ...

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The six PDA residents of Diagon Alley had set up a rotation to stand watch and that night was Katie and Lee's turn. Lee had finished his first shift and was now sacked out on the cot behind her as Katie gazed through the window. They were set up in an abandoned store across the street from Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, and the window was charmed for one-way viewing. As was by now standard practice, Katie was wearing her dragonhide armor and her shield hat, which was currently on the disillusionment setting. As she scanned the dark, deserted street before her Katie found herself thinking about her life.

Only a year ago she had been about to return to Hogwarts for her final year, with NEWT's and quidditch her primary concern. Harry had been named quidditch captain and she knew he would be relying on her as the other experienced member of the team for her guidance and suggestions. And just maybe, that might be the year he finally noticed her. Cho was finally out of the picture, he hadn't shown interest in anyone else, as his quidditch teammate for five years she had spent more time with him than any other girl (except Hermione, but she seemed to be settled firmly in the best friend category), she would be working closely with him and ... She shook her head. It had never happened. On the first Hogsmeade weekend she had been given the cursed necklace and nearly died, and by the time she recovered and came back to the castle his mind was elsewhere – on Ginny as it turned out. Even so, nearly losing her life had changed her perspective on things, and schoolgirl fantasies about a cute green-eyed boy weren't quite as important anymore. And then Dumbledore had been killed and the likelihood of surviving to adulthood could no longer be taken for granted.

Even so, when she had been contacted by Fred and George last month she hadn't hesitated to throw her lot in with the Chosen One in his efforts to build a force that would resist the attacks of the dark wizards who were terrorizing the country. As a Gryffindor there could be no other possible response. So here she was, a member of a vigilante group known to its members as Potter's Army, waiting for a chance to strike back.

She was abruptly jerked from her thoughts by a staccato series of pops signaling the apparation of a large group of wizards. Instantly she pressed a button next to her that would alert Fred and George in their flat above the store, then touched her pendant to send a signal to Potter Manor, sounding the alarm. After quickly rousing Lee she carefully watched as the Death Eaters gathered together in front of the twins' shop and raised their wands. She tensed, waiting for precisely the right moment. She couldn't act too soon and risk tipping them off. A dozen voices shouted out the explosion hex, and a dozen streaks of golden light arced out from the wands of the Death Eaters. The defensive wards on the store flared bright red and the hexes dissipated in a shower of sparks. A second volley caused the wards to flicker, and the large sign hanging above the doorway splintered into a hundred pieces. Now was the time. She tapped a set of runes next to her with her wand and the stores on both sides of the joke shop and across the street glowed with a silver sheen, just as the third round of explosion hexes impacted the structure under assault.

Over the past few weeks the twins had been quietly visiting their neighbors and installing protective wards at no charge. In addition to the standard impervious and flame-suppressing charms they had added a complicated shield ward that was linked to the rune set that Katie had just activated. The purpose of all these protective spells had not been to shield the stores from Death Eater attacks. It had been to shelter them from the twins' deadly counterattack.

As soon as the explosion hexes ripped through the doors and windows of the seemingly harmless joke shop they triggered a thunderous blast that blew out the entire front wall and ripped through the night. Across the street, Katie and Lee had switched their hats to the shield setting in anticipation, but the shock wave still knocked them off their feet. The massive explosion disintegrated everything in its path until it reached the heavily shielded buildings, then rebounded and hurled the remnants of its destruction down the Alley. It would take the Aurors several days before they finished identifying all of the body parts.

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While all of the students present had heard about the attack, and knew that it had been turned back, few were aware of the extent of the bloodshed and destruction. Harry grimly reported that the building had been completely destroyed. Fred and George had portkeyed out as soon as the shooting started, and had removed most of their stock in advance, leaving only the jokes and pranks that were on display. Everyone was cheered, though, by the revelation that they would be opening a new branch in a month in Hogsmeade, at the site of the former Zonko's joke shop.

Harry then called on Padma to report. The petite dark-skinned Ravenclaw stepped forward with a calm efficiency and detailed the activity of the support group. After Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny had left, she immediately contacted Chief Auror Robards and relayed Harry's message. While he had summoned a strike force of his own, Seamus, Colin, and Dennis had arrived, followed closely by Hannah and Susan. She had sent the older two Gryffindors and the two Hufflepuff males to Longbottom Manor, then coordinated the counterattack with Robards. As soon as Harry and Hermione had reported the capture of the remaining Death Eaters inside the mansion, they opened fire on the ones outside from upper floor windows while Justin and Ernie did the same from the lower floor. While the Death Eater's attention was occupied an Auror strike team took them by surprise from behind. The final tally from the Longbottom attack was six Death Eaters dead, including Bellatrix Lestrange, and nine captured, while Neville and his gran were both injured but expected to make full recoveries.

Meanwhile, Anthony, Michael, and Terry had arrived and she put them along with Colin and Dennis on the Diagon Alley reserve, sending Susan and Hannah to back up Ginny and Ron when they called for non-emergency assistance. She also informed Robards of the situation at the Lovegoods, but he had already received a floo call from Mr. Lovegood and a second team of Aurors was dispatched to take the Death Eaters there into custody. The tally from that site was ten more Death Eaters captured, with no casualties. She had made the decision to keep Parvati and Lavender with her to help track the battles and coordinate the response. Meanwhile the situation at Diagon Alley had turned out not to require further support, and by the time Katie reported back in Robards had already received several floo calls about that attack from other sources, as well as half a dozen owls. It was too soon for an official count on the number of Death Eater casualties there, but Katie had estimated about a dozen attackers. There were no survivors.

This had a sobering effect on the listening students, and no one spoke until Padma turned to her friend Lisa and three other girls. "I'm sorry I didn't use you four anywhere. It's just that ..."

"Don't worry about it," Tracey interrupted, motioning to herself, Daphne, Su and Lisa. "You're right, we haven't been training as long as the rest of you. You made the right decision."

"Most of the rest of us didn't see any action either," Michael pointed out. "From everything you guys just said, besides Harry and Hermione, only Ron, Ginny, Justin, and Ernie even cast a spell."

"And Neville," added Dean soberly, recalling the pain-wracked body of the friend he had carried into St. Mungo's. A hush fell over the compartment as everyone's thoughts turned to their fallen comrade.

"And if it was up to me it wouldn't even have been that many," Harry responded quietly. "We're not in this for glory. The fewer people who have to fight the better. But it's good to know that you were all trained and ready to go if you had been needed. If you never need to use that training in a battle that would be perfect as far as I'm concerned."

There were general nods of agreement, some relieved and some reluctant. Padma started to move back into the crowd when Harry grabbed her arm. Giving her a smile and an affectionate squeeze he added, "Good work Padma. You did a great job at keeping track of everything. That's important too." Padma's deep brown eyes went wide for a moment, and a barely detectable flush briefly tinted the almond skin of her face, before she returned a shy smile and mumbled her thanks. Hermione managed to keep her expression neutral, but noticed Dean catch Seamus's eye in the back of the crowd, where he nodded over at Parvati, who had a frown on her face. The two Gryffindors exchanged knowing grins, then Seamus saw Hermione watching them and gave her a wink.

Oblivious to all of this interplay, Harry attempted to wrap up the meeting. "The bottom line is, Voldemort lost somewhere between 35 and 40 more Death Eaters last night, but most importantly he lost his second in command. As far as we can tell, that's the last of his original inner circle. He's going to be furious, but there's not much he's going to be able to do about it for a while. The main way he's going to be able to strike back is with Dementor attacks, so continue to practice your Patronus charms. And I'm sure I don't have to point out who was attacked last night. They were all targeted because they've fought alongside me and stood up to him. Please make sure your families are doing everything possible to keep themselves safe." This plea was met by solemn nods of recognition from his listeners.

"Harry?" Ernie asked when he was finished. "What can we tell the other students?"

Harry exchanged a glance with Hermione and she stepped forward. "Tell them generally what happened, and that all the attacking Death Eaters were killed or captured, and that no one on our side was killed. Be sure to tell them that Neville was seriously injured but will be all right, but don't mention the Cruciatus curse. Also try not to let on exactly who was involved from our side or what spells we used." Everyone seemed satisfied with

that line of reasoning and they began to file out of the compartment as Hermione called out that the ones who were prefects should collect the other prefects from their houses and bring them back for the prefect meeting. A minute later she found herself alone with Harry in the compartment.

"Pretty smooth work there, Mr. Fanciable." Hermione teased. "You managed to charm an innocent first year and a 7th year Ravenclaw prefect within the span of an hour." What she considered to be his adorable flustered look appeared on Harry's face and he tried to stammer that he was only trying to be nice before Hermione let him off the hook.

"That's all right," she reassured him. "I think it's wonderful that you try to be nice to everyone. It's one of the things I love about you. You just have to get used to the fact that other girls find that as endearing as I do." She smiled at his relieved look and pulled him into a hug. Leaning back and looking up at him she gave him her pretend serious look. "Just remember who you're going home with at the end of the day."

"Not much chance of forgetting that, since we sleep in the same room," he pointed out with a grin.

"Convenient, isn't it?" she returned in a low voice as she pulled his head down to hers.

"Hey, no snogging in the Prefect's compartment," interrupted the voice of their best friend. "You know the rules."

Reluctantly the head students broke apart and a quizzical expression flickered across Harry's face. "There's a rule like that?"

Hermione instantly adopted her prim and proper prefect voice. "Section 5, part 2, paragraph 7 of the Prefects Handbook states that there shall be no inappropriate displays of affection by prefects while on duty, which by definition includes the Prefects' compartment of the Hogwarts Express."

She ignored the smug look on Ron's face as she continued. "However, Mr. Weasley, may I point out that while you are a prefect (which does not seem to have stopped you from violating any number of prefect standards during the past two years) Harry and I are not, and as Head Boy and Head Girl that rule does not necessarily apply to us."

Harry burst out laughing as Ron's mouth opened and closed soundlessly while Hermione shot him a triumphant look.

Hermione ran the prefect meeting flawlessly as Harry looked on, lending his silent, but not inconsiderable support. They first introduced the new prefects to everyone, which included Blaise Zabini and Tracey Davis who were taking Draco and Pansy's vacant Slytherin positions. The look she and Harry got from Tracey reaffirmed the other girl's pledge that she would keep close tabs on the Slytherin pretty boy and make sure he didn't cause any trouble. Hermione efficiently covered their expectations for the year and urged the prefects to take the lead in promoting inter-House cooperation. When she broke out the color-coded patrolling schedules all of the other prefects, but particularly those who didn't know her well, were amazed.

The rest of the ride passed uneventfully, except for a continuing stream of well-wishers and giggling girls, and eventually they arrived at Hogsmeade Station. After making sure all of the first years made their way to Hagrid's boats, and the rest of the students caught the thestral-drawn carriages, the tired head students settled into the last one and got in a bit of well-deserved cuddling on the way to the castle.

Joining their friends at the Gryffindor table, Harry and Hermione sat across from each other at the end next to the professors' table, with Ron next to Harry and Lavender claiming the spot next to Ron, followed by Parvati. Ginny sat down next to Hermione and Dean managed to snag the seat next to her, joined by Seamus. Everyone solemnly noted the absence of Neville and hoped he would be back soon.

In a departure from past years, McGonagall gestured at the tables and beverages appeared so that the students would have something to tide them over during the sorting, an action which Ron approved of wholeheartedly. Then the doors at the end of the Great Hall opened and Professor Flitwick, the new Assistant Headmaster, led in the procession of first years.

-ooOoo-

"Jordan, Jamie." About half way through the sorting the girl Harry had befriended at Kings Cross stepped forward, shyly but resolutely. There was a pause while the Sorting Hat mentally interrogated her.

"Gryffindor!"

As everyone at the Gryffindor table began clapping, the excited young witch hurried over to their table. As she passed by, Harry reached out an arm and gave her a little hug and smiled at her. The newcomer turned bright red and backed away starry-eyed, bumping into a student at the Ravenclaw table before she reached an open spot at the other end of the Gryffindor table and sat down in a daze. Immediately the other first and second years swarmed over her, asking how she knew the famous Harry Potter.

Harry turned back to find the exact same question on the faces of all his friends, while Flitwick called the name of the next student. He shrugged, "I met her at the station. She was by herself and I thought she looked like she could use some help. She's a muggleborn so I started explaining a few things. When I tried to tell her about the Hogwart's Express she politely informed me that she had already read all about it in *Hogwarts, A History*." He shot a quick grin at Hermione across the table and she beamed back at him and reached across to give his hand a squeeze. Meanwhile, the other upperclass students were looking down the table at the new student, who had recovered her composure and was now talking a mile a minute while explaining the situation to her classmates.

Ron held his head and moaned. "Crikes, we have a miniature Hermione on our hands." This pronouncement set off a burst of laughter from his end of the table. Unfortunately, it also caught Dean and Seamus with mouthfuls of pumpkin juice and the resulting spray sailed across the table. Of course, Lavender and Parvati were none too happy about this turn of events, since they were sitting across from the pair and ended up drenched. Hermione, hearing the commotion and the threats from her dormmates, turned her attention away from smiling affectionately at Harry, pulled her hand away from his and flicked her wand twice, restoring the irate girls' clothing to its original state. McGonagall briefly glared in their direction for not paying attention to the Sorting, and the Gryffindor table quieted down.

Gryffindor!"

Cheryl June, the other girl who Harry had introduced Jamie to at the train station hurried over to the Gryffindor table to more applause and joined her new friend. Both of them immediately whispered excitedly to each other, glancing down the table again at Harry. Hermione smirked at Harry and mouthed the word, *Fanciable* ! and was rewarded with a sheepish smile.

Soon the sorting was finished (with Slytherin getting considerably fewer students than the other three houses) and McGonagall stood to signal the beginning of the welcoming feast. When everyone's appetite had been fully sated (except possibly Ron's) the new headmistress began the announcements.

If anyone in the hall could have been said to need no introduction, it would be Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, but they were announced as Head Boy and Head Girl anyway, to loud applause. The returning faculty members were introduced first, and then the new appointments. Remus and Tonks were popular choices for Defense Against the Dark Arts, and the Gryffindors heartily approved the added declaration that Professor Lupin would be the new head of their house. Katherine Karl, an attractive middle aged witch who was the new Transfiguration professor, was also well-received. There was some surprise when it was announced that the bespectacled elderly wizard who had been teaching Muggle Studies was switching over to History of Magic but he was applauded for at least being alive. Similarly, the new caretaker was applauded for being 'not Filch'. But the real shock came with the next announcement.

"Finally," the headmistress said, "I am pleased to announce an appointment that is unprecedented for the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. We have decided to make major changes in our Muggle Studies courses, and the most visible manifestation of those changes is in our new instructors. For the first time ever we will have muggle instructors for this course. May I introduce the second of our new husband and wife instructional teams, Dan and Emma Granger.

There were a few seconds of stunned silence, but that was quickly broken by applause from the twenty some PDA members who had met the Grangers during their summer training. They were quickly joined by their housemates in a warm, but confused welcome. Over at the Gryffindor table Hermione was beaming with pride while Harry reached across the table to squeeze her hand before turning to grin up at his future in-laws.

The surprises continued when McGonagall revealed that effective immediately Muggle Studies would be required of all first and seventh year students, except for those students with at least one Muggle parent. (Or who were raised by muggles, Harry added in his head.) By way of explanation the headmistress stated that wizarding society had become too ignorant of the culture that they shared the country with, and that it was time to rectify this. This information was met with blank looks, if not open hostility, from most pureblooded students, as they didn't see how that ignorance was a problem. Many of them saw no reason why they needed to learn about an inferior culture. This failed to turn into open revolt largely due to the fact that the most respected seventh year students in each house also happened to be the students who knew the Grangers, and were willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. And the not incidental point that the new professors were the parents of the Head Girl, and no one wanted to get on *her* bad side (or her fiancé's!).

McGonagall's other announcements were better received. The year-level study lounges made a lot of sense to the students, most of whom were glad of the opportunity to interact more with members of other houses. The additional new quidditch teams for each house were a surprise that took some getting used to, but they soon warmed to that idea also. McGonagall's plan, worked out in consultation with Ron, was for each regular house team to play a double round robin schedule, and for the reserve teams to play each other once. The developmental squads would be limited to first and second years and would play scrimmages rather than formal matches. The eighteen actual matches would be split up with six coming before Christmas and twelve after, resulting in one match a week from mid-October through the end of November, and from March through May, with the top two teams meeting in June for the Quidditch cup. Finally, practices would be limited to four hours during the week per house (both the regular and reserve teams from a house would practice together) with an additional two hours on weekends. Madame Hooch would ensure that the practice time slots were distributed fairly, so that there would be no more overbooking of the preferred times by one house as had happened in the past. Whenever the quidditch pitch was not booked for practices it would be available for pick-up games.

"We are going to make more effort to promote cross-house interactions this year," continued McGonagall as she moved on to the next item. "One way to do that is to encourage study groups and clubs of all kinds. One successful example of such a study group that many of you may be aware of was formed two years ago to give students practical experience in Defense Against the Dark Arts. It was led by Mr. Potter and Miss Granger, and they will be resuming it this year under the name, Practical Defense Association." She paused for a moment as cheering had erupted from the students before her. Those sitting closest to the head table could have sworn that a smile flickered across on the stern professor's face

"The status of Hogsmeade visits this year is uncertain, for reasons of which I am sure you are aware. If situations permit, they might take place, but will not be announced in advance of the day they are held. In any case, the safety of our students will be our primary consideration." This announcement was disappointing to the assembled teens, but it actually was better than they had expected, and the mood at the tables was generally one of resigned acceptance.

"Another opportunity for you to interact with members from other houses will be in the form of some social events that have been scheduled," she went on. Everyone was suddenly alert again and a slight murmur arose as whispered speculation began. Several Gryffindor eyes turned to silently query Hermione and Harry, but they smiled and said nothing. "These will include a Halloween costume party, a Yule Ball, for upper year students, a Valentine's Day party, and an end of year dance to be held just prior to final exams. More details will be available on these events later," she added, raising her voice to be heard over the low rumble of excited voices. As was to be expected, the girls were considerably more excited about the dances than the guys were.

Harry leaned across the table and got Hermione's attention. "I'm not sure I need to do this, but I don't want to mess anything up. Will you be my date for all of the dances or anything else we need a partner for?" Hermione smiled brightly and nodded.

"No, you didn't really need to ask, but it's a thoughtful thing to do. I'd love to." She took both of his hands in hers and indulged herself for a moment just gazing lovingly into his eyes.



-ooOoo-

When the announcements were finished and the students dismissed, Harry and Hermione lingered behind to talk to her parents. After a round of hugs, Emma showed the teens her medallion that cancelled out the anti-muggle wards, and told them about their new quarters in the faculty wing, inviting them to stop by whenever they got a chance. Dan confessed that they were nervous about teaching, but felt that they had prepared well. In return, Harry and Hermione filled the older couple in on the attacks of the previous night. Remus and Tonks had come over to join them and Tonks added some more information that she had received from her Auror contacts. Although clearly distressed both about the attacks and about Harry and Hermione's roles in combating them, Dan and Emma managed to stay calm and congratulated them for the fine job they did in defeating so many of their enemies and at the same time avoiding injuries to their own forces.

One last stop they wanted to make on the way to the Head Suite was the Hospital Wing. Not surprisingly, many of their fellow PDA members had the same idea and had crowded the infirmary to visit Neville, driving Madame Pomfrey to distraction. Their fellow students readily gave way to Harry and Hermione as they moved closer to the bed that held their loyal friend, and they were relieved to see that he was looking much better. Harry joked with him that he should be sure to pester the head nurse to let him leave as soon as possible, which generated chuckles from his close friends who knew his own history in the Hospital Wing, and an exasperated sigh from Pomfrey.

For her part, Hermione noticed that Neville, although clearly pleased that his friends had come to see him, was looking around as though searching for a missing face. Just then Ginny burst through the infirmary door, out of breath and looking slightly disheveled. *Almost like she had just come out of a broom closet*, Hermione thought to herself, but quickly put that thought aside. That was uncalled for, and it was only the first day back at school, after all.

Neville brightened up as soon as he saw Ginny and she quickly made her way to the bed and gave him a little hug, telling him to get better soon. Eventually Madame Pomfrey prevailed and managed to shoo most of the students out of her domain, until only Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny were left. Neville, of course, only had eyes for one of them. Harry leaned over and whispered something into Neville's ear, and the stocky Gryffindor nodded gratefully. Then Harry and Ron shook his hand and took their leave, and Hermione gave him a hug and moved away. Finally Ginny gave him one last hug and a bright smile, which Neville returned. Hermione was quite sure that with that kind of encouragement he would heal in no time.

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"Well, we're back," Harry sighed as they snuggled together under the covers. "This is it, our last year at Hogwarts."

"Yes, it seems like only yesterday that an annoying little girl pushed her way into a train compartment and began lecturing two clueless boys," Hermione teased, as her finger traced little circles on his chest.

Harry smiled. "And their lives would never be the same again. Good thing, too, or the two boys would never have survived first year."

"Neither would the little girl," Hermione replied softly, recalling the terror of facing the troll in the bathroom. Harry responded by pulling her closer.

"We've been good together," he confirmed. "Even when we disagreed about things we were always there for each other."

"And we always will be," Hermione responded firmly. "We're going to do this, Harry. We're going to beat him and then live our lives the way we want to. We'll have a family, and our kids will read lots of books and you'll teach them all to fly."

Harry turned his head toward her, and she looked up and caught his eyes. Emerald green locked with chestnut brown, as she poured all the determination she could muster into that fierce gaze.

"I believe you," he whispered, and he moved his lips to claim hers, as each of them sealed their pledge to the other.

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# Hermione's Plan

## Fall Term Part 1 - Happy Birthday Hermione

### Chapter 24, Fall Term, Part 1 – Happy Birthday Hermione

December 22

Hermione sat in a window seat in the master bedroom at Potter Manor, looking out over the snowy grounds, thinking back over the last few months. It was so peaceful here today, with just her, Harry, and Minnie, and the loyal house elf was giving them plenty of privacy. In a few days it would be a different story, as that was when they would be getting married, and the house would be swarming with their friends. She sighed contentedly. She couldn't believe it was finally here. The fall term had seemed to go on forever and more than once she had wished that December would hurry up and get here. Of course, they had made it drag out longer than it normally would have with the time turner, adding half again as much time as it should have taken. But they had done what needed to be done. Obligations to Hogwarts and the other students, and more preparation as well, along with taking time for themselves to get away from the stress had all been necessary. But now they could relax and enjoy each other for a while.

She could feel him approach the room through their bond, which had been steadily strengthening, so she was not the slightest bit startled by the hands that began massaging her shoulders when he appeared behind her. She moaned her appreciation, her standard response when he did this, and leaned back into him. Having her shoulders and back rubbed was just about her favorite thing in the world, and he knew it, which of course was why he did it so often. And really, that was what love was all about.

"Hey," he whispered into her ear as he leaned forward to trail several kisses along the back of her neck. "How are you doing this morning?" She shuddered slightly as he began to pull the warm plush terrycloth robe off her shoulders, exposing more bare skin for his ministrations.

*How on earth did he expect her to give a coherent answer when he was doing these delightful things to her?* Her lack of response didn't seem to discourage him in the slightest, and her robe was soon down to her waist, making her entire back available to those magic fingers. If this kept up much longer they'd both end up back in bed and it would be even longer before they got dressed. *And that would be a bad thing how, exactly?*

His hands were on her side now, his fingers seeking more interesting territory around to the front. Just before his highly trained hands were about to capture a snatch or two, she finally decided that it was time for her to take some initiative, and she turned toward him and tugged his own robe apart. Leaning forward to press her bare chest to his, she wrapped her arms around his neck and captured his mouth with hers to express her appreciation for the lovely backrub. From there it was only a few steps over to the bed.

Later, after their desires had been attended to, she sat up and reached out to summon the notebook she had been looking at earlier from the table by the window seat. "I was just thinking about the past few months," she said, finally replying to his initial question. Harry sat up next to her and put his arm around her shoulder as they scooted closer together so he could look at the journal with her.

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 2, 1997

*Our new Head of House Professor Lupin (now there's yet another dramatic reminder of how different this year is going to be) handed out our schedules at breakfast this morning. We discussed extensively which classes we were going to drop and finally decided that I would drop Herbology and Harry would drop Potions. One of his reasons was that he felt I was being unfairly overshadowed in the class by Slughorn's fixation on him. He freely admitted that I was better at Potions than he was, and this way Slughorn would take more notice of me. In turn, I admitted that I had been too closed-minded about the tips in Snape's book. Some of them were quite useful. I agreed that I would use his mum's book as a reference this year. The other reason for us dropping different classes was so that between the two of us we would have more coverage of the subjects.*

*So I'm taking Arithmency, Ancient Runes, and Potions by myself and Charms, Defense, and Transfiguration with Harry and Ron. Ron and Harry are together in Herbology. Ron also dropped Potions and picked up Care of Magical Creatures, so Hagrid will be pleased. Harry and I agreed to come to Care on occasion if there is a particularly interesting creature being studied. I'm planning on taking the NEWT in Muggle Studies as well, so that will be 7 in all. I'm not nearly as worried about career options as I was a year ago. Frankly, being one of the heroes of the War on Voldemort will get me pretty much any job I want, and if not, being Lady Potter and crusading for more rights for persecuted magical beings are also attractive options.*

*This is quite an adjustment for me. For more than a year now from our perspective I've been with Harry virtually 24 hours a day, and now we'll be apart for hours at a time. I'm sure we'll manage – I'm hoping it will make us appreciate the time together even more. He IS going to walk me to the classes that I have that he doesn't, which will be especially nice for Potions down in the dungeons.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger – September 2a, 1997

*Harry and I decided to repeat several days a week and spend them at Cambridge. This is our relaxing time, a chance to get away from it all, and also our opportunity to catch up if we get behind on anything. I'm going to take a college class at King's College. I've long admired the Chapel there, and love to listen to their choir. It was hard to pick which course to take. I thought about chemistry or physics, but prerequisites were an issue. A psychology course was also a possibility, since at some point I want to help Harry deal with the issues remaining from his abusive childhood. I finally decided on a philosophy course this semester, and a literature course next semester, both of which primarily*

*I've been reading books and writing papers. (If you're reading this Mr. Potter, you can stop that smirk right now!) My class meets twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so we'll probably be here at least for Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday every week.*

*This was my first day of class and I just loved it! Harry thinks it's an odd way to relax, but he accepts that that's just the way I am. I'm certain that Ron would shake his head and mutter about me being 'mental'. On the other hand, Harry decided to get a part time job while I work on my studies, and he's going to be an assistant cook in a local pub! How ironic – the hero of the wizarding world working in a kitchen! Harry, of course, thinks that angle is hilarious. I'll bet that when we tell Ron he'll think it's a dream job – being surrounded by food all day. On second thought, he wouldn't believe it. In his world, only women cook. I've tried to point out to him that most of the best known chefs in the muggle world are men, but he refused to believe me – he was certain that I was having him on.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, September 5, 1997

*Classes are going very well so far but there are some interesting things to report. I stopped by to visit Mum and Dad today to see how they're getting along. They love it here. They're fascinated by all the magical things about the castle – just like we were as first years. In one way it's a shame that we all lost that sense of wonder we had when we first saw everything. Anyway, they're doing fine. Dobby is here to help them out with any magic that needs doing – opening doors, turning on lights, summoning things, etc. Since Remus and Tonks are here at Hogwarts teaching, no one is living in Grimmauld Place at the moment, and Winky can take care of the Order's needs there.*

*Harry has continued to take an interest in some of the first year muggleborn students – it started with Jamie and Cheri, but the group has grown to include some from other houses as well. He stops by to see how they're doing almost every day. Of course, all of the girls have crushes on him. It's so cute to watch how flustered they get when he pays attention to them – just like an eleven year old Ginny. He says the boys all have a crush on me, too but – well, perhaps he's right. ...*

"So, how are things going for our first years today?" Harry asked as he flopped down next to Jamie at the table where a group of new students were sitting. Hermione smiled as she sat down on his other side. Jamie blushed and the girls on the other side of her giggled. Across the way the boys just stared at the Head Boy with expressions of awe, combined with some furtive glances at the Head Girl. They couldn't believe that such important people were paying attention to them.

"Pretty good," replied Jamie after she managed to get herself under control. "We're finding our way through the castle all right. That's been the most difficult part so far," she added, looking toward the others for confirmation. They all nodded in agreement. "The orientation gave us a pretty good idea of what to expect."

"What orientation?" came his puzzled response.

"You know, the orientation that all muggleborn students have before they come here," Hermione answered. "Mine was with Professor Vector. Who was yours with?" she asked the new students.

Most of the girls answered either Vector or Sprout; for the boys it was the former Muggle Studies professor. Harry frowned and Hermione immediately realized what was bothering him. He had not had an orientation session since he technically wasn't muggleborn, even though for all practical purposes he was. She gave a small shake of her head as she realized that this was yet another example of how much more difficult his life was than it ought to have been.

"I guess you could say mine was that day I spent with Hagrid, but I learned almost nothing about Hogwarts from him," Harry mused. Hermione reached out to give his arm a squeeze, and sent him a sympathetic smile. Then they excused themselves and left to join their other friends at the Gryffindor table.

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*Tonight he gave Jamie and Cheri goodnight hugs before we left the Gryffindor common room to go back to our suite. They both turned bright red and ran up the stairs. The really interesting thing was the reaction from the older girls – they're actually jealous of the young ones. Lavender was the first to speak up, but she was just teasing. ...*

Lavender rose from where she and Parvati were sitting by Ron, Dean, Seamus, and Neville. "That's not fair," she pretended to pout. "Can we have good night hugs too?"

To everyone's surprise Harry merely shrugged and crossed the common room to his fellow seventh years. "Sure," he replied and gave first Lavender, then Parvati quick hugs. "Nothing wrong with a little hug for a friend now and then." Lavender merely smiled and giggled, but Parvati's eyes went wide before she stammered and turned away, her face flushed. Meanwhile Hermione was watching the reactions from the boys. Mostly it was surprise at how outgoing Harry had become, but there was also some jealousy that Harry was getting all of these hugs, and perhaps that they hadn't thought of it first.

Harry then looked around and spotted Ginny sitting over by herself, which was surprising for the normally vivacious and outgoing young witch. With Hermione trailing behind him, he walked over to her and reached out to pull her to her feet. Before the surprised girl had a chance to react he gave her a slightly longer hug than the other girls had received. "Night, Gin." Next Hermione added a hug of her own.

*Strangely, Ginny's heart didn't really seem to be in it, as though something was bothering her. I'm a bit concerned about her. She hasn't been herself for some time. We were hoping she would snap out of it once we got back here, but she doesn't really seem any better. I'm going to have to try to talk to her alone some time and see if I can get her to tell me what's the matter.*

*After that I decided that it was time to step in and assert my girlfriend rights before things got out of hand. Good thing, too, because that tart Romilda Vane was starting to get ideas. I shot her down just as she was coming over ...*

Hermione took Harry's arm and tugged him toward the portrait hole. "Come on dear," she purred, smiling sweetly at the rest of the common room, one dark-haired girl in particular. "I think we've caught up with all of our *friends* ." There was a definite emphasis on the last word. "Time to get back to our room." The 'our room' line got some gasps, particularly from the students who didn't know them very well, and chuckles and groans, mostly from their friends. With a final wave the couple disappeared.

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*As much as I've been teasing Harry about being fanciable, it really hasn't been that bad. The younger girls I'm not worried about; having a crush on a heroic older man is part of growing up. (Note to Mr. Potter if you're reading this. If I hear any sound out of you that even resembles the word 'Lockhart' you'll regret it.) But the older ones aren't really causing any problems either. They're mostly confining themselves to longing looks, ogling, or disappointed sighs. Harry says it's because they're afraid of me. Oh yeah. Big bad Hermione Granger protects her turf. Honestly, six years ago could anything have possibly sounded more ridiculous?*

*What's surprising to me is the attention I've been getting. Suddenly it seems like everyone wants to be my friend. I'm fairly certain that some of these girls' friendly attitude is because of their interest in Ron, but I know that's not the case for all of them. At any rate, I've become good friends with Padma, much more so than I ever was with Parvati. And interestingly enough, I'm starting to like Tracey Davis too. She has a wicked sense of humor that I'd never seen in her before. The best part is that both of those girls are in all three of my 'non-Harry and Ron' classes, which makes them much more enjoyable. How about that? I'm actually hanging around with friends who are girls! It's interesting to speculate what it would have been like under other circumstances if this Gryffindor-Ravenclaw-Slytherin trio had been in place for all seven years. Certainly nothing like the Potter-Weasley-Granger Gryffindor trio. But I wouldn't give up my friendship with Harry and Ron for anything.*

*It's not only the girls, though. Quite a few guys have been eyeing me lately, giving me appreciative looks. Now that's really strange. I can count on two fingers the number of guys who have made me feel like I was desirable before now. (And no, Ron Weasley wasn't one of them. For all the times he acted jealous, he never looked at me like he thought I was attractive.) It's pretty much confined to my non-Harry classes, of course – none of these guys are stupid. Even though I know that Harry is secure enough with our relationship that he wouldn't call out a guy just for looking at me the wrong way, they don't necessarily know that.*

*So, where were all of these guys when I was unattached?*

"Bye sweetie," Harry said as he gave Hermione a quick kiss outside the Potions dungeon. "I'll see you after Runes. Are you sure you don't want me to come back after class?"

"Harry, don't worry so much about me," Hermione smiled at his over-protectiveness. "You know I can take care of myself. And Terry and Anthony have Runes as well, so we'll all go up there together."

Hermione noted the eager looks that appeared on Terry's and Anthony's faces, and hoped Harry either wouldn't notice or if he did that he wouldn't get upset. Out of the corner of her eye she caught his slight frown, but it quickly cleared up and was replaced by a smirk. She felt him give her hand a squeeze and she returned it as a small smile crept onto her face. His response had been perfect. Initially he had been concerned, but then realized that he had nothing to worry about. In fact, he had ended up being amused that she was having to deal with the kind of thing he had gone through the previous year.

"No problem," chorused the two Ravenclaws. Harry gave a little wave to show his appreciation and headed off down the corridor.

Hermione smiled at Terry and Anthony and they followed her into the dungeon. Unfortunately for them she sat down next to Padma. Blaise Zabini gave her his most charming smile as he maneuvered to take the seat on her other side. Reluctantly, Terry and Anthony took seats in the row behind her, glaring daggers into Blaise's back no doubt. Their dark moods brightened considerably at the next sequence of events, however.

Tracey Davis burst into the classroom next, just before the bell. "Move, Blaise, I want to sit next to Hermione," she demanded in a no-nonsense voice. It was quite amusing to see the tall, good-looking Slytherin shrink before the short stocky girl, but she clearly had him intimidated. He gathered up his things, which he had just begun unpacking, and shot one last hopeful glance at Hermione to see if she would intervene on his behalf. She avoided his eyes and soon Tracey was ensconced in the seat next to her. 'Thank you' she mouthed at her new Slytherin friend. Tracey merely shot back a wink as Slughorn began to announce the day's potion.

*'What on earth is going on here?' Hermione thought to herself. 'Do I have some sort of late-blooming Veela powers?'*

In fact, no magical explanation was necessary, but Hermione's sudden attraction to the opposite sex was due to a number of factors. The least flattering was that she was now famous, and associated with perhaps the most well-known wizard alive. That reason alone would have been enough for opportunists like Blaise Zabini. But her attractiveness was also enhanced by a number of physical changes and adjustments in her mental attitude.

Her body had indeed matured and filled out during the more than a year she had lived since the previous June. And her new, form-fitting robes were tailored to show her figure off to its best advantage. She now used modest amounts of the potion Fleur had given her to tame her hair so that it could be more accurately described as curly than bushy. Likewise the subtle use of eye makeup brought out her deep brown eyes more dramatically. Finally, the way she carried herself, more confidently, lifted her shoulders back and brought her chest forward, with most noticeable results.

Not to mention that she now considered herself attractive, which led to some of these changes. Before she had 'known' that she wasn't good

looking, so made no attempt to be. Now she knew that Harry, at least, thought she was, and had convinced her, so she acted like it.

Another attitude change was in the way she related to people. She was generally a happier person now, and smiled much more. The other students marveled at this change in her personality. The scolding prefect whose primary method of communication had been a frustrated sigh and an exasperated eye-roll had been replaced by a helpful head girl who felt better about herself and so was less inclined to find fault with others.

Last, but not least, were the things she had learned from Fleur. The way she smiled at the guys when she talked to them, small motions of her shoulders, torso, hips, etc, and little touches during conversations – each of them innocent in and of themselves - all combined to throw the male of the species off balance during a simple encounter.

No, all together it was not the least bit surprising that Hermione Granger found herself with more male attention than she could possibly have imagined.

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger, September 6, 1997

*Harry and I went out for a run around the lake this morning before breakfast. We need to make sure we keep up our exercising here. We talked about the idea of recreating the fitness course we built at Potter Manor, but then realized that we can just have Dobby move that one here, since no one is using it there any more. Mum wants to start up her aerobics again, but her tape player won't work here at Hogwarts. I'm going to talk to Flitwick about enchanting it to make it play. We can probably get McGonagall to give us an unused room to turn into an exercise room, and we can promote the whole thing as a Fitness Club, with Mum as the faculty sponsor. It will be interesting to see who joins besides PDA members.*

*While we were running Dean, Colin, and Justin came out to run with us. Apparently someone had spotted us from the castle and word spread. No one except the PDA members could figure out why we were out here running. These three were the most enthusiastic about it during the summer, so it stands to reason that they were the ones who were brave enough to come out and join us.*

*While we were running we talked about quidditch tryouts. Justin's not sure if he will try out for one of the Hufflepuff teams or not. Dean will try out for chaser for Gryffindor again, of course, and has a good chance to be Katie's replacement. Colin said that he was going to try out for chaser too, figuring that he might have a shot at the reserve team, and that Dennis wanted to try for reserve seeker. Playing with us over the last month at Potter Manor gave them the confidence to give it a go. Ron's idea of a reserve team to give more students the opportunity to play was a good one.*

*Ron was pretty nervous at breakfast, being captain and having to pick two teams today, but it went pretty well. Harry and Ginny were big helps.*

"Okay," Ron called out, looking out at the assembled quidditch prospects. "First of all, is everyone here from Gryffindor?" There were quite a few chuckles at that, as the students recalled the previous year's tryouts. Hannah, Susan, and Luna raised their hands and Ron laughed, as he knew that they were just there to watch. "Well then, if you know what position you're interested in, join that group. Chasers, go with Ginny, seekers with Harry, and keepers and beaters stay with me."

By far the largest group was the chasers, and Ginny had them do some simple stationary passing drills, then moved on to passing while flying in formation. Dennis and two younger students that Harry didn't know, a boy and a girl, were the only prospective seekers, and Harry talked about search strategies for a while before having them practice catching some bright orange golf balls that Dan had given him. After he had satisfied himself that they could handle that, he released a snitch and let them go at it. From her spot in the chaser line Hermione waved him over and he came to watch her fly.

When Hermione had announced at breakfast that she was going to join the quidditch tryouts, it had caused quite a stir. "Hermione, you hate flying!" Lavender had protested.

"That's not true," Ginny pointed out matter-of-factly. "Didn't you notice that she played with us this summer?"

"Well, I thought that was just ..." Lavender stopped, realizing that she shouldn't say more about their summer training.

"You thought that was just because I'm with Harry now?" Hermione had picked up smoothly. "Well, it is true that flying with Harry is much more enjoyable than I had ever imagined it could be." She managed to put a sultry tone into this sentence, which made some of the listeners choke on their pumpkin juice, and Romilda Vane turned slightly green.

When her turn came up again Hermione managed reasonably well. Flying came pretty instinctively to her by now, so she could concentrate on catching and throwing the quaffle. This time it was her turn to try to score at the end of the run, and she shrieked with delight when she managed to put the quaffle through the left hoop. After one more run, though, it was clear that there were at least six players who were better than she was and she flew up alongside Ginny on her way back to the line.

"Don't hesitate to cut me; my feelings won't be hurt," she informed her friend. "I just came out to have a bit of fun and set an example for the others." Ginny nodded with some relief and excused her from the group, so she joined Harry and flew up with him to watch the seekers.

In the end Ginny, Dean, and Demelza Robins were the first team chasers, as expected, and Colin did make the reserve team along with a third year girl and a fourth year boy. Harry picked Dennis as the reserve seeker. All in all, Ron was happy with the team, as it was largely intact from the year before, and the reserves included some promising players for future years.

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger, September 7, 1997

*We had the first meeting of the 'official' PDA today. McGonagall doesn't want everyone to know about the Room of Requirement so we met tonight in the Great Hall. Eventually we'll divide up into smaller groups and use classrooms. The place was absolutely packed! I'm pretty sure that more than half of the school showed up. If word gets around that it's an effective class, I'm sure that there will be even more interest. On the other hand, some will most likely drop out as the work gets more difficult.*

*As usual, Harry started with simple spells, which some of the upper year students, particularly the Ravenclaws, grumbled about. It's amazing, though, how many were doing them wrong. We'll spend the first few sessions mastering Expelliarmus and Protego. There was much more complaining when he started talking about physical conditioning, even after we illustrated how important it was to be able to dodge or evade spells. The younger students, though, were more enthusiastic about this, especially when he used Dennis Creevey, who's only a 4th year and small for his age, as an example. They recognized that this was something that they could be as good at as the older students.*

*All in all it was a success. We're going to start off by evaluating where everyone is in terms of skill level and sort them out. Two or three core PDA members will be assigned to each group. Harry and I will roam among the different groups overseeing things and helping out if any problems arise. With any luck, by the end of the year most of the students will at least be able to defend themselves in an attack.*

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From the Journal of Hermione Granger, September 8, 1997

*This morning was our first Transfiguration class. Professor Karl seems reasonably competent, although I think she's intimidated by Harry and me. She's nice enough, but it was a strange experience. Quite a contrast from Professor McGonagall who I think could even intimidate Dumbledore if she wanted to. Ron and Harry claim that I intimidated some of our other professors too, but I'm not sure I believe them. Well, Umbridge for certain. She was intimidated by both of us.*

*The problem today happened when Professor Karl announced that we were going to work on animal transfiguration this year – human to animal as well as inanimate object to animal. She asked us to demonstrate what we were already able to do, and well, I guess I shouldn't have taken her quite so literally. Harry and I started transfiguring things and I got carried away. I made some birds like I did during our duel this summer, Harry made some snakes, I made some dogs, and then of course I had to show the difference between dogs and goats. Then Lavender said she wanted to see a horse and other students started making requests. I should have noticed that Professor Karl was just standing there dumfounded, I guess, but I'm used to Professor McGonagall who always has control of her class. I think between the two of us we made seventeen different animals. (Harry says that he only did two and I did fifteen, but I don't think that can be right.)*

The Transfiguration class was the dominant topic of conversation among the seventh year Gryffindors in the common room that evening. Ron reminisced fondly about Moody (actually Crouch, Jr.) transforming Malfoy into a ferret and everyone had a good laugh. Then Seamus teased that Ron would make a good weasel, which got a sofa cushion thrown at him. Then they moved on to speculating what would be the most suitable animal for each of them.

"I think Ron would make a good Irish setter," Hermione offered. When pressed for an explanation she continued, "it's a dog with bright red hair, like Ron's, and very loyal." There was general consensus on that one, and Ron was much happier with that characterization than with being a weasel.

"In that case, I want to be an Irish wolfhound," declared Seamus, drawing more laughter.

"Neville would be a bear," Parvati suggested. Indeed, given his dark coloring and the way he had bulked up during the summer, combined with his generally placid demeanor that could turn into a fierce fighter when provoked, the analogy seemed apt.

"What about Hermione?" Neville asked. They could tell he was embarrassed, though pleased, by the complimentary description of himself and wanted to change the focus to someone else.

"Oh, that's easy," Harry responded. "She's an owl." Before anyone could answer he gave her a wink and pointed his wand at her, mouthing an incantation. Realizing what he was doing Hermione transformed herself into her owl animagus form.

"Wow!" "Wicked!" "That's awesome!" were just a few of the reactions from their startled classmates. Hermione hooted at Harry and he flicked his wand again to 'turn' her back.

"So what would Harry be then, a lion maybe?" Dean wondered.

Hermione grinned at Harry. "Nope," she corrected. "He would be a black panther. Let me show you." Harry was a little puzzled, but she knew he would go along with her. She made a standard transfiguration motion with her wand, and he changed to his jaguar form. However, instead of just doing a fake spell, she transfigured his fur to make it black before he even finished his transformation. Voila, instant panther. Panther Harry looked down at his black paws in surprise, then pretended to growl threateningly at her. The other students began backing nervously away, but Hermione just smiled and knelt down in front of the panther and hugged him, just like she often did with Crookshanks. Harry responded by licking her face.

Once the laughter had died down and Hermione had wiped the slobber off her face and glared at him for good measure, she 'transfigured' him back and they all resumed their speculations. Hermione, sticking with dogs, decided that Dean Thomas would be a Great Dane and suggested a French poodle for Lavender.

"I think Ginny would be a fox," Dean announced. This, of course, got a glare from Ron due to the double meaning. Harry jumped in before he could object. "I don't know, I've always seen her more as a cat. Maybe a tiger or a cheetah."

"She sure has the temperament for a tiger," Ron agreed, trying to turn the thinking away from how attractive his little sister was. As luck would have

it, Ginny appeared at the portrait hole just at that time. When she walked by the seventh year group she noticed all eyes were on her.

"What?" she stopped and demanded.

"We were talking about what animals different people would be, and I said you were a fox, but Harry thought you were more of a tiger," Dean explained with a grin. Ron covered his face with his hands and groaned. Ginny brightened momentarily at the pair of compliments, and even gave Dean and Harry small smiles, but then shrugged and walked away, leaving a puzzled group of seventh years behind. The Ginny they remembered would never have let a line like that go by without a witty comeback. Hermione once again resolved to have a talk with her to try to find out what was bothering her.

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, September 10, 1997

*Professor Flitwick said that we would be working on Protean charms and warding this term. Later in the year we will focus on conjuring. Of course, Harry and I are already pretty skilled at warding and ... well, when he mentioned Protean charms everyone in the class who was in the DA turned and grinned at me. I blushed – I couldn't help myself – and Harry reached over and gave my arm a squeeze. Once Flitwick was clued in on what everyone was grinning about he asked me to give a brief description of how they worked. The others in the room all groaned at that. The prats seemed to think that I can't be concise about anything. I showed them – I managed to give a thorough explanation in only 15 minutes. Then I made Harry join me as we told about some of the wards we've learned and how to cast them. Professor Flitwick was very interested when Harry mentioned that he now owned Dumbledore's ward detector, so we invited him to come by the Head Suite to look at the modifications we've made to it.*

*Afterward I asked him about enchanting Mum's tape player. He had an even better suggestion – he offered to tutor us in enchanting so we can do it ourselves. It would be an extra credit NEWT project. Of course, I couldn't turn down an opportunity like that!*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, September 14, 1997

*Rita Skeeter strikes again! She wrote a very detailed expose on Umbridge's trial. Apparently the foul toad had agreed to a plea bargain without any public trial and Scrimgeour was trying to sweep it under the rug. The sentencing is tomorrow and he was going to recommend that she get off with a warning and probation.*

*Of course, Rita had all of the facts exactly right, even ones from secret testimony that was never released (evil smile!). As one might expect, the public reaction was a demand that Umbridge be punished much more severely. Both the Daily Prophet and the Quibbler stories that have mentioned Harry during the past month have been generally quite favorable, and when people read what she and Fudge had done to Harry they were outraged.*

*The Daily Prophet ran an editorial on the page following her story calling for Scrimgeour to disassociate himself from her completely or consider resigning as Minister. He's very fortunate that Director Hammer and Chief Auror Robards are doing such a good job. Because of all the Death Eaters they captured and convicted (mostly due to Harry and me, but we don't want people to know that), he is being perceived as being effective against Voldemort. And since his position is so shaky now, they will have even more free reign to do their jobs as they see fit.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, September 19, 1997

*Wow! What an amazing birthday. Harry and I decided to stay in Cambridge an extra night because he said he had some special things planned for my birthday. So we did my birthday there first and then repeated it back here at Hogwarts.*

*It started first thing in the morning. I knew Harry was going to do this, but somehow he managed to get my knickers off and start my massage before I woke up. He had faithfully studied the 'sensual massage' video tape and he was a very good student. The first thing I knew, I was lying on my stomach, completely nude, and had a heavenly scented oil being worked into my feet. It felt so good, but it was soon to get much better! Next he did my calves. Mmmm, that was nice too. Then he started working his way up my thighs and things really started getting interesting. The video tape said that a woman's entire body was an erogenous zone, and they knew what they were talking about. I was so turned on by the time he started on my bum that I could hardly stand it. Then his finger moved down to 'touch' me and I lost it immediately!*

*It was so good I nearly passed out. Afterwards he lay down next to me and I fell back asleep in his arms. When I woke up next I was lying with my head in his lap and he was now massaging my forehead and scalp. I could not believe how good that felt! Then he went on to my shoulders and arms. Exquisite! But when he moved down to my breasts, oh my! He spent a very long time and lots of massage oil there. By then I was excited again and I knew what was coming next. He slowly worked his hands down to start touching me again and I just closed my eyes and rode out the waves of bliss. After he finished we cuddled up and I fell asleep again!*

When Hermione woke again Harry kissed her thoroughly, then pulled back. "Happy birthday," he murmured softly, gazing into her eyes.

"I love you," she responded, just as he had on his birthday.

"Are you ready for some presents now?" he asked. Hermione smiled and nodded. The first package she opened contained two brand new tunics of a style that she recognized immediately. Harry explained that he had picked them up from Chantico when they were in the Yucatan at the end of



August. One was for Hermione and the other for him, and Hermione's had beautiful hand-sewn multicolored embroidery and a matching sash. When she held them up she noted with a raised eyebrow that hers was considerably shorter than his. His response was an innocent look while he pointed out that it was probably just because he was taller than she was. She rolled her eyes at him to let him know that she wasn't fooled a bit, but then smiled and went on to the next package. This contained the leather ankle boots that completed the outfit. After that was a much bigger package that held a large garment bag.

"Harry?" She turned to look at him, puzzled. These were the formal dress robes that she had picked out before they came back to Hogwarts. Why was he wrapping them up for her now? Then she noticed that he was holding a small box and grinning at her. As her eyes dropped to the box he opened it and she gasped. Lying there were the most beautiful necklace and earrings she had ever seen!

"Harry!" The necklace was a large star sapphire (her birthstone) in a setting surrounded by smaller teardrop sapphires and diamonds, and the earrings were also tear shaped sapphires. The combination perfectly matched the periwinkle blue color of her new dress robes. He had insisted that she get the same color as her robes had been fourth year, but the cut and fit of the new robes was more appropriate for the nineteen year old woman she was now, compared to the fifteen year old girl she had been then. And without even trying them on she knew that the necklace had been made to fit exactly with the low neckline of the new robes.

"I wanted something extra special for you this year, so I sent your new robes in to the jeweler and had them put something together to match it. They took some of the pieces we found in the Black family vault that you thought were hideous in trade, so it didn't really cost that much," he added. She relaxed then and even managed a smile at the thought that he knew her so well that he had already countered her objection about the price before she even raised it.

"Harry, they're beautiful! I just can't believe I'll be wearing something so incredible."

"You already look incredible in that gown. These will just make you look even more so."

She decided that he deserved a passionate kiss for that remark. After she finished with his reward he gave her an even bigger grin and pulled out another jewelry box.

"Harry, stop! This is already too much."

"Oh. All right, I guess I can save this one for Christmas."

She gasped, then realized he was teasing her and hit him on the shoulder. "You prat!"

Harry grinned at her and explained. "Now, this one is actually a wedding present, but I thought you should have it before you pick out your wedding gown." Hermione barely heard the end of this explanation, because her mind was fixated on the breathtaking emerald pendant on display before her. It was similar to what was currently her favorite piece of jewelry (intentionally so, she was sure), the jade pendant he had bought her on the way home from Hogwarts at the end of sixth year, except it was larger and, of course, emerald instead of jade. The chain was platinum instead of silver. Once again she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him for all she was worth, tears of happiness running down her cheeks. When she finally managed to collect herself Harry explained that the emerald had come from the Potter family vault and that he had instructed the jeweler to set it on the platinum chain exactly the way their beloved jade pendant had been.

Although Hermione was eager to try on her new outfits, Harry pointed out that she was still coated with massage oil, which might stain the fabric. His solution was for them to take a shower together to wash it off. There he proceeded to rub all of the oil off by hand. It took quite a while, but he was VERY thorough. Needless to say, she wholeheartedly appreciated his efforts.

-ooOoo-

*Harry went all out to make it a perfect day for me. After I finished admiring how the necklace looked with my new dress robes (while he admired the part of me the necklace was resting on) and I modeled the tunic for him (I teased him by illustrating how short it was by bending over to pick something up. I could tell that I had caught his attention when I heard him try to stifle a moan behind me.) he took me out for the day. We spent several hours wandering through old bookshops in Cambridge, then in the afternoon he took me punting on the Cam River on one of those flat bottomed boats. It was so romantic, lying back in the boat watching him propel us along the water with the long pole. Well, it was until he lost his balance and fell in, tipping us over. I was only annoyed for a bit. Honestly, how could I stay mad at him when he was trying so hard to make it such a wonderful birthday for me? We were cold and wet at first, but a couple of discreet warming charms kept the chill off until we could get home and dry off.*

*He finished up this fantastic day by taking me out for a romantic candlelight dinner. Of course I wore my special white dress and the jade pendant. (I'm saving the emerald pendant for the wedding, of course.) The restaurant was located in a medieval wine cellar in a building just opposite King's College. We started with French onion soup and mussels in garlic and white wine with a cream sauce. For the main course Harry had the beef fillet while I ordered the vegetable pasta. For dessert he had the chocolate torte and I had the crème brûlée (but he let me have a bite of the chocolate torte too).*

*I love this man so much! By the time we got home I couldn't keep myself from snogging him senseless. Then he slowly, sensuously undressed me and laid me down on the bed and ran his hands all over me so softly I couldn't stop shivering. I swear the man has magic in his hands (yes, that kind too). Then he 'touched' me again. It took all the will power I had to hold to our decision to wait to make love until we get married.*

-oooOOOooo-

Back at Potter Manor, Hermione leaned back and closed her eyes to savor the memory, then turned to see Harry smiling at her. "Thank you so much, Harry, that was the most incredible day I've ever had. She leaned in to give him a soft kiss to show her gratitude. "But I don't know how I'm

going to top that next year for your birthday.”

“Well,” Harry pointed out with a raised eyebrow, “we *will* be married then.”

“Oh, I see,” she grinned, her eyes sparkling. “You have something in mind perhaps?”

“Hmmm,” he leered back. “I’m sure I could think of *something* .”

“You know,” she leaned up and whispered into his ear. “I bet we’ll be *really* good at that by then.”

The playful bantering paused for some passionate kissing. Eventually, Hermione noticed that they had knocked the notebook to the floor. She reached down and picked it up, marking their place. “The next part wasn’t too good,” she commented quietly.

“What do you say we shower and get dressed and have some breakfast – er – lunch, before we continue?” Harry suggested.

“Good idea.”

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# Hermione's Plan

## Fall Term Part 2 - Many Things Are Revealed

### Chapter 25, Fall Term, Part 2 – Many Things Are Revealed

Still December 22

That afternoon the young couple snuggled up together on a couch in one of the parlors. At one end of the room was a warm fireplace and at the other a large picture window looked out on the field where they had played quidditch during the summer, and into the woods beyond. A light snow was falling again but it was nice and cozy inside. Hermione summoned her notebook again and they settled down to read once more.

-oooOOOooo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, September 20, 1997

*We celebrated my birthday the second time through with my parents last evening up in their rooms. They are so excited about their classes, and they really feel like they're making a difference. While many of their students are skeptical that a couple of muggles can teach them anything worth knowing, they are making some progress. The more members of the wizarding world that they can help overcome this ridiculous prejudice, the better off the society will be.*

*They are discussing how muggle society differs from wizarding society, initially focusing on technology. They have a lot of things that they show the students, from common household items to transportation, communications, commerce, and industry. Dobby is a great assistant for them, conjuring perfect replicas of muggle items. Mum and Dad show him a picture of something and he can make it. When they get to transportation they'll start with trains, since everyone is familiar with those, then move on to cars, and finally airplanes. Dad is actually planning on having a plane and a helicopter out on the grounds.*

*There was one awkward moment during the evening, though. Mum had ordered a birthday cake, and the house elf who brought it up couldn't leave the room fast enough when he saw me there. When Mum asked about it, Dobby let it slip that none of the other house elves will have anything to do with me. That made me realize that Dobby's the only one who takes care of the Head Suite. Then Harry admitted that during the last couple of years Dobby was the only house elf who would clean Gryffindor Tower. I had driven all of the others away. It made me feel terrible that by knitting those hats and leaving them lying around I had only been making his life more difficult. The worst part, I now realize, was that I insulted them all for nothing. Even if they had picked up one of the hats, it wouldn't have freed them, since I wasn't their master.*

*I've really had to reexamine my attitudes about house elves these past few months, and really, reexamine my attitude in general. I realize now that I've been insufferably self-righteous about a lot of things. Not a really happy way to spend your birthday, is it? Good thing I've got such a supportive boyfriend and set of parents.*

"So you knew all along that Dobby was taking all of the hats and that they weren't having any effect at all?" Hermione asked Harry dejectedly as she leaned back on the couch in her parents' quarters. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to feel bad." Of course. She knew that would be the answer even before she finished asking the question. Harry consistently did whatever he could to avoid hurting her feelings – any of his friends' feelings actually.

While that thought made her appreciate what a good friend he was, it did nothing for her self doubt. "I really have been insufferable sometimes, haven't I? Why did you put up with me?" she asked as a look of sadness settled on her face.

"Because I knew you cared." Harry moved up behind Hermione and pulled her onto his lap and put his arms around her. Dan and Emma joined them on the couch, one on either side, but kept quiet, wanting to see how Harry would deal with this.

"You care about people. It's one of your best qualities. Sure, you go overboard sometimes, and you have had trouble being inflexible. You decide that you know what's best and have a hard time admitting when you're wrong. But really, you aren't wrong very often and you've gotten much better at that more recently." Hermione looked up at him to see if he really meant it, or if he was just saying that to make her feel better, but Dan and Emma reassured her that they had noticed it too. She *had* been rethinking some of her positions lately, from her opinion of Fleur, to house elves, to the way she acted toward Harry, Ron, and her other classmates.

"As for why we put up with you, well, that reason's probably different for Ron than it was for me," Harry continued. "Ron grew up in a house where people get on each other all the time, but they all know that they love each other. So he was always used to being scolded by people who cared about him. And the way he learned to deal with it was by ignoring a lot of it from Ginny and his brothers, and even from his mum to some extent." Hermione nodded. That was Ron's most common response to her nagging, and it had tended to drive her crazy.

"Me, on the other hand, I was scolded all the time while I was growing up, but the difference was that I knew it was from people who hated me." Harry was focusing on Hermione on his lap, rubbing her shoulders while he was saying this. He could tell that Hermione tensed up at these words, and he dropped his hands down to her arms to give them a reassuring squeeze. He didn't, however, see the dark looks that Dan and Emma exchanged behind his back at the idea that he could talk about his abuse so casually.

"It took a while for me to get used to having someone badger me because they cared so much for me, because they actually liked me. I'm sure that's why I resented you at first, and why my attitude toward your suggestions hasn't always been the best. But I gradually learned to appreciate what you tried to do for me, even if I didn't always show it."

Hermione turned and leaned her head into Harry's chest, while wrapping her arms around him. He responded in kind, and they shared a nice, contented hug. It had been good for both of them to get those feelings out in the open. Dan and Emma sandwiched them from either side with brief hugs of their own before they both got up and pulled the teens to their feet.

"OK, that's enough introspection for now," Emma announced. "Let's have some cake."

-ooOoo-

*We also learned this morning about some goings on in Gryffindor house. It seems that Ginny is now going out with Zacharias Smith! We can't believe it. Of course, Ron is fit to be tied. Of all the guys she could have picked, why him? He has a well-deserved reputation for treating girls very badly. Normally, I'd say that Ginny could take care of herself in a relationship, but I'm not so sure about this one, with the way she's been acting lately. I tried to ask her about him, but that didn't go well at all...*

"Ginny?" Hermione had found Ginny alone in a corner of the common room.

"Oh, not you too, Hermione. Why can't you people just leave me alone?" Ginny snapped as she folded her arms across her chest and looked away.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Hermione persisted.

Ginny fixed Hermione with a withering look. "Well, no, Hermione, but we can't all have Harry Potter now, can we?"

Although Hermione was long past feeling guilty about Harry, that struck a nerve. Taking care not to let it show, she tried one more time. "But why Smith?"

"Oh please, Hermione. Where do you come off asking that? Or have you forgotten so quickly? Two words, Hermione. Cormac McLaggen. Oh wait, that's right. YOU considered Smith first, THEN decided on McLaggen."

-o-

*Needless to say, that ended our conversation rather quickly. But I considered dating Smith, then went out with McLaggen, in order to make Ron jealous. (I know, not the brightest thing I've ever done.) Is Ginny trying to make Harry jealous? That doesn't make any sense. It's not like Harry cares how Ginny goes out with, except the same way I do, as a friend. He's not exactly going to drop me and date Ginny just because she's going out with Zacharias Smith!*

*Mum had another idea about it when I talked to her. She said that girls with low self-esteem often go out with boys who treat them badly as a way of punishing themselves. They somehow think they deserve to be treated badly, or feel worthless. How can that possibly apply to Ginny? If there's any girl who should feel good about her appeal to the opposite sex, it's her. Just because Harry chose me instead of her shouldn't have damaged her self-esteem that much, should it? She must know she's still one of the prettiest girls at Hogwarts. I'm sure lots of other guys have asked her out already this year.*

*But that comment of Mum's made me really stop and think about what I was doing last year. Did I try to pick the biggest jerk I could find to punish Ron, or was I also punishing myself? I guess I was feeling pretty worthless at that time, after Ron rejected me for Lavender. After all, if I just wanted to make Ron feel jealous I could have asked Harry, or any other Gryffindor guy. Maybe that is part of the reason I picked McLaggen. I knew he would treat me horribly. It was all I could do to keep his hands off of me. In retrospect, it was a good thing Harry was at the party that night. I would have been horrified to have him see McLaggen pawing at me. I wonder if Harry hadn't been there, if I would have let him go farther than I did. Now there's a truly sickening thought. I was really a mess last year.*

-o-

*Here's something a bit more pleasant. I'm really impressed with the way Ron is handling himself this year, with all the female attention he's getting. He's playing it cool, and being nice to all of them, but not letting any of them hang all over him the way Lavender did last year. Lavender, of course, has the inside track, as she has him all to herself in Gryffindor Tower. But she's keeping it under control, and not acting all clingy or jealous like she did last year. She just sits with him every night and flirts, letting him know she's interested.*

*During the day, Hannah and Susan have their chance. Somehow they always seem to be going the same direction that he is in the corridors, and end up one on each side of him. They're both very friendly, and always smiling and laughing, making him feel like the greatest guy in the world. Those Hufflepuffs really can butter a guy up.*

*The most fun one to watch is Daphne. Ron doesn't know what to make of her. She just appears out of nowhere occasionally and gives him a look, a smile, and just a few words in a low, sultry voice then walks away with a seductive sway to her hips. It puts Ron in a daze for the next half hour. (It usually gets Harry's attention too, but he always catches himself right away and gives me an apologetic look.) And she always manages to do it when Ron's with me and/or Harry, rather than when the other girls are with him. I don't know how she does it. That Slytherin girl is really crafty. I guess the Sorting Hat had her pegged right.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, September 21, 1997

*OK, this one is rather amusing. For some reason, Lavender decided not to wear a bra today. If she was trying to call attention to her 'assets' she succeeded spectacularly! I lost count of how many boys walked into walls or doors when she bounced down the corridors, or spilled things on*

themselves when she paraded them into the Great Hall during lunch. Of course, I'm well aware that her main target was Ron. And it was pretty obvious that he appreciated her efforts. I don't think he stopped grinning all day.

Unfortunately, I think it got to be a bit uncomfortable for her eventually. The breaking point was when she came to Mum's first aerobics class this afternoon. (I finished enchanting her tape player and gave it to her Friday night.) Lavender showed up in a tight tee shirt and stretch pants, and the exercises were just too vigorous for her unrestrained breasts to handle. Finally I took pity on her and cast a quick spell on her. It was one that Fleur showed me to use in case I thought I needed a bit more support when I'm not wearing a bra.

"Hermione! That's wonderful! What did you do?" Lavender asked eagerly after she had pulled Hermione aside. "You simply HAVE to teach me that spell."

"I'm sorry, I can't," Hermione explained. "It's a Veela spell that a friend showed me and I promised her I wouldn't reveal it to anyone." Lavender's expression showed a clear disbelief.

"You're friends with a Veela?"

"Well, do you remember Fleur Delacour, the Beauxbatons Tri-Wizard champion?" Hermione asked. Lavender nodded. "She married Ron's oldest brother."

"I know," Lavender replied. "But I didn't think you and Ginny got along with her very well."

Hermione shrugged. "I guess I've changed in quite a few ways since last year. She's probably my closest female friend now. Sort of like a big sister."

"So, is she the reason for your change in appearance?" Lavender inquired.

"The potion for my hair and the make-up, yes." Hermione admitted.

Lavender nodded again, looking thoughtful for a moment, then perked up. "All right then, but at least tell me how the spell works for you. I'm guessing you don't wear a bra at all any more?" Hermione blushed and nodded a bit sheepishly. "Can you vary how much support it gives you and, well, how much movement you get?" Hermione's smile confirmed that the buxom blonde was on the mark. "So, how much do you use?" Lavender asked with a sly grin.

Hermione returned a coy smile. "Enough to keep Harry's interest."

Lavender shook her head in wonder. "You really have changed a lot. We should have gotten the two of you together years ago."

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, September 22, 1997

*They've found Viktor! He's alive! I've been so worried about him ever since he disappeared right before the attacks at the beginning of the term. He's very badly injured though. Probably tortured extensively, according to Tonks. I can hardly bear to even think about it. They have him in St. Mungo's now. Harry and I are going to go visit him this evening after classes. I don't know how I'll be able to wait that long to see how he is.*

They were escorted to the floor where Viktor was being treated, past several levels of security. When they were finally admitted to his room Hermione broke away and ran to the bed.

"Viktor! I was so worried about you!" She barely managed to restrain herself from hugging him, realizing that his injuries would not respond well to that treatment, and settled for taking hold of his hand.

"We both were, Viktor," Harry added. "It's really good to see that you got out alive."

Viktor acknowledged their concern with a pained, but grateful expression in his eyes. "Her-mi-o-nee ... Har-ry," he whispered with an effort. "I ..."

"Shh, you don't need to say anything," Hermione insisted as her eyes welled up. "You just make sure you get better."

Harry told Hermione to stay and visit while he talked to the healers. After several minutes he returned with a satisfied look on his face. By this time Viktor had lapsed into sleep, likely aided by the comforting presence of his friend holding his hand. Harry explained to Hermione what he had been up to. He had inquired if Viktor needed any special assistance, thinking of possibly attempting to repeat the spell they had used on Charlie, but the healers had assured him that it was unnecessary. He had then expressed his concern about security, a concern which the staff shared. While they were grateful for the Auror presence, they were worried about a possible Death Eater attack. They were definitely not thrilled about the potential for a shoot-out in the hospital corridors.

Therefore, they were quite receptive to Harry's suggestion that Viktor be transferred to Hogwarts as soon as he was well enough to move, so that he could recover in the protection of the castle. Hermione threw her arms around his neck and hugged him, her face glowing with her appreciation. The pair stayed in Viktor's room the rest of the night, as Harry's favorable status with the Aurors came in handy once again. They were more than willing to bend the rules a touch for him, and besides, having the wands of Potter and Granger backing them up in case of an attack was a definite plus. The next morning, the young couple used the time turner prior to returning to Hogwarts to get an extra six hours of sleep before their classes.

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, September 24, 1997

*Here's something interesting. Harry mentioned that Olivander had told him that his mum's wand was good for charms. We had found James and Lily's wands in the Potter family vault this summer and Harry had taken them to keep as mementos. On a whim, I tried using her wand in Charms class today. It worked surprisingly well. Not as good as my regular wand, but I think it will work better for me than the backup wand I got from Moody this summer. Harry assured me that it's OK for me to use it as a backup wand.*

*Then I asked him what his dad's wand was supposed to be good for and he said Transfiguration. So I talked him into trying it out for that, and it worked pretty well for him also. He decided to keep using it in Transfiguration class in order to get more used to it. If he gets really good with it, it will give him another option when we fight Voldemort, since it won't lock up with Voldemort's wand the way Harry's original one does.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, September 26, 1997

*Viktor was transferred to Hogwarts today. He's better than he was, but Madame Pomfrey insists that he'll need to spend several weeks in the Hospital Wing. Harry grimaced when he heard that, and she just smiled and shook her head. I'll bet she hopes that Viktor is a more cooperative patient than Harry usually is.*

*Viktor is still in some pain when he's awake, so Madame Pomfrey keeps him asleep most of the time. I'll go and visit him in the evenings. I teased him (and Harry) by announcing that I'd sit by his bedside and read to him from Hogwarts, a History. Predictably, Harry groaned loudly when I said that, so of course I had to hit him. Then I got him with a tickling jinx. That actually made Viktor smile.*

-o-

*Augusta Longbottom, Neville's gran, is also here now. She had been released from St. Mungo's two weeks ago and apparently has been busy working on legislation with DMLE Director Hammer. Both of them got together after Harry and I talked with them over the summer about the possibility of requesting that Gringotts seal the vaults of convicted Death Eaters and establishing a procedure for the Ministry to seize their assets. With the DMLE behind it, and Mrs. Longbottom lobbying for it in the Wizengamot, combined with the fallout from the Death Eater attacks on pureblood targets over the summer, they managed to get it passed early this week. The tricky part was that they needed to word it carefully so that due process is followed. They don't want to make it too easy, or they could have a situation like Sirius where they could have taken the Black family fortune even though he was innocent.*

*It was reported in the Daily Prophet this morning, and there was apparently quite the stir among some old pureblood families. It was all coordinated, of course, and Gringotts had already sealed the vaults prior to the public announcement, before anyone could react. Mrs. Longbottom says she's now marked for death because of what she did, and so is Director Hammer. That's really frightening, but after all, they did kill Hammer's predecessor in the position, Amelia Bones, last year so it's a definite possibility. There are obviously a lot of brave, dedicated people fighting with us against Voldemort. That's both good to know and saddening at the same time.*

*She's given us something to think about. We assumed that the Longbottom and Lovegood homes had been attacked because of Neville's and Luna's links to Harry, but she thinks it was because of both her and Mr. Lovegood's outspoken opposition to Voldemort. I guess it we'll never really know. When Harry and I finally face him, we'll have other things on our minds besides asking him about that.*

*So anyway, since she has that threat hanging over her, McGonagall arranged for her to come to Hogwarts also. She's going to be teaching a Magical Traditions class for muggleborns. If we can make time, Harry and I want to sit in on it. It should be very informative.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, October 1, 1997

*We finally heard from Bill and Fleur! They found Hufflepuff's Cup! They asked if we wanted them to bring it back so that Harry could destroy the Horcrux in it or if they should just destroy it there. We decided that it wasn't necessary for Harry to be involved, since Dumbledore destroyed the ring without him. And if they take care of it there, we wouldn't have the risk that something could happen to it or to them on the way home. It will be safer if they just destroy it before they come back.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, October 6, 1997

*Slughorn announced today in Potions class that we would learn how to make Wolfsbane potion this term, and would be making quite a lot of it. Gee, I wonder why? That man is so greedy. Given that it's Harry's money we're talking about, we'd actually end up paying him for potions that I made. Harry had an idea and went and talked to McGonagall. Then she went down and offhandedly reminded Slughorn that all potions made by students at Hogwarts belonged to the school, and wondered if he had any of value that were worth selling, as we were short on supplies in the Hospital Wing. He was not very happy about that. I'm reminded again why the Sorting Hat considered putting Harry in Slytherin.*

*Greed aside, Slughorn's treating me much better this year. Although I am the top student in the class again (now that Harry's gone, as he so cheekily reminds me on a regular basis,) I don't think that it's just because of that. I think he's playing up to the future Lady Potter. I now realize that despite Harry's success in Potions last year, most of Slughorn's fawning over him and his excessively favorable treatment was due to Harry's fame, not his perceived Potions ability. I still can't believe that I got jealous and pushed away my best friend because of that.*

*I am so lucky that things turned out the way they did between us. If Ron had accepted my advances I could easily have ended up with him and Harry with Ginny. I know neither of us would have been nearly as happy in that ending as we are together (Especially me! Harry and Ginny might have got along reasonably well, but I would have been miserable with Ron!). As Tom Cruise's character said in the movie about the sports star and his agent – Harry and I complete each other.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, October 10, 1997

*The situation with Ginny has continued to deteriorate. She and Zacharias Smith only lasted for two weeks, but it just got worse. Since then she's gone out with a series of guys who are just as bad. And she's started to get a reputation for showing the guys a really good time. Ron's been in detention three times this week for attacking guys he overheard saying things about her. The last guy she went out with was from Slytherin house, which prompted an interesting discussion last night.*

"I thought Ron was going to completely lose it because he was a Slytherin, but that part didn't seem to bother him as much as I expected it to," Harry commented once he and Hermione had returned to the Head Suite after breaking up a shouting match between the Weasley siblings.

"No, he was much more concerned about the guy's reputation than his house," Hermione agreed. "I'm glad to see that he's matured and is attempting to get over the whole 'all Slytherin's are evil' mindset. This is more like Blaise Zabini asking me out." Harry raised an eyebrow at that comment, causing Hermione to roll her eyes at him. "No, you silly git, he hasn't actually asked me out. He might have, though, if he didn't think you'd hex him into a pile of goo. But my point is, I wouldn't go out with him because he's a creep, not because he's from Slytherin." Harry nodded that he understood the distinction. "Now," Hermione smirked, "what would be the most disgusting would be if Ginny got together with Malfoy."

"Ugh! No kidding. How can you even suggest such a thing?" Harry protested. Then he thought for a moment. "No, what would be even more disgusting would be if *you* were with Malfoy."

Hermione burst out laughing. "No, actually, that's not so much disgusting as just completely absurd. You see, it's at least conceivable that Malfoy would consider being with Ginny, since she's a pureblood," she explained. "His treatment of her would be despicable, more like a sex slave than anything else, but since she's so attractive he would at least consider it. He would never even consider the possibility of anything with me, given my blood status. Now of course, Ginny would never have anything to do with him, since he and his family are the complete opposite of everything she and her family believe in. No matter how much she hated herself she wouldn't do that to the rest of her family."

"Inconceivable, huh?" Harry asked after a pause, trying to lighten what had turned into a truly depressing conversation. A little smile appeared on his face.

"Inconceivable!" Hermione responded with a grin. "And I don't want to hear you start quoting dialog from *The Princess Bride*."

"As you wish." Harry grinned back and Hermione sighed contentedly. That line always got to her. Harry smoothly moved around behind her and started massaging her shoulders and neck and she melted happily back into him. Suddenly she burst out with a sharp laugh and turned around.

"I just got this weird picture in my mind," she told him. "You're facing Voldemort for the final time and he's backing away in terror while you say ..."

"My name is Harry Potter. You killed my father. Prepare to die!" Harry finished for her, laughing. Hermione nodded and joined his laughter, the subject of Ginny's problem temporarily forgotten.

-o-

*Harry says quidditch practice has been very tense. Ginny's performance hasn't slipped a bit; in fact, she's better than ever. She's playing with such an intensity that she's scary. I think it's a way for her to release the pent up emotion that's tearing her apart.*

*This afternoon Harry overheard a conversation between two sixth year Ravenclaws that made us decide we have to do something ...*

"So, you're going out with Weasley tonight?"

"Yeah, can you believe it? She is so incredibly hot. I am going to be one lucky man."

"You mean she'll let you shag her?"

"Well, not that far yet, but the next best thing!"

-ooOoo-

Harry checked the Marauder's Map once again as he approached the broom cupboard that evening with a sickening feeling in his stomach. He was obviously reluctant to go through with it, but felt he had to step in and stop this. Taking a deep breath he quietly put up a silencing ward, unlocked the door, then threw it open.

The scene before him was as bad as he had feared. The Ravenclaw boy was sitting on a chair with his trousers and underwear around his ankles, with an expression of disbelief at his good fortune as he practically drooled at the beautiful girl before him. Ginny had removed her robes and her top, and was kneeling in front of him, her torso completely bare, as she lowered her head toward his lap. As she moved closer, his hands reached down to try to fondle her breasts.

*Stupefy!* Before either of them even knew he was in the small room, Harry had silently stunned the boy. Ginny jumped to her feet and turned on



him with a look of fury, clenching her hands into fists at her side, but made no effort to cover herself.

"What do you think you're doing!" she screamed at him. "Why are you here? This is none of your business!"

The sight before him was one that would have frozen him into incoherence the prior school year, but his experiences since then, particularly all the time he had spent with Hermione and Fleur sunbathing topless, enabled Harry to keep his cool. Not that he didn't notice. He was a normal male, after all, so a part of his mind filed away a detailed picture of her for later perusal while he focused his attention on the current situation. "Ginny," he said calmly. "Why are you doing this?"

"Why do you care? You don't want me! You've made that very clear. I'm not worthy of you. I get it, all right? I'm a failure. I've let down my family." Ginny's anger was slowly turning into sorrow, but it didn't hurt any less.

"Ginny that's not true ..." Harry tried to reassure her, but she wasn't listening.

"So if I'm not worth your time I can find someone else who likes me," she countered, tears now welling up in her eyes. "Now I have someone who loves me and you come in here and break it up. Why don't you leave me alone?" she pleaded.

"Ginny, he doesn't love you and you know it. These guys are just using you. They don't really care about you." Harry winced as he said these words. He couldn't expect them to make her feel any better, but he needed to make her realize their truth.

"Then no one cares about me and I might just as well die." Ginny's shoulders slumped and she covered her face with her hands and began sobbing. Harry now moved forward and tentatively put his hands on her shoulders.

"Ginny, you're wrong. Lots of people care about you. Your family cares about you. I care about you. Hermione cares about you ..."

"You don't love me. You love Hermione," Ginny argued, but she didn't pull away.

"Ginny I do love you and Hermione does too. Not like you wanted me to but more like ..."

"I don't need any more brothers." Ginny was wavering. It was clear that she was struggling with whether to accept the affection he was offering.

"Maybe not, but I could really use a sister. And Hermione would really like to have the sister back that she used to have." He pulled her toward himself and she resisted only briefly, allowing him to put his arms around her. "Ginny, you don't have to do this. You are a very special, beautiful, warm, fun loving, and all around wonderful girl. There are plenty of really great guys out there who would be so lucky to be with you if you gave them a chance."

Ginny broke down and threw her arms around Harry's neck, still sobbing. In turn, Harry wrapped her up in a tender hug. "Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry! You must think I'm the most horrible slut you can imagine. I know you'll never want anything to do with me now ..."

Harry murmured soothing words, trying to comfort her and reassure her that this wouldn't make him stop caring for her, while stroking her back. Carefully, without letting go of her, he began to pull his robes off in order to wrap her up in them. While he was doing this another hand appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and took the place of one of his hands on Ginny's back.

"What's going on here?" The door to the broom cupboard flew all the way open as Padma Patil, who had been on Prefect rounds, entered. Due to Harry's silencing spell no one inside the small room had heard her approach. Padma's eyes widened as she took in the scene in before her – Harry Potter, removing his robes while embracing a topless girl who was NOT his fiancée. "Harry! I don't believe this! How could you do this to Hermione?" Padma was obviously crushed by this betrayal, not only of Hermione, but of herself. She had believed so strongly in Harry Potter and everything she had thought he stood for.

"Padma, it's not what you think," Hermione blurted out as she threw off the invisibility cloak. Ginny, who had initially frozen in horror at being discovered, then turned in surprise at hearing Hermione's voice, relaxed somewhat as she realized that she was among friends who could be counted on to keep quiet about what they had seen. "Don't worry, we have everything under control now," Hermione continued as she turned to Ginny with a hopeful look. "We've just had a bit of a misunderstanding, but we've cleared it up now." Ginny hesitated, conflicting emotions warring across her face as her eyes darted back and forth between Harry and Hermione, then she gave Hermione a hesitant nod.

Hermione let out a sigh of relief, then pointed her wand at the unconscious Ravenclaw boy, directing his trousers back up his legs to cover him up. Padma blushed, amazed at how unconcerned Hermione seemed to be with the boy's nakedness, but then remembered that her sister had once commented on Hermione's relaxed attitude toward clothing. Hermione then levitated him out into the corridor and Padma, with one last puzzled look over her shoulder at Harry and Ginny, followed her. Hermione could see that the Indian girl was astounded that she would leave her boyfriend alone in the room with his half-naked former girlfriend.

"Um, a misunderstanding?" Padma finally managed. Hermione eyed her carefully for a few seconds, then nodded.

"Can I trust you to keep this to yourself?" Padma nodded vigorously and began to raise her wand to take an oath, but Hermione stopped her and continued. "Ginny's been making some bad choices lately. I think her mum gave her a really hard time this summer about Harry and she started feeling like a failure. She got so down on herself that it changed her whole personality. I don't know if you've noticed recently, but she's been nothing like the vivacious, outgoing girl we used to know. It got so bad that she started punishing herself by going out with guys like this creep. Hopefully she'll come to her senses now." Padma nodded, not really understanding how a girl who had everything going for her like Ginny could think so poorly of herself that she would date a guy like this. Since he was her housemate, she knew his reputation all too well. He usually preyed on younger girls who were easier to seduce. A girl like Ginny was way out of his league.

When Padma pointed this out to her, Hermione shrugged. At one level, she didn't understand how Ginny could feel that way either, but she was

also aware of how she herself had reacted somewhat similarly, but thankfully to a lesser extent, the previous school year.

Hermione next turned to the unconscious male still floating in front of her, and to Padma's astonishment promptly obliterated him of the memory of the last hour. Finally, she asked Padma to escort the would-be lady's man back to Ravenclaw Tower. Somewhat dazed by the events she had just witnessed, Padma agreed and levitated him away.

When Hermione reentered the broom cupboard Ginny, now fully dressed again, embraced her. "Thanks, Hermione. I'm sorry for not listening to you earlier." She pulled back with a dejected look on her face. "I've really made a mess of things now, haven't I? No decent boy will want to have anything to do with me after this."

Behind her, Harry put his arms on her shoulders and gave her a reassuring squeeze, and Hermione responded, "I don't think you should be so hard on yourself, Ginny. You've made a mistake and a really good guy won't hold it against you. But perhaps you should cool it with dating for a while." Ginny solemnly nodded and the three friends turned and headed back to Gryffindor Tower.

-ooOoo-

*What a relief that's over with. Well, perhaps not completely over, because it will be a while before Ginny gets over it and starts feeling better about herself. But I think she's headed in the right direction. She made us promise that we'd never tell Ron, or anyone else in her family, what she had done. I suggested that she might be able to confide in Fleur, and she allowed that she thought she could do that. We each gave her a hug before she went up to the dorms and she thanked us again with tears in her eyes.*

*When we got back to our suite Harry and I just turned and hugged each other. It was such an emotionally charged night, and we had been so worried that it would turn out badly. We decided to go straight to bed and just hold each other all night. This incident tonight made me SO glad that I have him.*

-oooOOOooo-

Back at Potter Manor Hermione closed the notebook and sighed. "I am so relieved that the situation with Ginny finally got resolved. I was really scared there for a while."

"I was nervous about your plan for me to go in there and confront her alone, while you stayed under the invisibility cloak," Harry replied. "For a while I was sure she was going to hex me." Hermione smiled at him and patted his arm. "But you were right, as usual. I was the one who had the best chance of getting through to her." He smiled back and leaned over to plant a little kiss on top of her head.

"I wonder if Mrs. Weasley has any idea of what she did to her daughter, with all the harping about you she did last summer," Hermione responded concernedly. "Have you heard anything about how she's doing since we got back?"

"Minnie heard from Winky that she's doing much better. Susan's mum has been visiting her every week ever since September and talking to her about things, trying to bring her back to reality. Apparently she's accepted that Ginny and I aren't going to be together, which will take the pressure off of Ginny. I think she's beginning to understand that you and I are together, but I'm not sure if she knows how serious we are. There was a message from Ron that the Weasley family is going to decide the day before the wedding if they are going to bring her or not. They want to be certain she won't do anything to disrupt it."

Hermione nodded. While it made for great drama in the movies when someone actually stood up in a church and challenged a marriage when they got to the 'Does anyone object?' part of the ceremony, it was most decidedly unpleasant to have it happen at one's own wedding.

Harry removed his arm from around Hermione and stretched out. "I think we could use a bit of exercise. What do you say we check out that new pool you surprised me with?"

Hermione nodded happily. Harry had been thrilled when Minnie proudly showed him the new swimming pool that had been added to the mansion after they had gone back to Hogwarts in September. The indoor portion was under a greenhouse type enclosure and was heated to a comfortable temperature. There was also a sunning area where Hermione claimed that they could sunbathe even in the winter, at least on those days when the sun was out. She got up and went over to a dresser and pulled out a small pair of swim briefs for Harry, and an even smaller bikini bottom for herself. She tossed Harry's suit to him and quickly removed her clothing and put on the bikini bottom, making sure he was watching, then tied a pareo around her hips and pulled on a very short cropped tank top. She smiled broadly as she noticed that her little show meant that Harry's swimsuit didn't fit very well. Keeping her eyes on his display, she slinked forward toward him as alluringly as she could.

"You are such a tease," he protested.

"I've been taking lessons from a Veela," she purred back. When she was right in front of him she reached down and stroked him, causing him to moan.

"Just a few more days now," she whispered. That thought caused a tingle between her own legs. Then he reached down with his hand and gave her bum a squeeze, and she gasped. After sharing a long, passionate kiss, the loving couple finally made their way down to the swimming pool where they had a long, very enjoyable swim.

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# Hermione's Plan

## Fall Term Part 3 - On to Halloween

### Chapter 26, Fall Term Part 3, On To Halloween

December 22 yet again

When they had finished swimming Hermione went over to the sunning area and stretched out on a lounge chair. She could tell that Harry was still skeptical about whether they could actually get a suntan but she also knew he wouldn't pass up an opportunity to join her as she was laying out wearing just a tiny string bikini bottom. As he settled into the lounge chair next to her she explained that even though it wouldn't be nearly as effective as being outdoors in the summer, she tanned relatively rapidly and she wanted to have a bit more color in her skin with her wedding dress.

After a time spent with her eyes closed, just thinking about what they had been reading, Hermione got a mischievous look on her face. Turning toward Harry she teased, "So, did that incident with Ginny change your mind about who you'd like to be on a topless beach with?"

Harry grinned at her, but denied her the satisfaction of being flustered by her question. "Nope. She looked pretty good, but I like the way you look better. You and Fleur."

Hermione pretended to pout. "Fleur?"

"Yep. You're number one and she's number two." This, of course, earned him major brownie points with Hermione, as she still was convinced that the French witch had an absolutely perfect figure, and she beamed at him. "You're so sweet."

But Harry turned the tables on her with a tease of his own. "On the other hand, Ginny does have a very fine-looking arse."

Hermione huffed and folded her arms across her chest indignantly. She had to bite her lip, though, so that she could maintain her hurt expression. But she didn't fool Harry a bit. He got off his lounge and knelt next to her pretending to apologize and offered, "But it's not nearly as nice as yours."

With a quick move Hermione reached out and grabbed Harry around the neck and pulled him down on top of her (which he didn't resist in the least), then kissed him soundly. When she was finished she pushed him back a little, poked him in the chest and announced, "And don't you forget it." Then she ruined the effect by giggling.

Somehow Harry managed to roll them over on the lounge chair so that he was on the bottom, then pulled her to himself. He reached down and gave her bottom an appreciative little squeeze, then wrapped her up in his arms while she snuggled up and made herself comfortable.

"I suppose you did get a pretty good look at it during the Halloween Party, now that I think of it," she recalled.

"We got a pretty good look at quite a few girls that night," Harry admitted. "I can't believe how revealing some of those costumes were."

"Yes, one in particular was quite the eye-opener," Hermione recalled with a smile. "That party was definitely the highlight of the term. Let's stay here as long as the sun is out and then we'll finish going through the journal after supper."

-oooOOOooo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, October 13, 1997

*Bill and Fleur stopped by Hogwarts today to fill us in on their progress. They destroyed the Horcrux in Hufflepuff's cup without any trouble. While they were abroad they checked out a few more leads but came up empty. Bill is convinced now that the last Horcrux (aside from the one in Nagini) is somewhere in Britain. He cautions that it may take some time to find it, though, since they have to keep their movements secret. The goblins they're working with scout out a site thoroughly before they approach it, to determine if there are any alarm or other protective wards on it.*

*After they finished I pulled Fleur aside for some 'girl talk' and the guys got the message and left the Head Suite. Harry took Bill to visit with Ron and once they were gone I told Fleur that Ginny really needed to talk with her. I used the PDA pendant to summon Ginny, then I let her and Fleur know they could use my bedroom (that I haven't actually slept in even once) for as long as they needed it. Then I went and told Harry and Ron that Ginny wasn't feeling well and wouldn't make it to quidditch practice today. Fleur was in there with her for more than an hour. When they came out they were hugging and I could see that both of them had been crying, but Ginny managed a smile and thanked me.*

At dinner that evening Bill and Fleur joined the Gryffindor table. Bill sat on one side of Fleur and Ginny on the other, with Harry and Hermione directly across, so most of the Gryffindor male population was spared too much embarrassment from being dazzled by the part-Veela. Fleur was her usual buoyant and animated self and near the end of the meal declared that she was enjoying being there so much that she didn't want to leave. At this point she turned to Bill and 'suggested' that they stay at the castle for a while and spend some time with Ginny and Ron before going back to work at Gringotts.

Bill got the message loud and clear – this 'suggestion' was not open for discussion. He went up to the staff table and asked McGonagall if there was anything she needed help with for the next week or so, and she said she would be delighted to have their assistance. The headmistress quickly instructed the house elves to set them up in the guest quarters. When Bill reported back, Fleur bubbled excitedly about how happy she was that they could spend more time there, and how much she had been looking forward to seeing Ginny, Ron, and Harry play quidditch. Hermione just sat back and smiled, marveling to herself at what the clever French witch had just accomplished. She had managed to arrange to stay at Hogwarts to help Ginny's recovery process without anyone having any idea of the real reason.

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, October 16, 1997

*Fleur 'took care of the last of the boys who took advantage of Ginny today. My goodness, one should not get on the bad side of a Veela or a member of her family! She wasted no time in finding out from Ginny exactly what she had done and with whom (fortunately, nothing further than what Harry and I witnessed) and proceeded to obliviate those incidents from their minds. It took no effort at all for her to lure each of them into an unused classroom (just a look and a flip of her hair) where she calmly and methodically adjusted their memories and left them in a daze, wondering what had happened.*

*This will go no further than the three of us who already know (four, if you count Padma). We're not sure how McGonagall would take to learning that someone obliviated her students, but there's no need to find out. Personally, I feel that she would have some compassion for Ginny, and might even agree with our solution. I think she has a very kind heart under her stern exterior.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, October 18, 1997

*We had quite an eventful day today. Viktor was finally released from the infirmary, and Gryffindor played their first quidditch match of the season. I thought Viktor would enjoy watching the game, so I took him along to join me in the Gryffindor stands. To say that this caused some excitement would be a vast understatement. First of all because this was Viktor Krum, international quidditch star! Second was because this was Viktor Krum with Hermione Granger! Little did I know how much trouble that would cause.*

Hermione came into the Hospital Wing to see Viktor waiting for her with a big smile on his face. She had tried to come visit him every day for the three weeks he had been here, and knew how much he had been looking forward to finally getting out. Harry, Ron, and Ginny had already left for the pregame meeting so it was just her and Viktor walking down the corridors to the Entrance Hall and then out onto the grounds as they made their way out to the quidditch pitch.

She ignored the strange looks they were getting; as the fiancée of the Boy Who Lived she had become accustomed to the extra attention. And, she reasoned, a good deal of the attention was directed toward the man she was escorting. Viktor, who was somewhat ungainly on his feet normally, was even less coordinated after being in bed for three weeks, and stumbled as they descended the front steps. Hermione automatically reached around him and pulled him to herself to steady him, then kept a firmer grasp on his elbow the rest of the way to the stadium. She didn't notice that this action caused the whispers of the onlookers to increase significantly.

"Thank you," Viktor said with a look of surprise. She noted his eyes pass admiringly over her torso, and realized that she had displayed an upper body strength that would be unexpected from a woman of her size. She smiled at him and tossed her hair back in a saucy gesture that hinted that there were things about her that he didn't know. Unfortunately, once again these actions were misinterpreted by the crowd of students who continued to scrutinize their every move.

The pecking order in the Gryffindor quidditch stands was that the older students got the more favorable higher seats, and as even the Minister of Magic himself would probably not outrank Hermione Granger and Viktor Krum in this stadium, the pair eventually found themselves sitting in the topmost row as the other spectators gradually found their seats. Hermione's attention was directed toward the locker rooms as she prepared to jump to her feet and cheer when Harry and the rest of the Gryffindor team made their entrance when she was diverted by a tugging on her hand. Looking down, she realized for the first time that she had never let go of Viktor's arm, and had actually entwined their arms and hands during the climb to their seats. Now Viktor was putting her left hand palm down on his right hand while he examined her engagement ring.

"It is very beautiful. Congratulations. He is a lucky man," he said softly, leaning close to her ear so that she could hear him over the noise of the crowd. Hermione blushed and beamed happily at him while he smiled back.

"Thank you," she replied. "We'll want you to come to the wedding of course," she continued in a low voice. "We're planning it for right after Christmas, but we're trying to keep it private."

Viktor gave her a knowing grin. "I never really stood a chance, did I?" Hermione's blush deepened as she lowered her head and shook it demurely.

"No, not really," she admitted. "Even back then I know you could tell that Harry was the most important person in my life. It took us a while to figure out exactly what that meant – well, I guess it took him longer than me – but we couldn't possibly be happier about how it turned out."

Neither of them realized it, but the noise in the stadium was slowly dropping as more and more of the students twisted and turned to get a better look at the Head Girl and the quidditch star sitting close together, holding hands, talking in low voices, and smiling at each other at the top of the Gryffindor stands.

"Hermione!" a female voice hissed. "What are you doing?" Startled, Hermione looked up to see Lavender and Parvati standing in front of her. The two girls split and sat down beside them, Lavender next to Hermione and Parvati next to Viktor. Viktor smiled politely at Parvati, and she smiled back at him before looking away shyly as it struck her just whom she was flirting with.

"What?" Hermione responded to Lavender in confusion. Instead of answering, Lavender just swept her arm out at the stands below them, where more than a hundred heads quickly turned away from their observation of what appeared to be a major celebrity scandal in the making.

"Looking pretty cozy up here," Seamus called out as he and Neville joined them. "Hope we're not breaking anything up." Hermione put her head in her hands briefly and groaned as the two Gryffindors took seats directly in front of her and Viktor. *Not another Potter-Granger-Krum love triangle*

*story. Howdid she manage to get herself into these situations?* Then she decided that Seamus had the right of it by joking about the situation. Treating the whole incident lightly would be the best way to dispel any potential rumors. Laughing out loud, she stood and gave Seamus and Neville quick hugs, then introduced her four housemates to Viktor. As soon as that was concluded she was saved from having to do anything further when the two teams streaked into the sky and the crowd erupted in applause.

Hermione waved excitedly at Harry as he zoomed by and he waved back, fortunately unaware of how close he had been to having his heart broken, at least in the minds of the Hogwarts gossip network. Now that that mini-drama had concluded almost before it had begun, Hermione relaxed and enjoyed the match.

Not since her third year, when she had last attended quidditch matches with Ron, had Hermione sat with someone who could provide such expert commentary on the match as Viktor did. Naturally, his analysis was considerably less biased than Ron's had been, particularly given that this was a Gryffindor-Slytherin match. He was impressed with Harry's seeker skills, although he explained that Harry's tactics could use improvement. He could not help but admire his flying, however. He also commented quite favorably on Ginny's performance, deciding that she might have a possible future as a professional. Indeed, Ginny was virtually unstoppable. While it was true that her new Nimbus 2010 outclassed any other broomstick on the pitch, she flew it so naturally it was as though she was born to fly. After she scored the first ten goals of the match she let up and concentrated on getting her teammates more involved. But there was no doubt in anyone's mind that she could score whenever she wanted. On the other hand, Ron's keeping ability was simply not tested enough by the inexperienced Slytherin chasers to make a fair evaluation.

After a while Viktor commented that Harry seemed to be concentrating more on distracting and blocking the opposing seeker from catching the snitch, rather than going for it himself. He speculated that he was trying to prolong the match in order to give his teammates more playing time. His guess was proven correct when the score reached 300 to 30 and Harry signaled Ron to call a time-out. After a quick consultation, Colin Creevey rotated in as chaser and Dennis Creevey took over as seeker, and Hermione was surprised when Harry zoomed over and hovered his broom right behind her and Viktor as the game resumed. She was even more shocked when he leaned over her back and gave her a quick kiss on the top of her head, then started rubbing her shoulders and at the same time getting into a technical discussion with Viktor about some points of strategy. She focused on the nice feelings he was sending through her and tried not to dwell on the fact that in order to do what he was doing, he must only be holding onto his Firebolt with his knees.

Eventually, after Ron had rotated in the rest of the reserve chasers and beaters, the Slytherin seeker finally caught the snitch, ending the game but giving Gryffindor an overwhelming 500 to 200 victory. By the time Ginny had left the game she had scored 30 of her team's 50 goals, while Ron had let in only five for the entire match. To Hermione's relief, Harry, once he noticed how nervous he had been making her, had got off his broom and climbed into the stands to sit next to her. She and Viktor moved apart to make a space for him, and the others in the row obligingly shifted down. With this action, and the friendly way Viktor and Harry interacted, the three of them (entirely unwittingly in Harry's case) quashed the last traces of gossip about their relationship.

That evening, while the traditional quidditch victory celebration was in full swing, Harry, Hermione, and Viktor retired to a corner of the Gryffindor common room to discuss what Viktor's future role in the war might be. He could certainly not return to his intelligence gathering efforts on the continent now that he was a marked man. Deciding that it would be best for him to remain at Hogwarts, they sought out McGonagall to see if she had any thoughts on the matter. Once she learned that Viktor didn't need a paying position, being fairly wealthy from his quidditch career and endorsements, she came up with what everyone agreed was a perfect solution.

Viktor would help out with Defense Against the Dark Arts classes and the PDA, bringing with him his knowledge of the dark spells that were regularly taught at Durmstrang but not at Hogwarts. In addition, he would move into the Slytherin dorms and serve as a sort of surrogate big brother to the younger students of Slytherin House, providing them with a light side role model. There was plenty of room, given that there were only three male Slytherin students in the sixth and seventh years combined. The three of them could easily be accommodated in the sixth year boys dorm, leaving the seventh year dorm available for him. Given his background and the fact that he had spent most of his time with Slytherin students during the year of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, he would be well received there.

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, October 19, 1997

*Viktor came to his first PDA meeting this evening. He was really impressed at what we're doing and the scale we're doing it on. We have nearly 200 students in five groups, and meet five nights a week, Sunday through Thursday. We've been emphasizing mastering a few simple principles – Evasion, Shielding, Disarming, and finally Stunning.*

"In Evasion, the goal is to get away from an attacker, by running, hiding, dodging, or whatever. If possible, disapparation and using a portkey are also encouraged. Dodging is the one we drill at the most," Hermione explained as she and Viktor watched a row of younger students cast spells at another row, who all tried to dodge out of the way. "We start with tickling jinxes, then move on to stinging hexes when the evading students get better at it," she continued. They stopped to watch as a fourth year stopped firing wildly at his partner, and took time to aim. This made it much more difficult for the third year girl to dodge, and he eventually hit her causing her to squirm and giggle. "As you can see, this drill helps develop accuracy also," Hermione added.

"In Shielding, the goal is to put up a shield as quickly as possible, and hold it for as long as possible," she announced as they moved on to another group of students. "The better students get at it, the trickier we make it, including having four opponents take turns casting at them, so they don't know which direction the hex is coming from. To test the strength of the shield, the student tries to maintain it as all four opponents fire at it and we time how long it takes before the shield fails."

"And how long will your shield last?" Viktor asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Long enough," Hermione returned with an impertinent smirk. "Care to try me?"

Word quickly spread throughout the training rooms as students moved out of the way of the pair and gathered at a respectful distance. Suddenly two shield barriers flared into existence on either side of where they were standing, courtesy of Professor Flitwick, and the students quickly scrambled behind them, crowding for the best view. The more alert upper years began conjuring benches of gradually increasing height for use as make-shift bleachers.

Meanwhile Hermione had removed her robes to reveal her dragonhide armor, which she always wore to PDA practices, so that Viktor would realize that she was protected even if her shield broke and therefore wouldn't hold back. For his part, Viktor's eyes widened at the sight, but he was brought up short when he saw Hermione smirking at him again.

"Are you going to just stand there and gape or are you actually going to try a hex."

Embarrassed to be caught looking, Viktor rapidly raised his wand and sent a stunning spell rocketing toward her, but she was expecting it and effortlessly turned it away as a bright golden shield formed before her. Surprised at how easily she had handled it, Viktor shook his head and tried again. Stunner after stunner splashed against her bright shield and dissipated, no matter how much power he put into them. Unbeknownst to him, Hermione was drawing small, undetectable amounts of magical power from the life energies of everyone in the hall, in fact from everyone in the school.

Viktor gradually switched to more powerful spells, with the same frustrating results. Finally he put all of his power into one final attempt. "*Reducto!*" Hermione had not been expecting him to use such a dangerous curse, and could feel her shield waver as the blasting curse impacted. Instead of feeding more power into it and drain her reserves, she decided to let it go, and her shield shattered in a shower of silver and gold sparks as the explosive wave threw her back. By rolling with the spell she still had plenty of power to put up another shield in case Viktor launched another spell, although she guessed that he had used the last bit of his power and doubted that he had anything left. While flying through the air she braced herself for the impact with the safety barrier behind her but it never came, as she found herself slowing and eventually coming to a halt in a nice comfortable cushioning spell. Of course she knew exactly who had cast it.

For his part, Viktor had no intention of casting another spell, even if he had the strength to do it. It didn't matter in any case, since he suddenly found himself immobilized in a powerful petrification jinx. The strange thing was that he hadn't heard the spell being cast or even seen any wand movement.

"Is there some reason why you're trying to hex my fiancée?" came a voice from his side. Unable to even turn his head, Viktor nevertheless recognized the voice, and could only wait until Harry Potter moved into his view. Once there, he found himself caught by those glowing green eyes, and suddenly observed first hand why every Hogwarts student went to great lengths to avoid getting on the wrong side of this year's Head Boy.

Fortunately for Viktor's peace of mind, Harry's attention was diverted by Hermione's arms coming around his neck as she leaned over to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thank you dear," she said sweetly. "But I think I had things pretty much under control."

Harry turned and made a show of looking her up and down before he cleared his throat and pronounced, "Oh, all right then." He then turned back grinned at Viktor to let him know he was only having him on and wordlessly cancelled the petrification spell. Then he took Hermione's hand as she moved up along beside him and greeted Viktor, while the students, talking excitedly about what they had just witnessed, resumed their drills. As they moved on to the next training area Harry seamlessly picked up the description of the PDA training where Hermione had left off.

"Now, disarming is trickier, since a powerful disarming hex will knock the recipient off his feet," Harry commented. "So we practice this in a well-padded room. This has the added benefit of having the students learn how to fall without injuring themselves." They stopped a bit while Ginny and Luna demonstrated, with Luna casting an *Expelliarmus* that knocked down Ginny, who rolled expertly as she hit the mat, then bounced to her feet. She shot a quick smile over at Harry as he sent her a thumbs-up before continuing.

The final practice area was again heavily shielded. Here students were firing stunning spells at target dummies. Viktor was shocked to see that some of the dummies were moving, some appeared to have shields, and some actually fired back! This time Hermione took up the explanation again. "For Stunning, we use the practice targets Professor Flitwick and I developed over the summer, since it's not safe for someone to be repeatedly stunned. Once a student has mastered these 4 basic areas, we move them on to blasting hexes, again using target dummies. Then we get them involved in groups for simulated combat situations. So far, 10 students have moved into this phase, joining the 30 from this summer." She turned to Viktor who still stood there, amazed at what he saw, with a gleam in her eye. "So, any questions?"

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*After spending several minutes absorbing everything that was going on at the practice, Viktor had one question – 'What can I do to help?' I told him what we needed most was simulations of realistic combat situations and he jumped at the opportunity. I think he has some bad memories of the fight where he was captured that he wants to exorcise.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, October 24, 1997

*Lavender asked me to introduce her to Fleur today so she could ask if she would show her that support spell. She's finally got up her nerve to approach her. I was taken aback, since I'm not used to Lavender being intimidated by a good looking woman – she's usually the intimidating one. I didn't think Fleur would teach it to her, but she put her off rather nicely. She said that Veela magic was easy for Veela to cast, but difficult for other women, and that I was one of the few who could manage them. My reputation of being able to do spells that no one else can get came in pretty handy for that excuse.*

*Lavender then asked her if she would at least cast it on her for Halloween. It seems that she has a costume in mind that is too bare for a bra, but she will need some support to be able to wear it. Fleur agreed, but said that to be fair she should offer it to any other girl who needs it. Then*

the conversation moved to discussing which girls needed it the most. Lavender, of course, knows exactly how every witch in the castle stacks up.

"Well, I guess Susan for certain," Lavender admitted grudgingly, not wanting to give her rival any sort of advantage. "In Gryffindor, only Hermione besides me might need it, and she already knows it. Parvati and Ginny certainly don't." Hermione winced a bit at that blunt assessment, but it was accurate. "Hannah is probably about the same size as Hermione, so it depends on what she is wearing." She went on to accurately assess the attributes of all the seventh year girls, and a few of the sixth years. Except for two.

"What about Daphne and Tracey?" Hermione inquired, already knowing the answer. Lavender scowled. She really didn't want to do any favors for Daphne. Ron was already much too distracted by her.

"Certainly not Tracey, she'd never wear anything needing it," Lavender decided. "Daphne ... maybe."

"Eet seems to me zat she may already know eet," Fleur mused. "Either zat or she ees naturally very firm." Lavender was not happy with that analysis, but Hermione decided that from what she had seen that Fleur might be right.

Then Fleur agreed to do the spell for Lavender on Halloween, and to offer it to Susan and Hannah and others if they needed it, and the blonde Gryffindor left satisfied.

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, October 26, 1997

*People are starting to get pretty excited about the Halloween Party, and what they're going to wear. There are going to be three different parties – one for 1st through 3rd years, one for 4th and 5th years, and one for 6th and 7th years. As the staff with the least seniority, Mum and Dad and Remus and Tonks got roped into being chaperones. Bill and Fleur volunteered to help out too. Mum and Dad are going to take the 6th and 7th years.*

*Mum came up with the idea to go as characters from the Wizard of Oz and talked the rest of them into it. She will be Dorothy, of course, and Dad wanted to be the Tin Man. Fleur will be the beautiful Good Witch of the North (naturally), and Tonks will morph into the Wicked Witch of the West. She claims it will be easy – she'll just model herself after her Aunt Bellatrix. Remus and Bill both wanted to be the Lion, being loyal Gryffindors, but Remus won out so Bill will be the Scarecrow. Mum and Dad have been teaching about muggle culture for the past week in their Muggle Studies classes in preparation, so at least the seventh years will know who they all are.*

*Harry and I will wear our Mayan tunics, loincloths, and leather boots, although I'm not anticipating that too many students will get a chance to see the loincloths. (Some might get a glimpse of mine, though, since my tunic is rather short – thank you very much Mr. Potter.) I was a bit nervous about that until I found out what some of the other seventh year girls are planning. It looks like it may have been a mistake for McGonagall to assign a pair of nudists to be chaperones for a costume party! The girls have been asking about certain costumes, and Mum is approving nearly anything. As the word gets around, they're getting more and more daring. I'm anxiously waiting to see what they end up with on Friday night.*

*On the other hand, Mum and Dad are making it clear that they won't put up with any indecent behavior. And they've recruited a whole corps of house elves to back them up. The students will not be permitted to wander away from the party seeking more private locations. The house elves will be able to find them easily and break up anything improper.*

*Here's what I know so far about costumes.*

*Ron is – surprise, surprise – going as a Chudley Cannons quidditch player. I didn't have the heart to tell him how badly those bright orange robes clashed with his hair. Dean and Colin talked Neville and Seamus into the four of them going as muggle comic book superheroes. Colin is going to be Spiderman and Dean will be Batman. Somehow they persuaded Neville to go as Superman. As soon as Seamus learned that the Incredible Hulk was green, he promptly decided that's who he would be. He'll need to use some engorgement charms to be more realistic. On the other hand, I don't think Neville will need any more muscles to look good in his Superman costume.*

*I heard that Justin is going to dress up in top hat and tails like a muggle magician. I think that's really clever. He's mastered creating a rabbit in Transfiguration class, so he should literally be able to pull a rabbit out of his hat. He also tipped off Ernie and the other Hufflepuff boys about toga costumes. I think they're going to be Roman gods. They're trying to talk some girls into wearing togas with them to be Roman goddesses, and I think Hannah, at least, is considering it. Susan, though, wants to project a warrior image (she thinks this will impress Ron more) so she was thinking of just wearing her dragonskin armor (without a bra, of course). But when Justin found out about the Gryffindor comic book superheroes he suggested that she go as Wonder Woman. As soon as Susan saw a picture of what her outfit looked like, she agreed. That short, tight bottom shows more leg than anything even I've ever worn in training. And of course that lowcut strapless top will be absolutely eye-popping on Susan.*

*Getting back to goddesses, Lavender is going as Aphrodite. Her costume seems to consist of a few wisps of cloth. The strips over her breasts aren't nearly wide enough to cover her. They might possibly cover a girl as small as Parvati, but if I wore them I'd leak out on both sides. On Lavender I think there's more breast uncovered than covered. I can see why she needs Fleur's support spell! Speaking of Parvati, she's putting together a costume that looks like a harem girl's outfit, and says she'll be a genie. Lots of see through fabric. Padma is going as the Hindu goddess Durga. Her costume is quite revealing for a girl as conservative as Padma. It has a bare midriff that goes from right below her bust all the way past her navel. Of course the most impressive aspect is the 8 arms. She's actually going to transfigure herself 6 additional arms! Amazing!*



*Fleur is helping Ginny with her costume, and neither of them is telling anyone what it is. Based on the giggling and blushing, I think it's probably pretty revealing as well.*

-ooOoo-

From the Journal of Hermione Granger, October 31, 1997

*We're all set for the party tonight. Lately, though, we've been getting nervous about what else might happen. Even aside from the fact that Halloween was the night Harry's parents were killed and he got his famous scar, it has also been quite a notorious night since we've been at Hogwarts. First year was the troll incident, of course, and second year it was the night the Chamber was first opened. Third year Sirius attacked the Fat Lady trying to get into Gryffindor tower on Halloween night, and then fourth year it was the night Harry's name came out of the Goblet of Fire. It's only been the past two years that nothing significant has happened. We're hoping that trend continues.*

The Halloween party for the 6th and 7th year students was held in their new lounges, which had been magically combined and expanded for the occasion. There was a dance floor at one end, food and drinks at the other end, and lots of tables of different sizes in the middle, seating between two and eight people. The idea was that the students could gather together in whatever groupings they wished. At first they tended to stay with others from their own houses, and also clustered somewhat by gender, nervously checking out the members of the opposite sex. Hermione took the opportunity during this initial ice-breaking period to look at the costumes on the other girls.

Ginny was the first girl she noticed, since they had come to the party together and the petite redhead was just ahead of her as they removed their cloaks. Hermione's eyes widened and she smiled as she took in her friend's costume. Fleur had evidently been completely successful in persuading her to come out of the shell she had withdrawn into following the disastrous dating episode. She was wearing one of Fleur's bikinis that Hermione had helped pick out the previous summer. The top had been magically downsized to fit Ginny, but still covered her more than it did Fleur. The real eye-opener was the bottom. Actually, to most eyes the bikini bottom was covered by a long pareo tied to ride low on her hips, but Hermione soon became aware that the cover-up was in fact of variable transparency. Apparently Ginny was able to control how see-through it was for different people, since whenever Ron looked her way it was completely opaque. Even in that mode, however, Ginny was showing a great deal of bare skin.

Hermione was also amused to see that the four Gryffindor 'superheroes' seemed to have formed a protective guard for the popular girl, with her consent. With this security, she was able to relax and let her old personality re-emerge, laughing and flirting lightly with all of them. But when any male that they deemed to have questionable intentions approached, they were immediately on guard. The clear message was 'look, but don't touch'.

When Harry returned after hanging up their cloaks, along with two drinks, Hermione gratefully took one and directed his attention towards their housemates. "Take a look at what Ginny's wearing."

"Hey," Harry realized, "that's one of Fleur's bikinis she has on." Hermione nodded and waited. "But if I remember correctly, that one was a ... wow!" Hermione grinned. Evidently Harry was on the 'favored' list, since the pareo had turned semi-transparent when he looked at it and revealed the outlines of the thong bikini bottom. "Merlin, she really has a nice ..." Harry stopped himself just in time and shot an embarrassed look at Hermione.

Hermione just giggled. "A very nice-looking bum, yes."

"Hmm, I guess I never really noticed before," claimed Harry, attempting an innocent look. Hermione laughed at his antics and swatted his arm good-naturedly before she turned to look at some of the other costumes. Lavender's costume was currently drawing the most attention, as the strips of material barely covered the essentials, but many of the other girls were drawing appreciative looks as well. Hannah's and Megan's (Megan Jones, another seventh year Hufflepuff) togas were both of the one shoulder variety, and the uncovered part on the opposite side dipped perilously close to revealing too much. Once more, magic did the trick, and the cloth remained exactly where they wanted it to for the entire party, even though the giggling motion beneath should have vibrated it off within minutes. Susan was easily as impressive a Wonder Woman as Hermione had ever seen, even given the tendency of comic book artists to overemphasize their heroines' bustlines.

Daphne Greengrass had gone for a completely black look. She had spelled her hair black, and was wearing a costume that reminded Hermione of the television character Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, who hosted late night movies. Basically, it was much like Lavender's costume, with lots of filmy material and plenty of cleavage, only all black. Beside her Tracey Davis was also dressed in black, but she was as close to the opposite of Daphne as she could be. The clever girl had managed to duplicate perfectly the attire and mannerisms of the Hogwarts headmistress, Minerva McGonagall.

Both Parvati and Padma were also receiving many compliments on their outfits, which the Gryffindor twin took in stride but which somewhat flustered her Ravenclaw sibling. Hermione decided she needed some encouragement and dragged Harry over to the group of Ravensclaws they were with. Padma flushed briefly when she found herself staring too long at Harry's bare legs, but Parvati wasn't shy at all. "So, is there more to that costume that we can't see?" she teased him, eliciting a horrified gasp from her sister. Hermione noted that the males in the group, who were all dressed up as famous wizards of the past, perked up at this question, except their eyes were on her legs, of which considerably more was showing than of Harry's.

Harry merely grinned at Parvati, and at Padma too, who despite her shyness was also clearly interested in the answer. "Let's just say that the costume is completely authentic." He then raised his foot onto a chair and pretended to adjust his leather boot, which caused his tunic to ride up on his leg just enough for the bottom of his loincloth to be visible from where the twins were sitting. While the Patil girls tried to get over their shock, Hermione turned to the boys at the table, all of whom had eager looks on their faces, and shook her head with a sly smile, indicating that they had already seen as much of her as they were going to.

Hermione had just dragged Harry out onto the dance floor when the noise in the room dropped considerably as the students noticed another

costumed figure enter. Or rather, what appeared to be an *uncostumed* figure. Luna Lovegood had been keeping her outfit a secret, but that secret was now fully on display. She had come as a dryad – a wood nymph. And, as everyone now was aware, if they hadn't been already, nymphs in mythology were totally nude. Well, not totally nude, Hermione amended – they had wings. At least this variety did. Hermione didn't remember which kind of nymph had wings but she had no doubt that Luna would know.

Luna's gossamer wings were an extraordinary achievement of magic. They looked and moved just like the real thing, twitching slightly with her movements. Hermione shot a glance at her mother, but was surprised to see her nodding in satisfaction. Surely she had not approved a student attending the party in the nude? As Luna moved nearer, Hermione realized that things were not quite what they appeared. While Luna looked to be nude from a distance, there was in fact some sort of coating on her. The best way Hermione could think of to describe it was that if it were a muggle woman attempting a similar costume, it would have been a body stocking. Or perhaps flesh colored body paint, she was not exactly certain. If this costume was some sort of garment, it blended in seamlessly with her skin. For the most part, whatever it was appeared to be transparent, except in certain areas. While her breasts were perfectly visible, for example, certain details were lacking. Similarly with her pubic region – no one would be able to ascertain if Luna was completely blonde.

Hermione finally concluded that it was either a fabric of variable transparency – a more advanced version of Ginny's pareo – or an obfuscation charm that only concealed a few square inches in three specific areas. Something like the way the telly electronically blurred out those same body parts on people who either accidentally or intentionally were incompletely covered. In either case, it was extremely impressive magic.

"Harry?" Hermione had an impish idea to determine which method Luna was using. "Would you mind going over and dancing with Luna?"

"Uhhhhh ..." She felt Harry tense up. "I'm perfectly happy to be dancing with you," he stammered. "Wh ... Why would I want to dance with Luna?"

"Because if you danced with her you would be touching her and then you could find out for me if she's actually nude with a charm hiding her private bits or if she's wearing an invisible body stocking," Hermione explained, her eyes sparkling with mirth.

Harry recovered his wits enough to counter. "Perhaps, but I really should dance with Ginny too, to try to determine what exactly hers covers as well, don't you think?"

Hermione gave a mock scowl that turned into a grin. "I suppose. But perhaps it would be better to have Ron dance with Luna," she said slyly.

Harry turned them so he could see where Luna was going. "Too late. I think Luna's already made that decision." They both watched as the blonde Ravenclaw unhesitatingly marched right up to Ron (actually, floated might have been a better description) and asked him to dance with her.

Even when Ron and Luna were out on the dance floor, and had moved within a few feet of them, Hermione still couldn't tell how Luna was achieving the effect. The bright red color on Ron's face was no clue, as that probably would have been the result in either case. After he had finished dancing with her, Ron quickly moved away, and adamantly refused to tell Hermione anything. But she did notice that he kept looking in Luna's direction for the rest of the night.

Ron's hasty exit might have proven awkward for Luna, but for Justin Finch-Fletchly. While she was still looking hopefully at the retreating red-haired Gryffindor, he smoothly approached and asked her for the next dance. That led to another surprise, as the pair of them danced superbly together. Justin, as the son of an upper class British family, would have been expected to be a fine dancer, but Luna was just as good. As they swirled their way across the dance floor, with Justin in his top hat and tails, Hermione was reminded of old movies of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers – with the slight difference that this Ginger Rogers had wings and was essentially nude.

Just as the students were mostly getting over the novelty of Luna's costume and turning their attention elsewhere, the door opened again and Viktor Krum strode in. His costume initially generated little attention, for he was dressed as a quidditch player also, and carrying a Firebolt racing broom. But as the students noticed the details a rumble of chuckles emerged which gradually grew to laughter and applause. For his quidditch robes were not those of the Bulgarian national team, but the familiar red and gold of Gryffindor. And his normally well-groomed black hair was now quite messy. Across the back of the uniform was displayed the name 'Potter', and to top it off, he even had a fake lightening bolt shaped scar on his forehead. Hermione laughed out loud and clapped her hands while beside her Harry groaned. It was brilliant. Viktor Krum had come to the Halloween party dressed as Harry Potter!

By the time Viktor had made his way across the room to where they were, Harry had regained his good humor and congratulated his Bulgarian friend on his cleverness. After they had talked and joked together for a while Viktor surprised the crowd again by seeking out Luna and asking her for a dance. Once again, Hermione's eyes sought out Ron to gauge his reaction. As she had expected, he was glaring at Viktor, just as he had glared at Justin while he was dancing with Luna. And just as years before he had glared at Viktor and herself when they were together. But as Hermione allowed herself to hope that this meant that her friend was truly interested in Luna, she realized that while she had always taken this reaction as evidence that Ron had romantic feelings for her, he had finally informed her that such was not the case. And in the light of this information, she now realized that this reaction was identical to the way he reacted to the sight of Ginny with any of her boyfriends.

It struck her at that point that Ron was not as transparent as she had always thought. It was not at all clear whether his annoyance signaled the jealousy of a potential romantic interest or the disapproval of an overprotective friend/brother. She then decided that she had better stay out of this one. Luna would have to figure it out on her own.

Eventually Harry did dance with Ginny, and Parvati, and Padma, and a few of the other girls in the PDA. Between Viktor and Justin, Luna was kept occupied so he never got around to dancing with her. Hermione made certain that she danced with Justin because he danced so superbly, and also made it through one dance each with Ron and Neville without getting her toes stepped on. She also enjoyed dancing with Viktor, and agreed to a dance with each of her Ravenclaw admirers. But mostly she and Harry moved from table to table conversing with their friends.

For his part Ron managed one dance with each of the girls who were interested in him, but he was clearly uncomfortable every time. More specifically, he turned bright red and never took his eyes off of their chests. In his defense, though, every one of them was wearing a costume that

was designed to draw attention to that particular area of their anatomy. When he wasn't dancing he was eating and glaring at whoever was dancing with any of them, and at whoever was paying attention to Ginny. It didn't look like that much fun to Hermione, but well, that was just the way Ron was.

She had just about concluded that this was going to turn out to be a nice, peaceful Halloween when a house elf appeared before her with a summons from the headmistress. Quickly Harry and Hermione took their leaves, while she paused to tell her mother not to worry, and made their way to McGonagall's office. There she sat waiting for them with a concerned look on her face.

"I've just received a message from Mr. Croaker," she informed them. "Your presence is requested at the Department of Mysteries."

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## Hermione's Plan Wedding Bells

### Chapter 27, Wedding Bells

A portkey to Grimmauld Place, followed with a floo trip into the Ministry of Magic and the young couple was soon stumbling out of the floo bank into the atrium. This late at night the large hall was deserted except for Croaker, who was waiting there for them.

"I have a challenge for you if you're interested," the small man began, forgoing any sort of greeting or other nicety. "How would you like to try to destroy a Dementor?" Harry and Hermione looked at each other in amazement, then turned back to the old wizard. Harry motioned him to explain. "Don't ask how, because I won't tell you, but we've tracked down a group of Dementors and have them trapped in a magical holding pen. We can't keep it up forever, it just takes too much magic." He turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger, a few months ago you asked what would happen if the two of your Patroni attacked a Dementor together. Now is your chance to find out."

Hermione considered for a moment. Having experienced the horrible creatures first hand, being nearly been kissed by the lake during her third year, she had no compunction about destroying them in any way possible. She looked over to see Harry awaiting her thoughts on the offer. She could tell that he was willing to do it, but wouldn't pressure her into it if she had a problem with it. She nodded firmly. "Let's give it a try."

Croaker made no response but to whirl and stride across the atrium. The two students followed him past the Fountain of Magical Brethren to the outgoing floos on the opposite side of the hall. After three more floo journeys, which Hermione guessed were primarily to hide their movements, they stepped out of a small cottage on the edge of a forest. Just inside the trees they could see a clearing, lit up by the glow of a magical field. Even at this distance they could feel a chill in the air, and an uneasy sensation began tugging at their minds.

"How close do we need to get," Hermione asked nervously. She knew that it would be more difficult to produce a happy memory as they came more under the influence of the soul-sucking creatures. Unlike Harry, she had never produced a Patronus in the actual presence of a Dementor. Harry reached out to take her hand, and she immediately relaxed a bit as a warm feeling of love flowed through her.

Croaker motioned them forward but as they approached the clearing Harry put out his hand for them to stop. "This is as close as I was the time by the lake," he stated firmly. "Are you still OK?"

Hermione nodded, forcing herself to remain calm. As long as Harry was holding her hand it was keeping the horrid feelings at bay. Croaker looked back and forth between them and the restraining field, clearly surprised that the younger Harry had managed to direct his Patronus to disperse a group of Dementors from this distance. By now they were close enough that they could see individual shapes. Five or six of them were gliding around, appearing to be biding their time until the wizards maintaining the magical field were overcome.

The two students nodded at each other and drew their wands, Hermione's in her left hand and Harry's in his right. With her eyes locked with his it was no effort for Hermione to find a happy memory. She chose the morning of her birthday.

"Expecto Patronum!" In unison they called out the incantation and together a gleaming pair of lions sprang from their wands. They hesitated for a moment, looking at their creators as if awaiting instructions. "Attack one together!" Harry shouted, and Hermione repeated the instruction a half beat later. The silvery shapes whirled and bounded away, covering the distance to their foes in seconds.

It was an incredible and awful sight. As they reached the first Dementor they pounced on it, one going for the throat and one for the body, just as their namesakes would attack their prey. In the blink of an eye the Dementor was ripped to pieces, emitting a horrible screaming noise as it faded away. When it was over there was nothing left but the fragments of a shredded black cloak.

Now the remaining Dementors in the restraining field flew into a panic, hurling themselves against the magical barrier. It was to no avail. Just as with the first, the lion and lioness dispatched them with gruesome efficiency, the horrible shrieks giving witness to their destruction. In less than a minute from the time they had first been summoned, the field was cleared. Now the pair of silvery predators calmed down and nuzzled each other briefly, as though checking to make sure their mates were unharmed, then turned and trotted back to the onlookers.

"Good work," Harry said to his lioness, reaching up to pat it on the nose. Hermione likewise congratulated her lion, marveling at the tingly feeling of the solid yet not solid fur. Then the two students stepped back and their protectors faded away into mist.

Croaker was speechless. From the shadows of the trees some other Unspeakables staggered into view, the strain of holding the evil creatures at bay in the magical field evident on their faces and in their movements. They too, were unable to find words to describe what they had just witnessed. Finally Croaker motioned them back to the cottage, and Harry and Hermione joined hands once again for the return journey to Hogwarts.

-oooOOOooo-

Back at Potter Manor, December 22

Well, that was certainly the dramatic high point of the term," Hermione commented wryly as she flipped through the last few pages of the notebook. "The rest of it seems pretty tame by comparison."

"Actually, I would have preferred a nice, peaceful, boring Halloween myself," returned Harry with a small shake of his head. "I enjoyed November – nothing but classes, studying, quidditch, training. You know, the kind of nice, normal things that are supposed to happen at Hogwarts. At least that's the way I've heard it was before we showed up." Hermione smiled and gave him a friendly punch on the arm, then closed the notebook and snuggled up under his arm and pulled it around her. They were back on the couch in the parlor in front of a nice warm fire.

"Well, we did have one more Dementor hunting outing with Croaker," Hermione pointed out. "And he's told us that we should expect one or two more before they're able to persuade the remaining ones to leave people alone. And we had the news from Hagrid about the giants – that was good."

"No kidding," Harry agreed. "While it's too bad that they keep killing themselves, I guess it's better than having them attacking us." Hermione nodded. Although she regretted the death of any intelligent or semi-intelligent being, and she felt bad about the persecution that she believed forced them to behave so violently, her encounters with Grawp had been terrifying, and *he* was rather gentle and friendly by giant standards. She would hate to have to go against a normal giant intent on killing her. So the report that they had received from Madame Maxime through Hagrid had been most welcome. Voldemort's agents' attempts to recruit the remaining giants had met with the same result as Hagrid and Maxime's earlier efforts. Some of the giants had seemed willing to listen, others had disagreed, and it had led to a battle where they killed each other until the dispute had been forgotten. After three such attempts, the Death Eaters had given up.

"Bill and Fleur aren't too happy about their lack of results, though," Harry reminded her. The erstwhile curse breaker and his new wife still hadn't found the location of the last Horcrux. Bill was putting a positive spin on it, however, saying that they now knew several more locations where it *wasn't*.

"The Hogsmeade visit went off just fine," Hermione pointed out. "And it was a good training exercise for the PDA. We learned some things that we need to do better in case of an actual attack. We definitely need a better way to communicate quickly." She leaned to the side and twisted her head back to smile at him. "And then of course there was the Yule Ball."

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McGonagall had announced at breakfast on the last Saturday of November that there would be an opportunity for students to go into the village that day. It was deliberately timed with no advance notice for security reasons, and no owls were permitted to be sent out that day. The Hogsmeade shopkeepers themselves only learned about the visit when the carriages arrived at the station and throngs of eager students descended upon them.

They quickly adjusted, however, and enough food and butterbeer magically appeared at The Three Broomsticks to satisfy everyone, as well as a seemingly unending supply of sweets at Honeydukes. The hit of the day was the grand opening of the Hogsmeade branch of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, in the building formerly occupied by Zonkos. Fred and George had a buy-two-get-one-free sale which the students eagerly took advantage of, much to the eventual dismay of the heads of houses and other professors back in the castle.

The evening before the visit, Harry and Hermione had summoned the elite members of the PDA to the Room of Requirement to inform them of the planned activity and discuss possible attack scenarios and how they would respond. Their primary goal would be to get the students back to the castle as quickly as possible, and Harry distributed several portkeys for that purpose to each member. When activated, these would deliver any students who were touching them directly to the Hogwarts gates, without needing to wait for the carriages. There some PDA members and some of the teachers would set up a defensive position to cover them as they passed through the wards into the protection of the grounds. Two locations within Hogsmeade were designated where PDA members would assemble to cover the evacuation and possibly fight back – Honeydukes and the Shrieking Shack.

The plan was that Harry or Hermione would alert the PDA of an attack by means of their pendants, and the members would then quickly move to whichever of the three positions they had been assigned. They also let everyone know that even in the event that there was no attack, they would have a practice drill near the end of the visit. From this drill they had discovered that pre-assigned positions were a mistake. The PDA was scattered throughout Hogsmeade, with some members near their designated position, but some much closer to another one. Quite a few of them ended up running past each other in different directions. They definitely needed more flexibility in their response strategy.

Aside from that small problem, which was itself valuable information, the Hogsmeade visit had been a resounding success. In addition to The Three Broomsticks, Honeydukes, and the twins' joke shop, Gladrags was a very popular destination, as many of the students, particularly the older girls, needed new dress robes for the Yule Ball.

To give them an additional opportunity to acquire the necessary garments, McGonagall had invited Madame Malkins to come to the castle on the second Sunday of December with several enchanted trunks full of a wide variety of selections. In any case, by December 20, the actual day of the Ball, everyone was reasonably satisfied with their attire.

Hermione and Harry were happy that this year the Yule Ball was on the last weekend of the term, rather than on Christmas Day as it had been three years earlier, as they were looking forward to spending Christmas at home – their first ever together in their own home. Of course the main topic of conversation for the weeks preceding was who was going with whom.

Ron's situation was gradually resolving itself. Hannah, realizing that she didn't stack up with Lavender and Susan in one of the areas that was most desirable to Ron, had given up the battle for his affections. She was instead going with Ernie Macmillan. Luna, who had still been unable to get him to pay any attention to her, had rather made quite an impression on Justin Finch-Fletchly during their dancing at the Halloween Party. She had accepted his invitation to be his date, but only after assuring him that she would actually be clothed this time. Daphne had never been interested in a serious relationship with Ron, preferring merely to tease him from time to time. She agreed to go with Blaise Zabini, although more to keep him

out of trouble than from any affection for him.

Thus it came down to Lavender and Susan. Ron's preference would have been to keep things up in the air and not officially attend with either of them, but they refused to accept that. A compromise was finally reached where he would escort one of them to the Yule Ball and the other would be his date for Valentine's Day. A quick drawing of cards from a Tarot deck determined that Lavender would accompany him to the Yule Ball. While the blonde Gryffindor was pleased that she would have the first shot, the Hufflepuff girl was quite satisfied to have him for the more romantic holiday.

Ginny was still struggling with the reputation she had acquired at the beginning of the term, and had planned to hold off on dating for a while longer. She therefore turned down all of the eager guys who had asked her out, reasoning correctly that their intentions were suspect. She was surprised, therefore, when she received invitations from both Dean and Colin, and even Neville. These she did consider, because she knew she could trust all of them not to pressure her to go too far. On the other hand, she had prior relationships with two of them, which in both cases had included heavy make-out sessions, and which she did not trust herself to resume just yet. She therefore accepted Neville's offer, knowing that this most honorable Gryffindor would understand that they would be going 'just as friends', and wouldn't push her for anything more.

On the other hand, Hermione was well aware that Neville hoped for more than mere friendship with the petite redhead. She was nearly moved to tears when Neville sought her out and pleaded with her to teach him to dance better, so that he might avoid a repeat of his last Yule Ball evening with Ginny where she had suffered from having her feet repeatedly stepped on. Harry, knowing he had nothing to be jealous about, had no objection, so Neville spent an hour in the Head Suite every night for a week dancing with Hermione. Eventually he became comfortable enough with the idea of holding a girl closely that he was able to calm down and manage to keep his feet to himself. Harry switched off with him as well, each learning by observing the other, so that both boys improved their dancing skills.

The ball itself was like a dream come true for Hermione. She felt like a princess in her new dress robes and the sapphire necklace and earrings Harry had bought her for her birthday. Her gown was a sophisticated off the shoulder design, cut low in front to show off a bit of cleavage but not indecently so. Once again, like at the previous Yule Ball, a side of Hermione Granger was on display that most of the school had never imagined existed. As professors her parents were of course also present, and her mother nearly passed out when she saw her outfit for the first time. *'Hermione! Are those real? That necklace must be worth at least fifty thousand pounds!'* (In fact, Emma had underestimated the jewelry's value, if anything.) Her father, after his initial shock wore off, merely shook his head at how grown up his little girl had become. And of course the look of pride and loving affection in Harry's eyes had been priceless.

Although she spent most of her time with Harry, the two of them did share some dances with a few of their friends. While Harry took a turn with Ginny, Hermione danced with Neville and her shy housemate related that things were going as well as he had hoped and thanked her for the dancing lessons. On this night at least, Ginny was his, and she was paying more attention to him than she had in years. Hermione sincerely hoped that things would work out for him, since she personally thought that he would be better for her than any of the other boys she had dated (she excluded Harry from this consideration, of course). She knew, however, that Ginny was still swayed by excitement and glamour, and tended to view him more as good old reliable Neville.

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"That was perfect," Hermione sighed as she leaned back into Harry's embrace (back on the couch in front of the fire at Potter Manor). "Exactly the way I had wanted it to be the first time."

"Really?" Harry wondered. "You wanted to go to the first one with me?"

"Of course. I told you that this summer. When I first got those dress robes I would hold them up in front of me and imagine dancing with you. I was so much hoping you would notice I was a girl that year. I spent more time planning that outfit, with the hair and the makeup, than I ever have in my life, either before or since."

Harry just shook his head in wonder. "Unbelievable. I had no idea."

"You do know that lots of girls daydreamed about going to that ball with you, don't you, if for no other reason than that you were a champion?" she continued. "Pretty much every girl in third, fourth, or fifth year. I know for sure that Ginny, Parvati, and Katie were desperately hoping you'd take them, and Lavender would have gone with you if you'd asked." Harry said nothing, continuing to shake his head, and Hermione smiled and wriggled up against him. "My dear sweet clueless Harry."

"I always thought you'd wanted Ron to ask you," Harry admitted.

"Back then? No way. I wanted nothing to do with him that year," she responded. "Last year, yes, after I'd given up on you. But at that time I was upset with him over the way he refused to speak to me most of third year, and then he wouldn't believe you about the tournament at the beginning of fourth year. Then he made me so mad with the backhanded, insulting way he finally did ask me. What I said to him that night about asking me first? I was just so furious over the way he treated me, like I was some kind of traitor for going with Viktor instead of with him, that I was yelling anything that came into my head. By that point I would have gone out with almost anyone instead of him."

Hermione shifted them so that Harry was leaning back against the arm of the couch and she was in front of him, lying back to rest her head under his chin. She reached down and moved his hands under her jumper and the tank top she wore beneath it, onto her bare skin. He took the hint and slid his arms up and crossed them over her chest to embrace her more intimately, with his right hand holding her left breast and his left hand cupping her right. She sighed happily. Most guys might get slapped for being so forward, but she relished having him hold her like that.

"You do know that Ron never was interested in me that way, don't you?" She felt Harry shrug behind her as though he wasn't quite convinced. "I finally figured it out. I was so certain that the way he was so jealous of Viktor meant he had feelings for me. And sometimes he even acted jealous when *you* complimented me. It actually had to do with his insecurities. You know how at times it was obvious that he was jealous of you? Well, for the most part, as long as there was something he had that you didn't, or was as good at as you, he was fine. Since he was always taller than you,

always beat you at chess, and got as good of grades as you, he could accept the other things you were better at." Privately, Hermione suspected that one of the reasons Harry had been mediocre academically was that he didn't want to show up Ron. "It was a real relief when you both got the same number of OWLs last year." The small twitch she got from him with that comment helped confirm her suspicions, but she ignored it and continued.

"With me, I was far superior to him academically, but he always counted on me being as hopeless as he was, or even more so, from a social standpoint. Remember how angry he got when Ginny told him I had snogged Viktor and he hadn't ever kissed a girl? He couldn't deal with that and behaved beastly toward me until he got Lavender to start sucking his face off. Then we were somehow even again. So, when socially inept Hermione Granger got asked out by world famous quidditch star Viktor Krum, he completely lost it. Even though we never went out again, he freaked out every time I mentioned Viktor, or got a letter from him."

"That may have been part of it, but he could have also fancied you, right?" Harry countered.

Hermione considered this briefly. "No, I don't think so. Look, you had a crush on Cho. When they announced the Yule Ball, the first thing you thought of was asking her to go with you, right?" Harry agreed. "But it never once crossed Ron's mind to ask me, until the day Fleur turned him down and he was desperate. And even then it was, 'Hey, Hermione you're a girl! You could go with me' like it had just then occurred to him. That's not something you'd say to someone you had any feelings at all for."

Harry was silent for a moment while he considered this, then shrugged again. "I don't know, maybe you're right. It does all fit."

Hermione decided to move the conversation in a different direction. "So, what do you think would have happened if we had gone to the first ball together? How would things have been different? Let's say Viktor hadn't asked me, and when Cho turned you down I had offered to be your partner before Ron managed to put his foot in his mouth."

"I probably would have fallen for you as soon as I saw you coming down the stairs the night of the ball," Harry declared fervently.

Hermione put her arms on top of his and hugged them more tightly against her chest. "You say the sweetest things," she purred. "But at least at first, I would think we would have agreed it was just as friends, like the way you went with Parvati."

"Well, I'm sure I would have enjoyed myself more. I wouldn't have felt as uncomfortable dancing with you as I was with Parvati."

"At least Ron wouldn't have called me a traitor if I were with you instead of Viktor," Hermione added. "I suspect he still might not have been happy about it, but he would have kept it more to himself. On the down side, I wouldn't have become as good of friends with Viktor."

"You still would have ended up in the lake for the Second Task though," Harry insisted. "Only you would have been *my* most precious thing instead of Viktor's."

Hermione smiled and patted his arm. "Perhaps. But even so I think the last two tasks would have turned out the same. You still would have stopped to rescue Gabrielle. And I don't think I could have spent any more time helping you prepare for the tasks than I already did."

"I would have been less confused about my feelings for you over that summer," Harry mused.

"But do you really think we would have fallen in love then?" Hermione wondered. "Remember, you were only fourteen. I'd hate to think that we might have dated for a while and then broken up."

"Either way we still would have been best friends," Harry decided. "I needed you too much for it to be any other way. Even when we weren't always getting along last year we never stopped caring for each other." Hermione nodded her agreement.

"So, fifth year," Harry continued. "I don't think you could have possibly have supported me more in fifth year than you did. I certainly might have been more pleasant to be around, though." Hermione nodded vigorously and Harry winced. He had behaved rather petulantly most of that year. Having a girlfriend certainly couldn't have hurt. "But I wonder," he went on. "Do you think I would have listened to you more about Occlumency, or about Sirius?"

"In the end, you did listen to me about Sirius," she quickly pointed out, before he could start brooding about how Sirius might still be alive if only ... "And I've changed my mind about your Occlumency lessons with Snape now that we've learned how to do it properly. I don't think you would ever have learned it from him, no matter how hard you tried. I think he was deliberately making it impossible for you to learn."

Harry was quiet for a bit as he pondered that statement and thought more about that year. Then he muttered. "Cho wouldn't have joined the DA. And Marietta wouldn't have been able to betray us."

"I don't know," Hermione countered. "Cho might have. If she really had her sights set on you, she wouldn't have considered me to be any competition. And she still would have wanted to find out about Cedric."

"Well even so, I know who I would have kissed under the mistletoe that Christmas," Harry declared firmly, "and it wouldn't have been her." He punctuated his assertion by pulling Hermione even more closely to himself. Hermione responded by leaning her head back on his chest and smiling.

"Well, in the end it doesn't matter," Harry concluded after a brief silence. "We're together now, I love you more than I ever would have thought possible, and in a few days we're getting married."

Hermione's breath caught briefly and a warm glow filled her inside. "I can't believe it's almost here," she whispered.

"Nervous?"

"I'm nervous about the wedding, in terms of whether everything will go the way it's supposed to, all the details, and so forth," she admitted. "About marrying you? Not at all. How about you?"

"I'm not too worried about everything going right. After all, the two most organized women I've ever met are planning it," he teased, causing her to smile and relax a bit. "As for getting married, I've never been more sure about anything in my life."

Hermione twisted around in his arms so that she was facing him and rewarded him with a passionate kiss. Then she snuggled up with her head pressed against his chest and a huge smile on her face. Finding his hands now on her back, Harry absently began to rub her shoulders with one hand, while he pulled the other out from under her jumper and started running his fingers through her hair. Soon she was purring contentedly.

"Ready for bed?" he finally asked.

"I don't know, I can't imagine anything more comfortable than the way I am right now," Hermione demurred. Harry leaned down and whispered something into her ear and she gasped, then squirmed as his suggestion caused goose bumps to break out all over her skin. "OK, I'm convinced," she replied breathlessly, and she quickly rose and led him up to their bedroom.

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December 25

"Nervous?" Emma and Hermione were sitting down together in the same parlor three days later on Christmas day. Her parents had joined them at the manor for the holidays, and the two of them were now going over the wedding details. Each Granger woman had her own pad of paper, filled with notes and to-do lists. Emma had noticed Hermione biting on her lower lip, and recognized the habit, which Hermione had undoubtedly picked up from her.

It had been a delightful Christmas, Hermione and Harry's first together in their own home. On Christmas Eve the four of them had made their way to the small church in Godric's Hollow, then returned to the manor to open presents. During her lessons with Flitwick on enchantments, Hermione had tried to enchant cell phones to work at Hogwarts, intending to give one to each of her parents and one to Harry for Christmas presents. Unfortunately, that had proven unsuccessful, as all the magic in the castle created some sort of magical field that interfered with the signal too much.

As an alternative, she had begun working on enchanting mirrors to communicate like Sirius and James had done, but they weren't ready yet. Instead, she had enchanted two clocks, modeled after the Weasley family clock with hands showing the status of every member of the family. (She had also made a third for the Weasleys, to replace the original which had been lost when the Burrow was destroyed.) The one she gave to her parents had four hands on it, one each for Dan, Emma, Harry and herself. The one she gave Harry had only two, but she pointed out when he opened it that there was plenty of room for more, when their children arrived.

That comment had caused some interesting reactions. Harry had given her such an intense look of love that it made her knees go weak. Emma had beamed delightedly at the implication but Dan had gone pale. This reaction, of course, led to plenty of teasing by the two Granger females who couldn't resist the opportunity to have a go at the male in the family.

Hermione had insisted that Harry wrap up the emerald pendant that he intended for her to wear on their wedding day and give it to her again as a Christmas present, hoping that he wouldn't be tempted to buy any more expensive jewelry for her. He had compromised by having matching earrings made, which she accepted graciously. He had wanted to also buy her a sports car, but she pointed out that it would be better to wait until she had someplace to actually drive it (and the time). He agreed to hold off until her next birthday.

"More anxious than nervous, I think," Hermione replied to her mother's question. "I'm the same way with exams – even though I know I'm prepared and everything is under control I just can't help fretting about it. Harry asked me the same thing the other day. He, of course, says he isn't. He's probably right, too. He's been in so many stressful situations, and he's always managed to stay under control and not panic. Hanging around him has made me better at it. At least I don't freak out about the small things any more." She turned and cocked her head at her mother, raising an eyebrow slightly. "What about you?"

Emma, who had been chewing her own lip, knew that her daughter had caught her out and returned a sheepish smile. "Well, this is the first and only time I'll plan my daughter's wedding. I think I'm entitled to a bit of anxiety of my own. I admit I certainly never thought I'd be doing this so soon." Hermione started to respond but Emma waved her off. "I know, you're a lot older than it appears. Otherwise we'd never have agreed to having our eighteen year old daughter marry a boy who's only seventeen. But even if you're actually what, nearly twenty now?" Hermoine nodded. "It still would seem too young to us except for the fact that the two of you have matured far beyond your years. Don't worry, we've both accepted it." Hermione relaxed and Emma smiled at her daughter. "Now, let's go over these plans."

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"Nervous?" Dan and Harry had retreated to the sunroom to stay out of the way of the women and their planning fervor, and Dan thought that Harry was looking remarkably calm for a boy who was getting married in two days.

"About getting married?" Harry shrugged. "Not really."

"I was an absolute wreck the day before I married Emma. At the time it was the scariest thing I'd ever contemplated doing." Dan admitted. "But I guess your life has been somewhat more eventful than mine."

"Yeah, facing a troll, giant spiders, a basilisk, Dementors, a dragon – and that was just my first four years. Not to mention all the times Voldemort has tried to kill me," Harry replied. "Not that I'd ever want Hermione to hear that I compared marrying her to any of those things," he added with a



grimace. This got a chuckle out of Dan, and he promised to keep that between the two of them. "I don't know, for some reason I don't find the idea scary at all. Maybe it's because I'm so sure that it's what I want to do."

If there had ever been a 'right answer' that a young man could give his soon-to-be father-in-law to that question, Dan decided that this was it. But it was still his fatherly duty to offer some advice. "I know I don't need to say all the usual things, Harry, about taking care of my daughter and keeping her safe and always loving her. I already know, and have seen, that there's nothing that's a higher priority for you. And I also know that there are things that you have to do that will put her in more danger than I could have imagined. But we both know that there's no way that she'll let you keep her out of it to protect her." Harry nodded solemnly to all of these statements.

"So my advice for you is for later, when you finally get a chance to live your lives together. And that is that love is more than hugs and kisses and warm fuzzy feelings inside. Lots of couples have that, but their marriages don't last. Because you have to live with each other every day, and that's the bigger part of loving someone. You and I both know that Hermione is not the easiest person in the world to live with. But that's the challenge in any relationship – accepting each other's faults, helping them change the ones they want to change, and together coming to understand what those are. Each person needs to be willing to do things they don't want to do because it's what is best for their partner. That's the kind of love that lasts." He reached over and clapped Harry on the shoulder. "Fortunately, from what I've seen I don't think there's anyone better able to love Hermione like that than you."

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"Nervous?" It was the day before the wedding, and Ron and Ginny found themselves alone at the Birmingham house for a few hours. They were sitting at the kitchen table and Ron was eating everything in sight.

"Bloody terrified," Ron confessed. "I'm scared I'll mess up somehow."

"All you have to do is hold onto the rings and give them to Harry at the right time," Ginny teased, trying to relax him. "And even if you lose them all you need to do is say '*Accio* Harry and Hermione's wedding rings.'"

"No I can't, not in front of all those muggles. I think that's what I'm most worried about, being in a ceremony with all the muggles watching," Ron confessed.

"Well, in that case tell Harry and he can *Accio* them wandlessly and nonverbally." This got a small smile out of him. "And besides, no one is going to be looking at you anyway, once the bride enters the room." Ron relaxed a bit more and turned to look at Ginny.

"So what about you?" he inquired.

"What do I have to be nervous about? All a bridesmaid has to do is walk down the aisle and look pretty. I think I've got that covered." Ginny punctuated this by sweeping her beautiful long red hair dramatically back over her shoulder, then grinned and added. "And the other bridesmaid is part-Veela so even if I looked like a troll, who would notice?"

"I mean, how do you feel about ...?" Ron began hesitantly.

"You mean will I be wishing that I was up there marrying Harry Potter? Sure. Half the girls at Hogwarts probably wish the same thing." Ginny shrugged, then turned serious. "What you really mean is have I gotten over him," she continued. "Not completely, but I'm able to deal with it. Fleur has helped a lot. She's made me see that everything's not about me. There are hundreds of girls our age who fantasized about Harry Potter like I did. Only one of them was lucky to have him become best friends with her older brother. Only a couple of them were lucky enough to even go out with him. There are only one or two other girls in the world that he cares for as much as he cares for me. One of them happens to be his soul mate. As much as I wish it had been me, I can't deny that he's happy about it."

She sighed and looked down at the table. "If it had been anyone other than Hermione it would have been a lot harder to take. But no one, including you and me, understands him better than she does. And no one loves him more than she does. Perhaps I could have, if I had a chance. But she was the most important girl in his life long before he even thought about me. Once they decided to move those feelings in a romantic direction, no one else had a chance." She looked up at Ron again and rubbed away some of the moisture that had collected in her eyes. "So yeah, I'll be OK." Ron responded in a way that he would never admit to anyone else in the world. He put down the biscuit he had been eating, moved closer and hugged his little sister.

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Saturday, December 27

"Nervous?" Hermione had just come out of the shower, and stood looking at herself in the mirror. Already her heart was beating faster than normal, and she suspected it would quicken even more as the day went on. This was the day she was going to marry Harry Potter! Harry moved up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders and squeezed them, then bent down to kiss her on the back of the neck.

"More excited than nervous, I think," she decided. "Everything's as ready as it can be, and I just need to relax and enjoy it." She reached up and took hold of his hands and moved them down around her waist and hugged him to herself, leaning back against him. She closed her eyes for a moment and sighed, then opened them and smiled at him in the mirror. "And I'm definitely planning to enjoy it."

After standing there in his arms for a minute she disengaged and turned around, putting her hands on his chest to push him away. "Now you can't watch me get dressed this morning. I have a special pair of knickers for today and you don't get to see them until later. And don't forget to wear the pair I got for you." Hermione had been amazed at what you could find in mail-order bridal catalogues. She had bought Harry a very brief pair of satin underwear, dark green in color. For herself she had picked out a tiny thong. She had considered ordering it in dark green also, but worried that it might show through her white gown, so she selected a pale green color instead.

Harry grimaced. “There’s hardly anything to that. It’s even smaller than the swimsuits you make me wear.”

“That’s the whole point,” Hermione replied with a seductive smile. “Every time I look at you today I’ll remember what you’re wearing and think of what we’ll be doing tonight.”

Harry swallowed hard. “OK, now I’m nervous. That’s the only part of this whole thing that I’m worried about.” Hermione stopped pushing him and took his hands in hers, giving him an encouraging smile.

“You’re worried that the first time might not be that good for me?” Harry nodded. “Well don’t,” she insisted. “No matter how it goes, it will be wonderful because I’ll be making love to you. And even if I don’t orgasm the first time there’s always the second, third and fourth times.” With a mischievous gleam in her eye she added, “And then we can try again tomorrow.”

She giggled at the look on his face that was generated by that last comment, and spun him around and pushed him the rest of the way out of the room, still in a daze. The she returned to her dresser and pulled out the special knickers, which were not much more than a couple of small triangles of light green silky material. She pulled them over her legs and into position, turning to admire how good they made her look both from the front and the back. Then she pulled on a tank top and a pair of sweatpants that she would wear until it was time to put on her wedding gown, and went down to join her family for breakfast.

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Planning this wedding had been at the same time incredibly complicated and remarkably simple. The complicated part was figuring out how to integrate the muggle and wizarding aspects into a single occasion. The simple part was that things like colors, flowers, food, and decorations were literally a snap for a house elf. Whenever Emma or Hermione found something in a book or catalog that was exactly what they wanted, they showed it to Minnie and she replicated it easily.

In the end they had decided to have a small muggle ceremony in a church, to which Hermione’s parents could invite their relatives, friends, and neighbors, and then they would perform the magical vows in a different location. Once that decision had been made, things were greatly simplified. When she learned of this plan, Minnie informed Hermione that Lily had done something similar, and that she and James had been married in the little church in the village. The elderly cleric there remembered James and Lily, and when he learned that Harry was their orphaned son, and that even though he didn’t live in the area any more he wanted to be married there in their memory, he immediately agreed to perform the ceremony. The Saturday after Christmas was not a busy time in the church schedule, so the timing worked out to their advantage.

Getting the guests to the ceremony was somewhat trickier. In the invitations Emma frankly confided that in the wake of the bombing the previous summer, they were still reluctant to return to the area where they had lived, so Hermione’s wedding would be taking place near where the groom’s family was from. In fact, the groom, whom Hermione had met at boarding school, was quite wealthy, having inherited a large sum of money. Unfortunately it was because his parents had died when he was an infant, and he thus had little remaining family of his own. In light of all of this, the guests were instructed to meet at Gatwick airport where a private jet would take them to the village where the ceremony would be held.

The jet had been arranged by Kingsley Shacklebolt, using his political connections as assistant to the Prime Minister. A retired RAF pilot who had flown insertion missions for the SAS had formed a private flight service for use by industry executives who wished to travel secretly to confidential meetings, and he was well-known for his discretion. When the wedding guests were dropped off at a private airstrip somewhere in Wales, they were ferried to the village of Godric’s Hollow in a luxury bus driven by Kingsley himself.

Relatively few members of the wizarding community attended the ceremony. Headmistress McGonagall represented Hogwarts and the Order of the Phoenix. Dean, Justin, Colin, and Dennis, the muggleborn members of the PDA, and Seamus, Hannah Abbott, Su Li, and Tracey Davis who were of mixed blood, each with at least one set of muggle grandparents, were honored to represent their fellow students. Padma Patil was also determined to attend the wedding of her now close friend Hermione, and any difficulties she had fitting in were readily ascribed to cultural differences. There was no keeping Arthur Weasley away from the muggle ceremony, although it was necessary for him to use a muggle wheelchair instead of his flying carpet, and Molly accompanied him.

At the church, Molly and Arthur sat in the second row, just behind Remus and Tonks who took on the role of Harry’s parents in the ceremony, joining with Dan and Emma to give the new couple their blessing. Padma and Tracey were alert in the row immediately behind Molly, just in case. Padma was among the best students at casting nonverbal silencing spells, and her wand was easily concealed in the folds of the sari she wore. As it turned out, Molly’s outward reaction was limited to a few tears, which were not at all out of the ordinary at a wedding.

Hermione had chosen green and blue as the principle colors for the wedding decorations, and Ginny and Fleur, her two attendants, were arrayed in gowns of deep emerald green and sapphire blue respectively. In fact, Ginny reused the strapless bridesmaid dress she had worn at Fleur’s wedding, and Fleur borrowed the similar dress Gabrielle had worn (magically altered to her larger size), with color transfiguration spells applied. Ron and Bill, as Harry’s two attendants, were dressed in black tuxedos with shirts that matched the dresses of their respective partners. Harry’s shirt was white, with green trim.

With forty or so guests on Hermione’s side of the aisle, and just over a dozen from the magical world on Harry’s side, it was a cozy gathering. When the music began, the Granger friends and relatives were impressed as an extremely pretty red haired girl came down the aisle first as the maid of honor, only to be followed by one of the most beautiful women they had ever seen as the matron of honor. When Hermione appeared, however, jaws dropped.

Many of these people had not seen Hermione since she was eleven years old, and the rest only brief glimpses during the summer, as she had not spent more than a week at home at any one time since the summer before fourth year. Somehow the shy, bushy-haired, bucktoothed little girl had been replaced with the lovely, poised, confident young woman with long flowing curls and a perfect smile who now glided down the aisle on Dan’s arm. *How could she have possibly changed so much in a little more than six years*, they asked each other? Hermione, of course, saw none of this, her attention focused solely on the green-eyed, black-haired young man waiting for her at the front of the church.

Hermione's gown was stunning – simple, yet elegant. A perfectly fitted bodice featured a wide V-shaped neckline that spread to the ends of her shoulders, which combined with a low V-cut back to bare most of her upper torso. The bust was flattering with just a touch of cleavage, and displayed the dazzling emerald pendent to perfection. From her hips the satiny fabric flowed gracefully out into a short train, with lacy detailing along the seams and around the edges. As Hermione reached the front of the church she saw Harry's eyes taking her all in, dropping from her bust down to linger briefly at her hips and she knew he was remembering her tease from the morning. She gave him the slightest smirk when his gaze returned to her eyes to let him know she noticed, and his lips curled slightly in response as they turned to face the altar.

As she heard the words of the reading from 1 Corinthians 13 – *Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love* – her thoughts turned to the similar words of a twelve year old girl to an eleven year old boy as she hugged him before he went off to face a deadly foe. *Friendship, bravery, and ...* she had lost her nerve before she could finish it. The word 'love' was not something twelve-year-olds are comfortable saying out loud. Her mind pondered the parallels between those two triads of words. Faith was inherent in friendship – you trusted that friends would be there for you. Hope could be a part of bravery – it was certainly easier to perform an act of courage if you could hope that some good would be accomplished by it. But in the end they were all tied together in love.

Finally it came time for their vows and they turned to face each other and clasped hands. As each of them looked deeply into the other's eyes, down into their very souls, they fervently pledged, "I take you Harry/Hermione, to be my husband/wife from this day forward. To join with you and share all that is to come. And I promise to love you and be with you faithfully as long as we are given life together."

Ron came through with the rings.

While the muggle wedding guests wondered why Harry's friends didn't stick around for the reception, the observation somehow quickly slipped from their minds. Dan and Emma were marvelous hosts, taking Harry and Hermione around to visit with each guest individually, where they all gushed over how much Hermione had grown, and commented on what a charming young man she had found. After several hours the newlywed couple kissed their parents goodbye and made their exit, from which they quickly apparated to Potter Manor. There they went back six hours in time, napped for a few hours, Harry changed into formal wizarding dress robes, and finally they went down to greet their wizarding guests as they returned from the church along with all the other invitees who had not attended the muggle ceremony. These included much of the Hogwarts staff, all of the PDA from the summer, the members of the Order of the Phoenix, and Director Hammer, Chief Auror Robards, and several other trusted Aurors who had become friends with the young couple.

As they gathered once again in the ballroom, Harry and Hermione climbed onto the platform, turned to each other again and took their magical vows. Clasping their left hands, so that each had their fingers touching the other's wedding ring, they raised their wands in their right hands and touched wand tips while they recited the incantation. A burst of white light brighter than any wedding ceremony in recent memory temporarily blinded their audience, and then it coalesced into a brilliant glow that clung to each of them for several seconds until it gradually diminished.

Having already endured several hours of wedding reception, the newlyweds were relatively subdued, spending much of their time with their arms either linked together or wrapped around each others' waists, with smiles that lit up the room. They danced the traditional first dance with each other, and Hermione one each with Ron, Bill, and Remus while Harry reciprocated with Ginny, Fleur, and Tonks, but relatively few after that. Once again they considerately greeted each of the guests and even patiently allowed Molly to fret that they had rushed into this and bemoan that they were growing up too fast. Hermione even managed to refrain from pointing out to Molly that she and Arthur had been married during *their* seventh year, although Ginny did not.

At long last they were ready to leave, only this time the entire crowd gathered to watch them depart. With a shrunken bag under each arm, they waved once more, activated a portkey, and vanished to thunderous applause.

During their visit to the Yucatan in August, the great wizard Ah Kinchil, whose power rivaled Dumbledore's, had created for them a portkey that would take them from Great Britain to Coba, and there they found their Mayan friends waiting to greet them. With the six hour time difference it was still mid-afternoon there, even though for Harry and Hermione's internal clocks it was well after midnight. Their Mayan hosts were very understanding, and after some time for visiting and congratulations, and another sumptuous feast, they were led to an ancient marriage chamber that had been readied for them. Here their close friends Mayahuel and Ekahau took them into separate side rooms to prepare them.

Hermione was first bathed by Mayahuel in a hot, scented bath, and then the Mayan witch brushed her hair and perfumed her with a jasmine fragrance. Fleur had taught Hermione several Veela spells to be used for this occasion, the most important a localized pain suppression charm that would negate the pain from the tearing of her maidenhead without hindering the sensations in the surrounding area of her body. Another was a stamina spell for Harry – she smiled to herself as a little tingle rippled down her body while thinking she might use that one later. A contraception charm completed the spellwork.

When she was ready, Mayahuel gave her a quick hug and pointed her to a different door before she smiled and withdrew. The central chamber consisted primarily of a large round bed covered with flower petals and furs, and as Hermione entered this room, completely naked, Harry likewise entered from the other side. For a moment each drank in the sight of the other, hearts pounding. The tension was broken as Hermione giggled when her roving eyes noticed that Harry was obviously very happy to see her.

They quickly embraced, their mouths attacking each other as their bodies attempted to maximize contact everywhere possible. As they fell into each other's arms on the impossibly soft bed, Hermione was infused with the knowledge that this went beyond kissing, beyond touching, this was a joining, figuratively and literally – physically, emotionally, spiritually, magically.

This was their first time going to bed when they were both naked, and they took their time to enjoy each other. As their explorations became more intimate they finally melted into each other - *'and the man and woman joined together and became one flesh'*. It was everything Hermione had dreamed it would be, and more. It was magic.

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## Hermione's Plan Romantic Interlude

### Chapter 28, Romantic Interlude

Hermione had researched and prepared for her first lovemaking experience as thoroughly as any woman ever had. She would never admit to anyone besides Harry (and him only years later) just how many books, magazines, and internet sites she had pored through seeking to learn everything she could about the process. Not to mention the time spent discussing it with her mother (somewhat awkwardly) and Fleur (also somewhat awkwardly, but for an entirely different reason). She had decided that she should probably discount some of the things she heard from Fleur, who was part Veela after all. All in all, though, she thought she had a reasonable idea of what to expect.

The reality was nothing like she had imagined. It was so much better. She had thought that she and Harry had a very close connection. It was nothing like the emotional connection this generated. She had very much enjoyed embracing him in the nude, with the delightful sensations of skin to skin contact. It was nothing compared to having him inside of her. Even without the stimulation of nerve endings that eventually led to orgasm, just the act of being joined together gave her a sense of being closer to him than she ever had. The feeling of completeness was indescribable.

The actuality more than made up for the wait. Indeed, the months of denial and anticipation only enhanced the ultimate experience, not to mention the effect of the additional magic of the marriage bond. But the months of denial also meant that now that she had him she simply could not get enough of him. She had once wondered how many hours they could spend in bed in a day. The first full day of their marriage gave her the answer. Twenty hours in a twenty-four hour period.

They took a brief break for breakfast when a slyly smiling Mayahuel delivered a bowl of fresh fruit and freshly baked bread to their door, although Harry pointed out that they could have eaten that without getting out of bed. Hermione compromised by having them remain nude while they sat at the small table in their room, then sweetened the deal by sitting in his lap while they ate. Harry had no problem eating with one hand while his other hand did quite a few interesting things besides holding her. At midday they took an hour to eat lunch, at least making it out of the room this time. When evening came, they actually took a couple of hours to visit with their hosts during dinner. All the rest of the time was spent exploring the physical side of their marriage.

On the evening of their wedding day they made love only once – with the time zone change and their earlier time travel it had been a 36 hour day – but it was quite satisfying for both of them. When they finished Hermione insisted that Harry stay inside of her, and they fell asleep joined.

The next day was a different story entirely. When Fleur had first noticed that Harry and Hermione were together, back in France before her wedding, she had made a joking comment about studious girls being the most knowledgeable and adventurous lovers. This unequivocally turned out to be true in Hermione's case. On the other hand, the similar saying 'it's always the quiet ones' most certainly did not apply. Hermione would never be described by anyone who knew her as a 'quiet one'. From her studies, to the causes she believed in, to her concern about Harry, the Hermione of Hogwarts and later was one of the most outspoken and passionate women around. And as might have been expected, this passion carried over quite obviously to her love-making.

Their body clocks woke them at 2 AM, and they were both eager and willing to give it another go. This time it lasted a bit longer, but soon enough they were each satiated and once more fell back asleep. As the morning light began to diffuse into the chamber, Harry woke to see Hermione smiling at him with a gleam in her eye. This time she began to experiment with different positions she had read about, learning the advantages and disadvantages of each. For example, with him on his back and her astride, she had more control but there was less skin to skin contact. After taking the act to completion for a third time, Hermione slyly mentioned the stamina charm. Harry gladly accepted it as he could easily see how much Hermione was enjoying this (as was he!), and willingly engaged in yet another round.

After this they finally got out of bed to shower before they ate breakfast – and managed to fulfill a fantasy Harry had visualized ever since they began showering together the previous summer. Hermione cautiously assented, concerned only because each time they made love the sensations were so intense that she knew it would leave her knees weak and unable to support her. Harry assured her he'd never let her fall, which earned him a smoldering look and a thorough snogging, which ended only because Hermione's hands started to get mischievous. Just in case, Harry also cast cushioning charms in the shower – by the time he was finished they had the most comfortable shower in existence.

After breakfast, they took a break for another nap, then continued with more exploration of different positions until lunchtime. During this period they learned what many couples have discovered, that having him enter her from behind enabled even greater penetration. It also gave Harry more freedom to use his hands, and over the months of abstinence he had become very good at manually pleasuring her. Back after lunch, they continued with renewed vigor, this time experimenting with different furniture. After trying it with all the chairs and couches in the room, Hermione decided she liked it best while sitting on his lap facing him. Then they discovered the dressing table and mirror. As far as Hermione was concerned, this combined several good features of the alternate positions they had been exploring (use your imagination!) and it was to become their second favorite piece of furniture after their bed. For the rest of their lives Harry would find it difficult to pass by their dressing table and mirror (they always made sure when they bought a new one that it was just the right height) while Hermione was dressing without taking advantage of the opportunity. All she has to do was give him a look (he later began calling it her 'come shag me' look) and they would go at it.

After supper, and after a polite amount of time spent visiting, they excused themselves to return to the chamber and continue their explorations. Of

course they had to put up with a lot of teasing from their Mayan friends, who also joked that they had missed some important visitors, but they didn't let it stop them. As for the final tally? Hermione never did get up the nerve to ask Fleur how many times Bill had managed it in a day, but she and Harry had made it into double figures and she was pretty sure the older couple couldn't have gotten much farther than they had.

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"Wow." She knew that simple declaration was as much as he could manage, as he was as overwhelmed by the day as she was. She had a delicious ache in muscles that were unaccustomed to the workout they had received today (although she fully intended that such exertions would be a regular part of her activities from now on) and she was getting pretty sore inside despite the spells from Fleur. On some later date she would ask him about how sore their workout had left him, although he certainly had shown no reluctance to continue. But both of them knew it was their last time for tonight, and they settled comfortably into their favorite sleeping position in each other's arms.

"I know," she responded. "This has been incredible, beyond anything I could have imagined." She punctuated her statement with a tight squeeze.

"I know what you mean," he returned. "And I had imagined some pretty amazing things when I dreamed of making love to you. But the reality was so much more." He paused to give her a tender kiss on top of her head. "Thank you." Hermione kept silent, waiting for him to elaborate. "Thank you for loving me. Thank you for marrying me. Thank you for making me the happiest man in the world." His arms tightened around her as well.

Hermione purred with contentment. "I was going to say exactly the same thing," she added. "I can't express how happy I am right now. I love you so much."

"I love you too," came his whispered reply as they finally fell off into a blissful slumber.

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"Are you certain that you want to do this?" Harry and Hermione were gathered with the leaders of the Mayan magical community in the eastern Yucatan, in the most powerful of the ceremonial circles in the main temple of Chichen-Itza, and Ix Chel needed to be assured that they were not undertaking this ritual lightly.

"Believe me, we've spent a lot of time discussing this," Harry replied as he turned to Hermione. "And as you might imagine it got pretty emotional at times." Hermione nodded somberly. "I know that I couldn't bear it if Hermione didn't survive this. I honestly don't believe I'd want to go on living. So my initial inclination was to forbid her to be with me when I face him." He paused as a small grin worked its way onto his face. "Of course, if you know Hermione, you realize how well *that* idea went over."

"I was finally able to make him understand that I felt exactly the same way," Hermione added. And he agrees that we're much more likely to defeat him if we face him together. So we've decided that it has to be all or nothing."

Hermione continued. "There is story in Greek mythology about an elderly couple who do a favor for the gods and are told they can request anything they wish. Even though they lived a simple life, they were content with everything they had as long as they were together. So their request was that they never wanted to be apart, and that they be permitted to pass on together, so that when one died the other would also. Each would never have to live without the other. Harry and I feel exactly the same way. So this bonding will help us achieve more than one of our goals." Ix Chel nodded. The Mayans, and probably every culture, had a similar legend.

Harry and Hermione had asked Ah Kinchil and Ix Chel to assist them in performing the most powerful of the bonding spells – the soul bonding. The advantage of this would be to make their connection even stronger. Each would be able to sense where the other was at all times, and they would even be able to mentally communicate with each other to some extent – not actual words but feelings and general impressions. Of course, Ron would say that they had been doing this for years, but this was a bit more reliably consistent. The biggest advantage would be that each would be able to draw on the other's magic in case of need, regardless of how physically separated they were or if the other was even conscious. In the extreme, they could take every bit of magic the other possessed, turning them into a squib. This was why this bonding was so rare – it required absolute trust in the other person. Both of them had determined that as much as they loved being able to do magic, they would each be willing to live their life out as a squib if it meant that Voldemort was defeated and the other remained alive. Harry had even joked that Hermione could be Headmistress of Hogwarts and he could do Filch's job at least as well as Filch had. The important thing was that they would be together.

This bonding spell had considerable potential for abuse, of course, if a power-mad wizard tried to force his underlings to give him access to their magic, but in practice this was not a concern because the bonding had to be entered into entirely voluntarily. No matter how fanatically devoted an underling was to his master, it was extremely unlikely that he would willingly sacrifice his magic without even a shred of doubt.

The downside for their battle with Voldemort, which was considerable, was also the fact that if one died the other would follow a short time later. The exact amount of time for that to occur was uncertain, because this bonding had been done so rarely, but it was believed that the maximum was between 18 and 36 hours. The bottom line was that if Hermione was killed, Harry would have about a day to defeat Voldemort before he passed on as well. During that time, however, he would have absorbed all of her remaining magical power, making him temporarily as powerful as his enemy. On the other hand, if Harry was killed first, and the prophecy was correct that only he could defeat Voldemort, it would be hopeless, but Hermione was determined to die trying regardless. The preferred outcome, obviously, was that this connection would afford each of them their best chance of staying alive and keeping the other that way as well.

Having convinced their mentors that they knew what they were doing, and that it was their best option, they took their positions in the ceremonial circle and discarded their robes. This particular ritual required the participants to be nude, and out of the corner of her eye Hermione saw Ah Kinchil and Ix Chel removing their garments as well. She and Harry knelt down and faced each other, each reaching their arms around their soul mate and clasping their hands behind their backs. Each of them could feel the other's heartbeat through the contact of their bare chests. When they were in position, with their bodies pressed tightly together and their foreheads touching, Hermione nodded.

Ah Kinchil and Ix Chel alternated saying their parts of the incantation, with a bright silver light erupting from Ah Kinchil's wand and enveloping them,

followed by an equally dazzling gold light from Ix Chel's wand as intertwined itself with the silver beam and formed an intricately woven web around the pair of young lovers. An especially bright node appeared at each of their clasped hands, another right over both of their hearts, and a final one where their foreheads met, signifying the joining of hands, hearts, and minds. Lastly, the elder wizard and witch spoke the final phrase in unison and the web began to dissolve into their joined bodies, much like the glow had during their marriage bonding. This time it took several minutes for the process to be completed, with the bright nodes being the last things to disappear. When the light had finally faded they were unable to move under their own power and had to be helped to their feet and out of the circle. They were led into another chamber and into a shallow pool, where their mentors left them sitting in the warm water, still embracing each other.

Hermione would have a difficult time describing how much different this felt than the marriage bonding had – the tingling sensation was the same but this time she could *feel* Harry so much more. Her eyes widened as the thought went through her mind that love-making would be even more fantastic now with this heightened sensitivity to each other's feelings. She wondered if it would be so intense that she would pass out.

In fact, the final stage of the ritual included the option to do exactly that, right there in the warm waters of the pool. When Hermione reminded Harry of this option his eyes lit up and they proceeded to fulfill yet another fantasy, this one which both of them had entertained ever since they had first sunbathed nude by the small plunge pool at the Robinson Club.

She did indeed pass out the first time. And true to his word, Harry didn't let her fall, holding her up to keep her head above water, even though he was feeling a bit lightheaded himself. With their new ability to experience each other's emotions, the excitement Hermione felt in Harry only added to her own arousal, which fueled his response in turn. Similar to a feedback loop in muggle electronics equipment, it quickly built up into the most intense orgasm either had ever experienced. It was actually over too quickly, and with practice they would learn to control the feedback from each other so that they could enjoy it longer.

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The rest of their honeymoon was considerably less dramatic, although no less enjoyable. They spent a week in Chichen-Itza and Coba, then used the time turner to spend another week at the beach. Instead of staying at one of the luxury mega-resorts, however, they had chosen to rent a private villa with its own secluded stretch of beach. Aside from the times that the maid visited, they were completely by themselves, which meant that clothing was superfluous most of the time. They did dress up to go out for dinner each night, but most of each day was spent outside letting their bodies soak up the sun and frolicking in the waves. Needless to say, Hermione and Harry had sex-on-the-beach fantasies just like anyone else, and they managed to experience every one of them. They did discover, as many other couples before them had, that sand has a pesky habit of getting into uncomfortable places while making love in that particular location.

One more manipulation of time and they were back at Coba on the day after they had arrived, ready to return home. Since they knew that their previous selves had spent nearly that entire day in the marriage chamber, they knew that there was no chance of accidentally encountering them. As they took their leave Mayahuel and Ekahau teased that they would be sure to let the couple inside the marriage chamber know that they had missed them if they ever emerged.

Chantico, Bolon, Ix Chel, and Ah Kinchil had a more serious parting message. If the young couple failed in their task, the four of them vowed that they would come to Britain and complete it. They were confident that Harry and Hermione would succeed, but had no doubt that even if they lost, Voldemort would be seriously weakened by the encounter and they would take care of finishing him off. As far as they were concerned, their willingness to break their centuries of seclusion in order to do this for Harry easily came under the heading of 'the power he knows not'. Feeling that their burden was now that much lighter, the pair of lovers activated the portkey that would return them to Potter Manor.

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Back home the newlywed couple discovered that quite a few interesting things had happened at their wedding reception after they left. It took them most of the month of January to get all of the details out of their assorted friends, but eventually they pieced together the story.

It is a commonly accepted adage among wedding crashers that wedding receptions are great places to find willing female partners. Something about the wedding atmosphere is thought to put women in the mood for romance. At this particular wedding, several of the girls in attendance had long had crushes on the groom. Now that the subject of their fantasies was officially off the market, there was a tendency to turn to the next available prospect. In addition, watching the smoldering looks Harry and Hermione had been exchanging all evening had been arousing for quite a few of the females present. (It was mostly females because they tend to be more observant about such things than males.) All of these things had combined to create a large group of women looking for some loving, and the guests began to pair off.

Two things that facilitated this state of affairs were the fact that bedrooms had been made available to anyone who wished to stay the night, and the lack of adult supervision as the reception wore on. The Hogwarts professors all left shortly after Harry and Hermione's departure. Dan and Emma were busy hosting the muggle reception, and never did make it to the magical one. Tonks was as affected by the overall mood as any of the females, and she dragged Remus off to the room that had been set aside for their use, and nothing was seen of them until the next day. Likewise, Hestia Jones got up the courage to admit that she had always been attracted to Kingsley Shacklebolt, and the two of them disappeared shortly afterward.

During one of the slow dances toward the end of the evening, Neville finally got up the nerve to kiss Ginny. Initially she kissed him back enthusiastically and Neville was in heaven for a second. But an instant later she was pulling back and running away in confusion. Later she would confide to Hermione that it had been nice, but it was *Neville* ! She was just not ready to think of him as anything but a friend. As a result, Ginny spent the remainder of her time at the reception with Colin, and shortly thereafter went home with her parents. Neville, hoping desperately that he hadn't gone too far and ruined their friendship, watched her sadly from the other side of the room until she had gone, then left with his grandmother and returned to Hogwarts. For the next month the two of them would avoid each other except during their sniper training.

Padma consoled herself with Justin. She had talked to him a lot at the wedding ceremony, where he sat next to her and explained the muggle service to her, and she discovered that he was a really nice guy. By the end of the evening the shy Ravenclaw had experienced her first-ever

snogging session. To his credit, Justin was too honorable to push her farther than she was comfortable with, but it was the beginning of a nice relationship.

Hannah helped out her best friend by distracting Lavender, so that Susan snagged Ron and managed to spirit him away for some heavy snogging and petting. The two of them eventually ended up in one of the bedrooms together where they took it as far as anything Ron and Lavender had done the previous year. During their exploration of each other she managed to convince him that she stacked up very favorably with her rival. The next morning, Ron woke and arose quietly, gazing appreciatively on her bare torso before pulling the blanket over her and leaving for another room with a dazed smile on his face. Once he had gone, Susan opened her eyes and permitted herself a happy smile of her own before she curled up and went back to sleep.

Once Hannah was certain that Susan had Ron to herself, she latched onto Ernie and pulled him into a private corner of the mansion for some serious snogging. At this point, Lavender and Parvati were both a little down and looking for some comforting. They found it in the company of their two housemates, Dean and Seamus. When the four of them had gotten thoroughly drunk together, Lavender pulled Dean out onto the dance floor. As they staggered around she grabbed him and told him she wanted to find out if he was as big as she thought he was. She thereupon shoved her hand down his trousers, at the same time thrusting his hands into her robes to feel her up. He agreed that she felt as good as she looked, and they made their way out of the room for some more private investigation.

Fortunately for her, Dean's mum, who had been a single parent raising her family under difficult circumstances, had drilled into him to never take advantage of a girl when she was drunk. He took her up to one of the bedrooms where Lavender passed out, and though they shared a bed the two of them stayed partially clothed. The next morning she apologized profusely, but he said it was all right, that he enjoyed it as far as it went. However, once back at Hogwarts a certain rumor spread quickly, and Dean found himself confronted with an unending supply of young witches who evidently subscribed to the saying that 'size matters'.

For his part Seamus, in yet another bedroom, was finally able to fulfill his fantasies of Parvati – right up until he made the mistake of using the word 'twins'. She had been down to nothing but knickers by that point, but to his dismay she immediately gathered up her things and apparated straight back to her room. (The wards had been set to allow the official occupant of a room to apparate into it, but no one else.) There, to her surprise, she found Justin kissing Padma goodnight. In her shock she just dropped everything to the floor, giving her sister's new boyfriend quite a show. After a few seconds she whirled and ran to the bathroom, so that he was afforded a view from the rear as well as from the front. (It must have really been his lucky day, because that occasion just happened to be the first time that Parvati had been brave enough to wear a pair of thong knickers.) Thus, through the inadvertent exposure of her twin sister, Justin managed to get a very good idea of what his new girlfriend's body looked like unclothed – but he at least was noble enough (and smart enough) to never utter the word 'twins' in either of their presence.

With all the pairing up going on, Su Li and Tracey Davis hooked up with Anthony Goldstein and Terry Boot. Eventually, however, they decided they preferred each other's company to that of the males, and they ended up sharing a bed for the night while the guys came up empty handed.

The older PDA members did pretty well for themselves also. Fred and George disappeared into a large bedroom with Angelina and Alicia, and Lee and Verity (the clerk at WWW) were last seen heading off somewhere together. A few drinks gave Katie the courage to approach Oliver Wood and admit that she had harbored some fantasies about him back at Hogwarts. Oliver decided that their three year age difference, which had prevented him from pursuing her at school, didn't really matter that much now that they were adults. One thing led to another and the next morning saw them sharing a bed in yet another one of the mansion's bedrooms, with Katie having satisfied at least one of those old fantasies.

One couple never left the ballroom. Viktor spent the entire evening with Luna, captivated by her stories. Eventually they were the only ones left in the room, sitting on a love seat just talking. There, for the first time in her life, Luna broke down and admitted that most of her fanciful creatures were made up. It was her way of distancing herself from people, as she had determined never to get close to anyone again after her mother died. Only once since then had she let the mask slip and she let someone in a just a bit, and that was when Harry had asked her to Slughorn's party.

For his part, Viktor confessed to the loneliness of being famous – girls wanted him for his fame, never getting to know who he really was inside. With only two women in his life had that not been the case – Hermione was never like that, and neither was Luna. Luna then realized how similar Viktor was in this regard to Harry, the only other guy who saw something in her. At this point she decided to finally give up on Ron. The dawn of the next day found them still together, sitting on the balcony watching the sun rise, his arm wrapped around her and her head on his shoulder.

Early that morning, Minnie discretely provided sobering potions to every bedroom. After having served James and Sirius in many similar situations she was quite familiar with the preparation of that particular potion.

Once Lavender found out what had happened between Ron and Susan through the Hogwarts gossip network, she determined that it was time to step up the level of her relationship with Ron. By the end of January the two of them would no longer be virgins. Unfortunately, the result of this effort was the same as it is so often for girls who try to use sex to cement an uncertain relationship – instead of bringing them closer together it caused him to pull away from her.

By their prior agreement, February was Susan's month with Ron, and she also managed to seduce him, the night of the Valentine's Day dance. By the end of February Ron was left with a difficult decision. He was not so much of a cad to sleep with girls he did not have feelings for, and indeed he was very attracted to both of them. Ultimately, he was able to persuade them both to wait until after the final battle to make any final decisions.

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When the newlywed couple returned to Hogwarts at the beginning of the term, McGonagall called them aside to inform them that they would be permitted to share the Head Boy's bedroom in the Head Suite and they agreed that it would be all right to remove the bed from the Head Girl's bedroom. Amazingly enough, all three of them managed to keep a straight face all throughout this conversation.

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## Hermione's Plan The Hogwarts Challenge

### Chapter 29 , The Hogwarts Challenge

Headmistress McGonagall rose to her feet as the start of term feast in the Great Hall began to draw to a close. "I have a very important announcement to make before you all return to your common rooms. It regards a special competition that we will be holding this term that we are calling The Hogwarts Challenge. The competition has been planned and organized by some of our staff and by the Head Boy and Head Girl, and they will be overseeing the events. At this time I'm going to ask Miss Granger to explain the competition and give you some details."

Harry and Hermione rose from their seats at the Gryffindor table, ignoring the questioning looks from their classmates. (The name 'Miss Granger' had not been a slip-up by the headmistress – the newlywed couple had asked all of their friends who had attended the wedding to keep the information to themselves, and they had all willingly taken the Confidentiality Oath, grateful for the opportunity to witness the event.) At the front of the hall, Harry gave her hand a little squeeze to help the nervousness she was feeling about her presentation.

"This competition we have put together is modeled to some extent after the Tri-Wizard Tournament," Hermione announced, "in that the participants will be competing in several events and receiving scores. The difference is that there will be far more than three tasks, and you will be competing in teams instead of as individuals. And yes, you will get to pick your own teammates – subject to certain conditions." This revelation immediately had many of the students glancing at their friends with 'you and me?' messages on their faces.

"Now," she continued, "these tasks will test you in many different ways both physical and mental, and on many different areas of magic. It is also designed to help you learn to work together to solve problems. And don't worry, you won't be fighting any dragons ..." here Harry made an exaggerated motion of wiping his brow in relief, "but it will certainly test your flying skills, among others." This line and the accompanying antics by Harry brought the house down, and Hermione gave his hand a return squeeze as they shared a loving smile so intense that it prompted a mass of sighs from the older girls in the audience. Their affection and care for each other was, if anything, even more obvious than it had been the previous term. Every boyfriend at Hogwarts would sooner or later be held up to the standard for how to treat a girlfriend set by the Chosen One.

"First," Hermione went on after the laughter had subsided, "you will compete in teams of four, two witches and two wizards, with one member from each house." This last addition triggered a loud murmur of surprise, and suddenly everyone was looking over at the other house tables, pondering possible partnerships. But Hermione wasn't finished. "Obviously, this will help you learn to work with students of other houses, and you will also need to join with students of different years than your own. This will be effected by the requirement that the sum of the years of the four students on each team must be twenty or less."

Hermione had to pause yet again for the hall to quiet. "Next, there will be eleven tasks, one held every other week for the rest of the term. They will test your abilities in flying, different aspects of spellcasting, and offensive and defensive hexes and charms. Also your knowledge of varied subjects such as magical creatures and plants, runes, and potions, involving puzzle solving and logical reasoning." She paused and turned toward the Gryffindor table, flashing a sympathetic look. "Sorry Ron, no chess matches this time." This drew another chuckle from the students, particularly the seventh years who remembered the points Ron had won at the end of their first year by playing his way through a giant chess set during the trio's quest for the Philosopher's Stone. "At the end of the year the winning team will have their names engraved on a trophy that will be displayed in the Entrance Hall," she concluded. (Nothing was said about house points, which surprised many of the students before they realized, some immediately and some later, that with one member on the winning team from each house these points would have no effect.)

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The students had a week to put their teams together before the first task would be announced, and this activity dominated the discussions in the halls, common rooms, and study lounges during this time. (In the case of the Gryffindor common room, it helped turn people's attention away from the topic of why Parvati and Seamus were totally avoiding each other, and eased the uncomfortable silence between Ginny and Neville.) As it was designed to, it led to more conversations that week between students of different houses and years than there would normally be in an entire school year. The first strategic decision to be made was how to vary the experience levels of the teammates, and the first and second year students found themselves being approached by seventh years who had (except for a few who followed the example of the Head Boy and Head Girl) completely ignored them all year. The second decision involved trying to put together a team that was balanced with students who were good at various subjects, as well as a mix of athletic and intellectual skills.

In the Gryffindor common room there was a good deal of laughter when Ginny had to explain to Ron that he couldn't be on a team with Susan and Daphne (he did realize why Lavender was excluded). She herself confided to Hermione her relief that she wouldn't have to disappoint Dean, Colin, or Neville by choosing among them. Surprisingly, the first team to be announced was Ginny, Luna, and two fourth year boys, one from Hufflepuff who Ginny knew from quidditch and the PDA and one from Slytherin that Luna recruited for his potions and herbology knowledge. Luna was good at runes and arithmency and especially magical creatures, while both of them were solid in transfiguration, charms, and defense. Of course, no one could touch Ginny at flying or spellcasting speed and accuracy (besides Harry, and he wasn't eligible for the tournament).

When the complete list of tasks was announced, and it was discovered that Muggle Studies was one of the topics, muggleborns and first years (due to the mandatory Muggle Studies class) were suddenly hot commodities. And it didn't take long until everyone realized that the number of

teams competing would be limited by the number of Slytherin students, since that house now had far fewer members than the other three houses. Suddenly the Slytherins, who had tended to be ostracized, found themselves in the driver's seat.

This was borne out when Tracey Davis marched over to the Gryffindor table on the morning after the announcement and claimed Dennis Creevey for her team. She and Su Li then completed their foursome with a second year Hufflepuff boy, and it was immediately recognized as one of the favorites. Daphne Greengrass, to everyone's surprise, selected Neville instead of Ron. This made Ron's decision easier, and he and Susan began plotting about which younger year students to join with, much to Lavender's dismay. An unexpected bit of fallout from Daphne's choice of Neville was Ginny's obvious annoyance, although she wouldn't admit it. This made Hermione wonder if she was about to witness a repeat of Ron's situation with her, where his jealousy of the attentions paid to her by other males turned out not to have any romantic implications. Was Ginny's irritation with Daphne the manifestation of a sisterly/friendly concern for Neville or was there something more to it that the young redhead just didn't recognize yet?

Blaise Zabini, true to his womanizing reputation, linked up with two sixth year girls from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, and added a first year Gryffindor boy. Ernie Macmillan got a laugh when he strode over to the Gryffindor table and asked if there were any first years like Hermione. The older students immediately introduced him to a red-faced Jamie Jordan. Ernie and Lisa Turpin then completed their team with a fifth year boy from Slytherin. Right afterward, seventh year prefects Hannah Abbott and Anthony Goldstein selected Jamie's friend Cheri June to join their team.

Soon the other sixth and seventh year students had paired up and also selected younger years to join them. Justin and Padma selected one of the reserve Gryffindor quidditch players and a quiet Slytherin girl that Padma had befriended, and ended up with another well-balanced team that would be in the running for the title. Other pairings included the Gryffindor/Ravenclaw combinations of Parvati and Terry Boot, Lavender and Michael Corner, Seamus and Morag McDougal, and Dean and Mandy Brocklehurst.

The complete list of tasks was posted in all of the common rooms and study lounges, and included the following:

A History of Magic multiple choice exam, taken by all four students together, with a strict time limit for its completion.

A practical exam featuring a wide assortment of magical creatures, with questions involving identification, where they could be found, and distinguishing characteristics, and a similar exam involving magical plants. Luna and Neville were considered to be the favorites for these two challenges, respectively.

A test involving the identification of various common muggle items and their uses, created collectively by the Granger family.

A crossword puzzle created by Emma Granger with help from Hermione and the Ancient Runes professor, in which all the clues were Runes.

A logic puzzle created by Dan Granger, again with help from Hermione, similar to the one Hermione had solved in the quest for the Stone during her first year.

A Potions challenge, where the students had to create as many potions from a specified list as possible in a week's time, with no instructions provided. They would have to research the potions in the library, determine what ingredients were needed, and then brew them. The final potions were to be judged for quality as well as how many had been successfully completed.

A flying challenge which involved a relay race where students had to retrieve objects from various points on top of the castle and return them to the starting point, and also an obstacle course in which they competed individually, with the times of the top two fastest team members being counted in the final team score.

A physical challenge also involving an obstacle course (land based this time), again with the two best times contributing to the team score.

A gauntlet of dueling dummies, completed by all four team members together, which rewarded accuracy as well as quickness, with the final score being a combination of most hits scored and fastest time of completion.

After these ten events were completed, the top five teams would compete for the trophy by completing a maze, similar in concept to the third task of the Tri-Wizard tournament. This time a team would go through the maze as a group, and the teams would go through the maze one at a time. The team with the fastest time would be declared the winner. Also, this time the trophy would hopefully not be a portkey.

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Ernie and Lisa's team took an early lead in the tournament when Jamie Jordan shocked everyone by blowing right through the logic puzzle, just as Hermione had done in her first year. No one was prouder of her than Harry and Hermione, and they treated the furiously blushing young muggleborn witch to an impromptu celebration in the Gryffindor common room. The other January event was the potions challenge, and here the quartet headed by Tracey Davis and Su Li came out on top, with Justin and Padma's team taking second place. Ginny and Luna's team, with their talented fourth year Slytherin potions prodigy, was a surprising third.

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It was fortunate, as January turned into February, that they had the tournament to take their minds off of other things, Hermione thought to herself. Bill and Fleur had still not made any more progress on the remaining Horcrux. The Ministry of Magic was not having any luck in dealing with random Death Eater attacks. Then there was the whole drama with Ron and Lavender, which was stressful for Harry and her as well since Ron was still their best friend. They also felt bad about the situation between Ginny and Neville. Neville was terrified that he had irrevocably damaged his friendship with Ginny, and Ginny was at her wit's end regarding what to do about the Valentine's Day party. She wouldn't have minded going with Neville, but was afraid now that he would take it as a sign that she had stronger feelings for him than she did. She didn't blame him at all for kissing her, and she also didn't want it to affect their friendship. But she was afraid that he wouldn't want to go back to being good friends now that she knew he wanted more out of their relationship.

Ron's problem, if not Lavender's, was resolved to some extent when he turned his attention to Susan in preparation for their date to the Valentine's party. Hermione finally solved the other problem by inviting Neville and Ginny to the Head Suite (she invited Ginny while Harry invited Neville, with each of the Gryffindors not knowing that the other would be there) where they played intermediary for their two friends. To everyone's relief, Neville was willing to be whatever Ginny wanted him to be, even though he wanted more, and she accepted that, and was willing to do things with him as friends and keep an open mind about the possibility that it could go farther. In other words, she was permitting him to court her but not making any promises. They would go to the party together and have a good time, and she even allowed with a sly smile that since it was Valentine's Day a friendly kiss or two might be in order. Neville, blushing furiously, agreed.

"She is quite the tease, isn't she?" Hermione commented to Harry after the other two had exited from the Head Suite. "Did she tease you like that?"

Hermione grinned inwardly as she watched Harry struggle with how to answer that question without getting into trouble. Finally he smirked at her. "Not as much as you do," he retorted as he wrapped his hands around her waist and pulled her to himself.

For their part, Harry and Hermione greatly enjoyed the Valentine's Day party. They enjoyed the night that followed even more.

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The February tournament events were the Runes crossword puzzle and the History of Magic test. This time Padma/Justin and Anthony/Hannah did best on the Runes, while Ernie Macmillan's team surprised everyone by scoring highest at History. As Ron joked later in the Gryffindor common room where they were once again congratulating Jamie on her team's second victory, "everyone thought that Hermione was the only one who ever stayed awake in that class."

Jamie was plainly puzzled. "I don't think our History of Magic professor's that boring," she protested. "I like history." The entire common room burst into laughter, which exploded through the roof when Ron walked over and began banging his head on the wall. Hermione smiled affectionately at the bewildered first year, and wrapped her up in a hug. Then it was all she could manage to keep a straight face when the young witch glanced over at Harry, hoping for a hug from him as well. Unfortunately for the smitten little girl, the object of her crush was still rolling on the floor from Ron's antics.

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It was with some trepidation that Hermione approached the Heads Suite one afternoon in late February. She had just had a distressing conversation with Parvati, and she was anxious about what Harry's reaction would be. As she entered through the portrait hole she saw that he was sprawled out on the sofa, sitting up leaning against one armrest with his legs stretched out along its length. She noted that he was reading a charms book but what really caught her eye was a gleaming sword lying on the table next to him.

Putting aside his book he shot her a big smile, like he always did when he saw her after they had been apart for a few hours, the one that let her know how happy he was when she was around and that he had missed her in her absence. Despite her nervousness, this welcome generated a return smile on her own face, and her spirits lifted a bit.

Given their close emotional connection, he picked up on her distress immediately. "You look like you could use a hug," he commented, spreading his legs and holding open his arms. "What's wrong?" Hermione's smile widened at his concern for her, and she removed her robes and laid them over a chair before crossing to him and settling down in front of him. (Most of the students kept their robes on all day long, but Harry and Hermione had still not gotten that comfortable in the standard wizarding garb, so now that they had their own private common room, they removed them when they wanted to relax. Harry had already taken his off.)

He pulled her back against his chest and wrapped her up in a comforting embrace, and she sighed in contentment. Even the most uncomfortable conversation could be managed when she was reminded of the assurance of his love for her.

"Parvati knows," she began simply. She could sense his concern turn to puzzlement even as she continued. "She asked me today about the possibility of you taking a second wife." She twisted around in his arms so that she could face him directly. "She's sort of applying for the position. She assured me that she wasn't trying to move in on you or take my place, and she understood that she would always be secondary, but still ..." Her voice cracked a bit as her eyes moistened. He responded by tightening his hug and leaning his cheek against her forehead, while sending all his feelings of love for her through their bond.

"What did you tell her?"

"I said that we had heard about the possibility last summer, but that we weren't interested in anything like that," she began apprehensively. "Should I have worded it differently, told her that we weren't interested for now but that it was possible that the situation might change at some point in the future?"

"No, no, you did fine," he reassured her. "Like we said before, we don't want to get anyone's hopes up. And really, she's not my type so I'm certain that we would never consider her even if we were going to go in that direction." Hermione's relief was obvious, and Harry smiled at her and gave another squeeze as they both felt the tension flow out of her body. She turned her head back away from him and nuzzled it up against his chest once more. She was about to tell him the rest of her conversation with the young Indian witch when he spoke up again.

"I just had a couple of thoughts. First, now that we're married and I've experienced how incredible our bond is now, I have no interest in even thinking about that any more." Hermione thought her face might crack with the smile that broke out on hearing him say that. "Last summer I had no idea of how this would feel. Maybe it's because of the soul bonding, or maybe it would be like this even without it, but there's no way I could come close to falling in love with anyone else. And the feelings I have when we make love, I could never do that with anyone else. So let's just eliminate that possibility from consideration." He paused for a moment while Hermione marveled at how perfect her life seemed to be at this moment.

Then Harry leaned his head down so that it was in her field of vision and grinned at her. "Feel free to say 'I told you so'", he teased. "I'm perfectly willing to admit that you were absolutely right yet again." She decided that an admission like that deserved a thorough snogging.

Once that activity had been completed to her satisfaction, she pulled away from her delightfully dazed and mussed husband and inquired with a gleam in her eye, "What was the other thought?"

"What ... oh ... um .... oh yeah," he stammered, trying to refocus. "I was wondering why Parvati and not Padma." She crooked an eyebrow at him, requesting a clarification. "It's just that I find Padma a lot more attractive than Parvati, now that I've gotten to know her better. I would have considered it more seriously with her if we were going to do it."

"Really?"

"Yeah," he grinned at her. "She's a lot more like you." Hermione laughed delightedly and gave him another hug. It was true that she was much closer now to Padma than she ever had been to Parvati, and yet the approach had come from the Gryffindor twin. She went on to relate the rest of her conversation with her housemate.

"Well, Parvati told me that the idea actually came from her father. I suppose he assumed that you knew Parvati better, being in the same house and all. And you did take her to the Yule Ball fourth year. It was probably a natural assumption on his part." Harry nodded his understanding.

"Apparently he's thinking of the political advantages. Presumably Padma would carry on the Patil line, and of course whatever inherited political power goes with it, while Parvati's child with you would take over the Black line and Wizengamot seat. I doubt that it would matter to him which one did which."

"And Padma's going with Justin now, after all," Harry pointed out.

"Oh, I don't think that's a factor," Hermione responded. "They're just dating; it's nothing serious. Sort of like what you did with Ginny." Harry cocked his head and gave her a look. She suspected that he hadn't thought much about the depth of his relationship with the young redhead at the time. "There's a big difference between dating someone and falling in love with them and getting married," she explained.

"Now that you mention it, I see what you're saying," he agreed. "When I was with Ginny it was more the excitement of finally having a real girlfriend and everything that went with that. We never had the kind of deep understanding that you and I have, so I guess I can't say I was ever in love with her."

Hermione had known this all along, but was glad that he realized it also. "On the other hand, this would have nothing to do with love," she observed, getting back to the original subject. "Whether it was Parvati or Padma, it would have been all about political power and providing heirs and continuing on a noble line."

"Well, now that I know what marriage is really like, all of that seems like a ridiculous reason to marry someone," Harry declared. Then he frowned. "So are we going to get swarms of witches bugging us about this now?"

"I don't think so," Hermione replied. "I pleaded with Parvati to keep it to herself and she swore that she wouldn't tell a soul – not even Lavender. It's only the noble families who even know about it, and they're a small fraction of the purebloods. There might be another inquiry from time to time, but I can deal with them. I think it's traditional to make the approach through the wife, so you won't have to deal with it." She turned her face back up to his. "Don't worry, I'll protect you from evil witches trying to steal your virtue."

That got another chuckle out of him, and resulted in another hug for her, and afterward she rested her head on his chest again. "So, Padma, huh?" she asked mischievously.

"Yeah," he admitted with a grin of his own. "I guess smart girls just turn me on." Then he tickled her and the sofa turned into a battleground between a squealing, squirming witch and her wizard.

Eventually they calmed down and he sat up again, with a now thoroughly mussed Head Girl snuggled up next to him, as he picked up the charms book once more. She allowed her gaze to rest on the beautiful sword in front of them, and only now recognized it. "Harry, that's the Sword of Gryffindor! What's it doing here?"

She could tell that he had been waiting for her to ask, and was feeling proud of himself. "It's for my part of our enchantment project," he responded. She nodded her understanding. While she had been focusing on enchanting normal objects, he had decided to study the existing enchantments on magical objects. In addition to charming the tape player for her mother, she had worked on several other household items as well. Anything that ran on electricity could in principle be charmed to work magically. The other thing she had learned to do was to charm mirrors like the one he had received from Sirius. These would allow instant communication across long distances between various leaders of the light side forces. She was also working on a simpler device for battlefield communications, a type of wristband communicator (like Dick Tracy's two-way wrist radio).

Harry explained why he had decided to focus on Gryffindor's sword. "I think I have some kind of connection with it," he told her. "During second year when Fawkes brought me the Sorting Hat, the sword only actually appeared when I put the Hat on my head and thought 'Help me!' really hard. I want to see if I can summon it at will, and also if I can do it without the Hat." Hermione nodded, impressed with his thought process. It could be extremely valuable to be able to summon a magical sword to you in the middle of a battle. "So first I need to try to identify the charms on it," Harry concluded, "and then try to key them to me." Hermione agreed with him and rose to go find another charms book, then joined him again on the sofa to help him pursue this line of inquiry.

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The month of March saw the tournament's first outdoor event, the test on their knowledge of magical creatures. As expected, Luna was a veritable fountain of information on creatures real and imagined. Fortunately for their team, Ginny was able to keep her focussed on the actual creatures on

the examination, and curb her forays into fantasy. It was a convincing victory, the first of the competition for their team. Padma and Justin's team again took second place, with Hannah and Anthony's foursome a close third.

The second event of March was the Muggle object identification. The twist here was that any muggleborn or muggle raised members of the team could not compete, but were expected to coach their teammates during the week before the examination. It was quite amusing to watch the normally somewhat pompous seventh year Ernie Macmillan sitting in rapt attention while being drilled by the young, but deadly serious first year Jamie. Harry had to stuff his fist in his mouth in his struggle to keep from laughing at the sight of the little know-it-all muggleborn witch earnestly reviewing the operation of electronic devices with her older teammates when he happened on them drilling in an empty classroom one day.

Apparently Justin had spent quite a bit of time reviewing with Padma as well, and Tracey and Su had squeezed all the information that they could out of Dennis, as their teams snagged the top two spots. Tracey and Su, with the additional benefits of each having one muggleborn parent, edged out Padma, with Hannah and Anthony's team third and Ernie and Lisa pleasing Jamie by taking fourth, the top showing for a team with all pureblood competitors.

Thus after six events the standings showed Justin and Padma's team in first place, and Tracey and Su's foursome second, with the Ernie/Lisa team and the Anthony/Hannah team tied for third. Ginny and Luna's team was a surprising 5th, by far the best placement for a combination with no seventh year students.

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"It has to be here somewhere!"

It was a somber but thoughtful group that gathered in the Headmistress's office on the first day of spring. Bill and Fleur had exhausted all of their other leads on the final Horcrux, and Bill was convinced it was somewhere at Hogwarts. Included in the assembly were all the people who knew about the quest, and they were brainstorming along with Dumbledore's portrait, who at this point was regarding them all quietly, but with deep concern showing on his face. McGonagall sat behind her desk, and standing off to her side were Moody, Remus, and Tonks. Harry and Hermione were sitting close together on one of the couches in the room, with Ron and Ginny on another. Bill was pacing back and forth while Fleur was doing her best to keep him calm. Outwardly, Harry appeared relaxed but if one looked closely they could see the strong grip Hermione had on his arm, as she was mentally attempting to sooth his nerves through their bond.

"It's possible that he hid it somewhere the day he came back for the interview," Harry suggested.

"Possible, but unlikely," came the voice from the portrait. "He was under surveillance the entire time he was in the castle. But even if he had the opportunity, where might he have hidden it such that we have been unable to detect it in all this time?"

"You are certain that you have thoroughly searched the Chamber of Secrets?" McGonagall inquired.

"Yes," answered Bill, "We even took Moody down there to give it a scan with his magical eye." Moody nodded his agreement.

The merpeople would know if it were in the lake," Remus offered, "and likewise the centaurs in the forest. They are aware of everything that goes on in there." He frowned. "Although I suppose they might not be too keen on telling us something like that."

"No, I am certain that they would have informed me if that were the case," the portrait responded. "They would not have tolerated an evil thing like that among them."

"I suppose you've frequently scanned the castle for dark magic?" Moody challenged, causing some of his listeners to share a smile. If it were up to the paranoid ex-Auror, the castle would probably be scanned on a weekly basis. Dumbledore's portrait guaranteed him that this was so.

"I find it hard to believe that there are no dark objects anywhere in the castle," Remus objected. "Especially with all of the hidden and out of the way places."

"Actually, a dark object in isolation is easily detected," countered Bill. "It would be more likely to miss one if it were hidden among lots of other dark objects."

"William is correct," agreed the portrait. "Except for the Chamber, which was magically hidden from the Headmasters' detection abilities, I can assure you that there are no dark objects except in places where they would be expected to be located."

"Let me guess," Ron broke in sarcastically. "The Slytherin common room."

McGonagall shot him an annoyed look, but said nothing, since he was right after all. "And I can unequivocally state that it cannot be there," she pronounced. "Professor Slughorn and I thoroughly scanned that room before the beginning of the year."

Hermione felt Harry's annoyance flare, as well as his disgust for the casual acceptance of activity from Slytherin House that would have had serious consequences if it had happened in any other house, and she squeezed his arm once more. Her thoughts, however were feverishly trying to connect two separate statements that different people had made. *Hidden among other dark objects. Out of the way place.*

"Does every House have a Head Suite like ours, and is it always located near the House common room?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes, but ..." McGonagall frowned as she saw where her brilliant student was going with this line of reasoning, and summoned a book from the shelves behind her desk.

The others in the room had suddenly turned to Hermione. "That's a thought," Bill agreed. "The Slytherin Head Boy's room? But the Horcrux we're looking for was made after Riddle left Hogwarts."

“There haven’t been too many Head Boys from Slytherin in recent years,” mused Harry.

“There weren’t any while I was here,” Tonks broke in.

“Not during my years either,” added Bill.

“It has been some time,” the portrait began. “Let me think, probably not since ...”

Remus frowned as he thought back. “During my first year I think it was ...”

“Lucius Malfoy,” announced McGonagall as she found the entry on the page she was searching.

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It must have been a strange sight for the students of Hogwarts, as the mixed group of students and staff hurried down the corridors and staircases to the Slytherin section of the dungeons. Any particular attention they might have paid to the procession was discouraged, however, by the menacing glare of Moody’s magical eye.

The portrait guarding the Slytherin Head Suite had protested allowing non-Slytherins into the room, but McGonagall asserted her right as Headmistress and forced it to let them in. They quickly split up and began searching the common room and the Head Boy’s room (and Tonks and Fleur checked out the Head Girl’s room for good measure). They found numerous dark objects, but Bill’s Horcrux detection spell came up negative every time. In frustration, Hermione pulled Harry out to the center of the common room and looked around carefully.

“We’re going about this the wrong way,” she insisted. “The Horcrux wouldn’t be anyplace obvious.” She had him close his eyes and stretch out his senses.

“It’s here somewhere,” he responded after several seconds. “My scar is tingling just a bit.” He paused and concentrated again. “It seems to be coming from over near the fireplace.”

Hermione shot her gaze in the direction of the fireplace, but there didn’t seem anything out of the ordinary there. Moody had already swept it once for dark objects, but Bill had cautioned them that it was possible that it could be masked somewhat to blend in with all the others. But the fireplace looked just like a normal fireplace, with a very ordinary picture hanging over it. She glanced away, frowned, and looked back again.

“Wait!” Hermione shouted. “Everyone come out here.” Seconds later the group had reassembled. “What do you see when you look at that fireplace?” Everyone turned to examine it closely.

“Just a fireplace with a picture hanging over it,” Harry replied finally, being the one least embarrassed about not seeing something that Hermione saw.

“And how would you describe the picture?” she persisted. “Without looking at it again,” she added quickly.

“Just a normal picture,” he answered with a frown, trying to remember what it looked like. “Nothing particularly memorable,” he finished, giving up.

Now everyone examined the picture again. It really was nothing memorable – just a desk with some books on it. Nothing dark about it at all. Hermione could see the puzzlement as everyone wondered why she was making such a big deal out of it. Then a glint of realization appeared on Remus’s face, followed by Fleur, then Bill.

“And wouldn’t you think that a picture hanging in such a place of honor would be of something more memorable than that?” she pointed out triumphantly.

Bill moved closer to examine the picture thoroughly while everyone hung back, but still studied it. There was a desk and chair, with a background that gave no clue as to where they were located. On the desk were some books and a few papers and writing implements, including a long quill lying on an open book. No titles were discernable on the books, and the writing on the books and paper was not legible. The quill appeared to be an eagle feather.

“Hey!” said Tonks as she rushed forward for a better look. “That looks like Ravenclaw’s Quill!”

Ravenclaw’s Quill, Hermione recalled from her study of the Hogwarts founders, was an artifact that had been passed down from one generation to another in the house that bore her name, from each seventh year female prefect to her successor. The custom seemed to have died out, because she had not been able to find any references to it recently, and no one she had talked to from Ravenclaw knew what had happened to it, although they were all familiar with the legend, particularly the female students. Tonks, having been in Ravenclaw, would certainly have known about it.

“This is extraordinary!” Bill gasped. He turned back to the others. “Was You-Know ... I mean Vol ... Voldemort ever in Egypt?”

“We’re not sure but it’s possible,” Moody answered. “He did travel a lot during the years after he left Hogwarts. Why?”

“I’ve only ever seen this once before, in an Egyptian tomb,” Bill responded, turning back to the picture. We stumbled across a painting that had an artifact we were looking for magically inserted into it. It took us two days to figure out how to get it out.”

Fleur came up behind him and wrapped her arms around him, while standing up on her tip toes to look over his shoulder. “And now?” she asked

Bill shot her a grin. “Should take about two minutes.”

Everyone watched in fascination as Bill spoke several incantations while moving his wand in an intricate pattern. The quill in the painting seemed to become more defined, and started looking as though it was in one of those 3-D pictures that you had to wear the goofy glasses to see, Hermione thought. Then she realized that the quill was in fact actually emerging from the painting. Fleur caught it as the enchanted picture finally released its hold.

Tonks moved up to peer closely at it. "I wonder if it still writes?" she commented, reaching to take it from Fleur."

"No!" shouted Bill, causing everyone to jump and Tonks to jerk her hand away. "That would activate it," he continued with his voice back to a normal level. The five of them who had destroyed the locket shuddered at that thought, and the rest of them, who had all heard about that episode, nodded their understanding. Ginny whimpered softly and shrank into Ron, who put his arm around her.

"So how do we do this," Harry inquired, after Bill had confirmed that it was indeed a Horcrux.

"One of us destroys the quill, and another casts the soul destruction spell as the soul fragment emerges," Bill declared. "Actually, several of us should cast that spell, just to make sure." He quickly taught it to everyone present, since they all wanted to participate.

Harry leveled his wand at the quill, now resting on the hearth of the fireplace. "I'm thinking *incendio*," he informed them. Bill nodded his approval.

"Do we really have to destroy such a priceless artifact?" McGonagall asked hesitantly.

Bill's eyes darkened, and he answered in a sharp voice that was unusual for the normally good-natured man. "No, we could try to activate it by having someone write something with it, and let Voldemort's soul come out of it and possess them, and then kill them," he snapped, moving subconsciously in front of Ginny as he spoke.

McGonagall quickly withdrew her objection.

It really *was* much easier than destroying the one in the locket, Hermione reflected a minute later after the task had been accomplished. Harry's *incendio* spell incinerated the quill, nine voices shouted '*Annihlato Spiritus!*', nine golden jets of light intercepted the misty form that rose from the ashes of the quill, and a flash and a scream signaled that they were one step closer to the final defeat of the dark lord.

-ooOoo-

As the weather began to warm, the tournament shifted to outdoor contests. The April events opened with the Herbology exam, and as expected Neville and Daphne's team took first place. This resulted in a rather steamy congratulatory kiss from the sexy Slytherin to her shy Gryffindor co-captain, which did not go unnoticed by his housemates. The weeks that followed saw quite a bit of teasing in the Gryffindor common room from Seamus and Dean about how he had been keeping his 'ladies' man' persona under wraps. This in turn generated some uncomfortable glances between him and a certain petite redhead.

The seventh year Hufflepuffs managed to uphold the honor of their house (given that the Herbology professor was their Head of House) by taking the next three places with the Hannah/Anthony team finishing second, Ernie/Lisa third, and Justin/Padma fourth.

The other outdoor event at the end of the month was the obstacle course, in which the PDA members and others who had been involved in physical training dominated. The battle for the top spot came down to a sprint between Ginny and Neville for the finish line. While Neville had taken the lead on the parts of the course requiring upper body strength, the smaller and swifter girl managed to overtake and pass him just before the end. Unable to restrain her excitement, Ginny latched onto him with a crushing hug which turned into a long embrace, much to both of their surprise. It was finally broken up when Daphne came forward and pulled him away to congratulate him with a hug of her own, leaving Ginny to wonder what had just happened between her and the boy who she still thought of as 'just a friend'.

The team winner still remained to be decided, however, and it was not until the third year Ravenclaw on Neville and Daphne's team came in several seconds ahead of the fourth year Hufflepuff representing Ginny and Luna's team that the Slytherin/Gryffindor duo learned that they had swept the month's events and moved into top five contention. In the final tally, the Ginny/Luna team took second with Justin/Padma third. Justin and Padma's team still held onto first overall.

-ooOoo-

The dominant news of the month, however, was the report of a massive raid by an Auror strike team on a Death Eater training center. The day after the news broke Harry and Hermione were invited to a secret briefing on the attack by Robards, Hammer, and Scrimgeour. While the Minister of Magic was primarily interested in trumpeting this rare success (particularly rare in that it did not involve the participation of the Chosen One and his mate), Robards provided the tactical details.

The raid had been made possible when someone, evidently a muggleborn Auror, had suggested the use of the Ministry's spell detector in the Underage Use of Magic Detection office to identify areas of high usage of Unforgivables. The annoying part of the story was how long it had taken the Ministry's hidebound bureaucracy to approve the diversion of the resource, which was after all primarily intended to keep tabs on muggleborn witches and wizards. It was not until Hammer had forcefully pointed out that there wasn't much use for the device while Hogwarts was in session and threatened to lock up the resisting officials for hindering the war effort that they had relented.

The downside of the raid, Robards reported grimly, was that although many Death Eaters had been captured, it had come at the cost of the lives of half a dozen Aurors. This led to a heated discussion on battle tactics.

Standard Auror doctrine called for the use of nothing more lethal than stunning spells, followed by binding the unconscious offenders. The Death Eaters were under no such restrictions, and although they had been taken by surprise, the more lethal spells they used had scored some deadly hits. The Head Auror noted, with heartfelt thanks, that without the dragonhide armor Harry had provided the light side casualty count would have

been much higher.

By contrast, it took several stunning hits on average for every Death Eater subdued, since they could be easily revived by their comrades. At this observation, Harry and Hermione shared an uneasy glance before Hermione nodded and Harry shrugged, then turned back to respond.

“We figured that out last year,” he told them firmly. That’s when we decided that we weren’t willing to risk our lives or those of our friends in a battle with that sort of disadvantage. That’s the same thing I told Shacklebolt and Dawlish last summer. When we fought the Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries, and again when they attacked us at Hogwarts, we and the others that fought with us scored as many or more hits as they did, but they just kept reviving the ones we stunned, or freeing the ones we tied up. Now, when we fight we make sure that when they go down they stay down. If we know we can take them out of the fight for good by stunning them we will, but otherwise we ...”

“I completely agree with you, Potter,” Scrimgeour broke in. “That’s what I’ve been telling these two. During the last war the Ministry authorized the use of Unforgivables by Aurors, and that’s what I’m going to do this time. I’m planning a press conference tomorrow to make the announcement and I’m hoping you will join me.”

Hermione winced as she felt a flash of anger from Harry at the realization that they had been set up. Before he could respond, though, she broke in. “Actually Minister, that’s not what we’re suggesting at all. There are plenty of spells that can disable an opponent without resorting to those.” Out of the corner of her eye she could see that Hammer, who had been furious at the Minister’s declaration, was now nodding with a look of vindication on her face.

“Now, my dear, I realize that you’re too young to remember the last war and what was necessary to win it,” Scrimgeour said soothingly. “You’ll have to just trust that those of us who were involved know what must be done.” Hermione forced herself to stay calm and not hex the patronizing smile right off his face. After several deep breaths, she shot a look at Harry to stay out of it for the moment and continued.

“So, Minister, you’re saying that the Aurors’ use of Unforgivables turned the tide in that war? That it was this decision that led to Voldemort’s defeat?” His placating smile now turned into an irritated glare but before he could answer she continued. “I suppose all the history books are wrong then and Harry Potter had nothing to do with it?” Now his look turned truly ugly and he began to sputter when Hammer broke in.

“No, Miss Granger, I’m sure that’s not what the Minister is saying. In fact, we don’t know whether it would have worked or not. The war was still going strong when Mr. Potter defeated You Know ...” she swallowed and forced it out, “Voldemort.”

Now Harry moved forward, and Hermione obligingly took a step back letting him know she was turning the floor over to him. “The one time I ever attempted an Unforgivable, a Cruciatus curse on Bellatrix Lestrange if you must know, it didn’t work. She then informed me that you have to really mean it, have to let your hatred fill you in order cast them properly. Righteous anger won’t work. That’s not something I’m willing to do, and I wouldn’t wish that feeling on any Auror either.” Hermione saw both Robards and Hammer nodding in agreement, while Scrimgeour continued to glare at them. “I’m sorry Minister, but we cannot endorse this action.”

-ooOoo-

*The Daily Prophet*  
Monday, 13 April, 1998

**Aurors to Use Unforgivables!**  
**Minister Scrimgeour Announces Controversial Tactic**  
**In War Against Forces of You-Know-Who**  
by Rita Skeeter

Unfortunately, Scrimgeour was not dissuaded in his determination to make a headline-grabbing announcement, and the front page of the Daily Prophet the next day screamed out the contentious decision. On the positive side, Hermione had managed to dissociate Harry from the decision, as the following paragraph appeared near the end of the article:

*And what of the Chosen One’s opinion on this questionable decision? A source close to Mr. Potter offered this statement: ‘We regret that the Minister felt it necessary to take this step. Obviously we have no say in what tactics the Aurors use, and this decision does not give us or those fighting with us the right to use these curses, and we are satisfied with that restriction. These curses also extract a heavy toll on the caster, which we prefer not to have to deal with.’*

Also on the positive side, Robards informed Harry privately that despite the new allowance, few if any of his Aurors would be using the killing curse or either of the others. They would, on the other hand, be taking his advice about using more incapacitating curses in the future, and he thanked him again for his assistance.

Regrettably, the incident didn’t end there. At the next meeting of the PDA one of the newly instated members of the elite battle groups raised the question again.

“Harry, are we going to learn Unforgivable curses now, too?” This question was met by some angry muttering by many of the seventh years who knew Harry the best, particularly the Gryffindors who remembered the demonstration ‘Moody’ had given them during their fourth year. “I mean, I know what the story in the *Prophet* said, but I was wondering ...”

Harry sighed, and Hermione’s hand found his again. Then he called to the whole group to stop what they were doing and gather round, before asking Hermione to transfigure some debris from the dueling dummy that had just been destroyed into a rat.

“First of all, you can assume that anything Rita Skeeter writes about me these days is probably correct,” he began. “Now, the short answer to your



question is no, we're not. But I'm sure you Ravenclaws, at least, want an explanation." The simple house jest managed to somewhat lighten the somber mood that had settled over the room and he continued. "The problem is that it's not as straightforward to cast these spells as you might think."

"Avada Kedavra!" The gathered students jumped back in shock as Harry pointed his wand at the rat and spoke the killing curse without warning. As expected, the green flash of light caused the rat to collapse and lie motionless on the table before him. But to their astonishment, in a few seconds it staggered to its feet and scurried off. Hermione was quicker, though, and an unspoken *Finite* later it reverted to debris again.

"The problem, you see," Harry resumed calmly, "is that there is more to these curses than saying the incantation and making the correct wand movement. You have to be full of hate in order for them to work properly. And that sort of hatred darkens your soul. It does no good for us to defeat a dark lord only to become like him ourselves."

Still wide-eyed, the students of the PDA all quickly agreed and the training session resumed.

-ooOoo-

On the first day of May, Ron told Harry and Hermione that they should come to Care of Magical Creatures that morning, as Hagrid had a surprise for them. Rather than some bizarre new (and likely dangerous) creature, Hagrid's treat was of the human variety.

"Charlie!" the pair exclaimed in unison as they ran to greet the grinning redhead. Harry paused to shake his hand but Hermione barreled right into him for a hug. While his surprised brother untangled himself from the enthusiastic Head Girl, Ron explained.

"St. Mungo's finally released him in March, and he's been living with Mum and Dad, but now he's getting anxious to get out and do something. They absolutely forbade him from doing something strenuous like going back to working with dragons, so we had the idea that he could come here and help out Hagrid for the rest of the year." Hermione understood the unspoken addition – Charlie would also be available to help defend the castle in the event of an attack, and was probably looking forward to it, as payback for the destruction of the Burrow.

"Also, I wanted to come and cheer for Ron and Ginny in this tournament you guys have cooked up," Charlie added. "I hear they're going to be doing some fancy flying next week."

Indeed, the next event of the Hogwarts Challenge was the flying competition, which did prove to be a Weasley family affair. Ginny and Ron, with faster broomsticks than any student at Hogwarts besides Harry, led their teams to the top times in the relay race portion of the event, meaning the obstacle course would determine the winner. This flying circuit on the reconfigured quidditch pitch involved climbing, diving, sharp turns, and ended with the contestant flying through the hoops at opposite ends of the stadium in succession. Since the top two scores for each team were all that counted, Luna and Susan sat in the stands with the other students and cheered as their teammates took to the course one at a time.

Ginny's superb talents as a chaser and seeker earned her the fastest overall time, nudging out Ron, but it was her selection of the Hufflepuff seeker as a teammate that sealed the win, as he came in ahead of the third year Ravenclaw who was the second fastest entrant on Ron's team. Thus, Ginny took this family contest, as her and Luna's team claimed the top spot with Ron and Susan's quartet settling for second.

Near the end of the month came the last of the preliminary events, the gauntlet. This was the event designed to test the students' Defense skills, and as expected the top PDA members dominated.

The gauntlet challenge had been boosted considerably when it was decided to add a series of traps (such as portable swamps) provided by Fred and George. The contestants would have to navigate through the various traps and take out as many dueling dummies as possible, while also avoiding the return fire from some of them. Since it was the final event of the preliminary round, the teams were sent through in reverse order of their overall standing.

The difficulty of the challenge quickly became obvious when none of the first five teams even made it though. Most of these unfortunates had tended to take an 'every man for himself, just get to the other end' approach and they paid for it. Clearly, some teamwork and strategy was in order.

Ron and Susan were the first to skillfully exploit this aspect, as Ron focused on attack spells, knocking out as many dummies as possible with powerful blasting curses, while Susan countered the return fire with shields. Their two younger teammates were instructed to stay close and help out wherever they could, and they methodically worked their way through the test, avoiding all of the traps. (In this Ron had a decided advantage, due to his familiarity with his brothers' inventions.) This approach put them temporarily in first place, but there were six teams yet to come.

Hannah and Anthony's team and likewise Ernie and Lisa's followed their example, but neither Anthony or Ernie's blasting hexes were as powerful or accurate as Ron's, and the Gryffindor/Hufflepuff pair maintained their lead. Daphne and Neville, however matched Ron and Susan for both power and skill, as Daphne managed to hit quite a few dummies as well as shielding. Also, the two of them moved their team more quickly through the gauntlet, trading fewer hits for a faster time. This strategy succeeded in moving them ahead of the Ron/Susan quartet, and Daphne once again rewarded Neville, in the same manner as she had after their Herbology victory. She also managed to time her congratulatory kiss just as Ginny was coming over to offer congratulations of her own, leaving the younger Gryffindor with a jealous feeling that tarnished her own victory.

For Ginny and Luna had devised an even more effective strategy that maximized the use of each of their team members' talents. They moved through the gauntlet at an all out run, with Luna solely focused on locating and disabling all the traps, while Ginny fired off blasting hexes at the target dummies with an incredible combination of speed and accuracy. Their two younger teammates were instructed to keep up with them and to focus on shielding and evasion, which had been their best areas during their PDA training. As the four of them slid across the finish line on the surface of a portable swamp that Luna had just frozen solid there was no doubt in anyone's mind that they had won handily.

Justin and Padma's team, the final team to run the gauntlet by virtue of being in first place going into the event, did a credible job with the two of them working well together to both avoid traps and blast the targets. They also moved through the gauntlet at a good pace, but neither of them were as fast or accurate as Ginny, and so their total hit score was considerably lower, but good for fourth place on the day.

Thus the contesting teams were set for the final event, the solving of the maze, to take place in June. Justin/Padma were in first place due to their overall consistency and string of second place finishes, while Ginny/Luna, who had taken the greatest number of firsts, were next. Tracey/Su held down third place with Hannah/Anthony and Ernie/Lisa taking the final two spots.

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Ginny was again the queen of the Gryffindor common room during the celebration that evening, both for her team's first place finish on the day and for their second place standing overall – noteworthy in that it was the only team in the finale without any seventh year members. The house was also justifiably proud that Ginny, Neville, and Ron had been largely responsible for their teams' top three finishes in the gauntlet.

"I'd like to see what Harry and Hermione would do on that course," Seamus declared, to loud general agreement.

"I don't see how anyone could have done better than Ginny did," Dean argued. "She was incredible today." Ginny smiled at him and gave him a pat on the cheek in appreciation, but shook her head.

"No, I couldn't hold a candle to Harry," she objected. "Maybe you lot don't remember the things he did in training this summer, but I do. And don't forget what the pair of them did at the attack on the Longbottoms, and before that on the Burrow. I was there for that one and they were unbelievable." She turned to Ron for confirmation and he nodded his agreement.

"Maybe not Harry, but it might be fun to see Ginny and Hermione go at it," Dean persisted, giving Seamus a wink. Across the room Hermione merely shook her head in amusement. Those two would enjoy watching any good looking pair of witches 'go at it', she knew. Before she could offer a response, Ron beat her to it.

"No offense to Ginny, but Hermione mopped up the floor with me when I was crazy enough to challenge her this summer. I'd like to think Gin and I are fairly evenly matched, so I doubt that it would be much of a contest." Ginny nodded vigorously, as she had no desire to challenge her friend.

"At any rate, it wouldn't be fair for Hermione and me to run that course, since we helped design it," Harry pointed out. Hermione nodded her agreement and surreptitiously gave his hand a squeeze, impressed with how he had directed the conversation away from speculation on their abilities, which they wanted to keep under wraps as much as possible.

Just then the portrait hole opened and Neville came stumbling in with a dazed expression on his face. Seeing a host of questioning looks he blurted out that Daphne had just asked him to be her date for the end of year dance. At that revelation, his fellow Gryffindor male housemates immediately decided that even though his team had finished sixth in the Hogwarts Challenge, just out of the running for the trophy, Neville had definitely come out of the competition a winner.

The stunned look on Ginny's face at this revelation made Hermione decide that another heart to heart conversation was in order. The next day she and Fleur invited Ginny to the Head Girl's room, where the two older witches tried to help the confused redhead work out what she was feeling. They both pointed out that it wasn't fair to Neville for her to string him along, expecting him to be there whenever she needed a date but not being willing to commit to anything herself.

She finally resolved to be happy for him, although she did wish that it had been a less attractive girl who had set her sights on him. Hermione carefully refrained from saying that who was going to take whom to this particular dance probably didn't really matter at this point, because the chances were that the course of the war with Voldemort would make the whole matter moot.

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Something similar was on the minds of the leaders of the Order of the Phoenix as well, and later that week Alistor Moody arrived at Hogwarts and sequestered himself with Remus, Tonks, McGonagall, Harry and Hermione. The subject – when did everyone think Voldemort was going to make his big attack, and where? All the intelligence they had been gathering indicated a large build-up of his forces.

"Well, so far, every attack he's made on me has happened near the end of the school year, either before, during, or after final exams," Harry offered. "So I'm guessing he'll hold to that pattern. I don't want to even try to understand his reasoning, but he seems pretty consistent."

"The only exception was last year, and it was Draco that initiated that attack, not Voldemort," Hermione pointed out in support. "And we've known for two years that Harry's the one he's after the most, so we believe that he'll attack here."

"Normally, I'd agree with you," responded Moody, "but that raid the Ministry pulled off last month really got his attention. I'd say it was possible he'd go after them first, not only for payback but also to remove them from the picture, leaving us more isolated up here."

The consensus was that they should be ready for an attack at either place, and that Robards and Hammer should be kept fully informed of their thinking.

Meanwhile, out on the Hogwarts grounds, a pair of redheaded twins were busily preparing a new set of tricks and traps for the maze that was to be used in the final task. They had used their standard assortment of pranks for the gauntlet (which somewhat accounted for the ease with which Luna had disabled them, given how her father had incorporated them into their home defenses) but this time it would be all new stuff. They had taken careful note of how their traps had been countered in the gauntlet event, and made adjustments accordingly. For example, an antifreeze charm had been added to the portable swamp.

But under the cover of this work, they were secretly performing a similar mission on a much larger scale. By the time they were finished, the entire Hogwarts grounds would be filled with a variety of their most dangerous traps, particularly a new model of the portable swamp, all of which could be activated remotely from the castle. An invading enemy would be in for a most unpleasant surprise.



## Hermione's Plan The War Comes to Hogwarts

### Chapter 30, The War Comes to Hogwarts

June 27, 1998

A plain brown owl streaked through the treetops of the forbidden forest, hurrying for the distant castle. In her animagus form Hermione had flown out to investigate a report that had come from the centaurs, that a large evil presence had appeared deep in the forest. It had turned out to be all too true.

The anxious days of waiting were at an end. At each event as the school year came to a close, they had wondered if that would be the day the dark lord finally attacked. But the quidditch final had come and gone, with a resounding victory for the undefeated Gryffindor team, without a disturbance.

Likewise the final task of the Hogwarts Challenge. Based on the results of the gauntlet challenge, the team of Ginny and Luna had been the favorite going into the maze. But the maze was about more than just combat, and the two sixth year girls no longer had the advantage of familiarity with the pranks and traps of the twins. The maze tested their magical knowledge on many levels, and especially their logical problem solving ability. Justin and Padma, with their greater experience and more varied backgrounds (the muggleborn Justin had no difficulty with the riddles of the Sphinx, for example) had come out with the best time and earned the championship trophy.

The tournament had accomplished its goals, however, and the students had all learned much about teamwork and the importance of inter-house cooperation. Their skills had been honed in a variety of areas and they were as ready as they were going to be.

Final exams had also proceeded without disruption. The OWL and NEWT examiners had finished up their work the day before and left the castle. Hermione had been satisfied with her efforts on the NEWTs, and though she was hoping for all O's, it was no longer the dominant concern in her life. It never had been for Harry, and he was also satisfied with his performance. The last major event of the term was the end of year dance scheduled for that evening. As Hermione had suspected, it would probably not be taking place now.

As the castle came into view, the brown owl soared to the top of the tallest section, where several people were awaiting her news. A command post had been secretly constructed up here amongst the parapets of the ancient structure and the finishing touches were even now being added. A large table had several mirrors arranged in a column along the left side, with a map of the grounds dominating the center, and a strange looking box on the right along with a set of runes. Another table off to the side held the silver detection instruments that had once resided in Dumbledore's office.

Padma had been Harry's first choice for the important position of battle coordinator, but she had declined, wishing to fight alongside her fellow Ravenclaws. Tracey and Daphne thereupon agreed to take over the post, and they would be up here with omnioculars, relaying messages and moving the defending students and professors to where they were most needed. Moody had spent some time with the two discussing battle tactics and had finished by pronouncing the pair of Slytherins 'suitably devious'. Hermione's enchanted mirrors would allow them to keep in touch with people inside the castle, especially McGonagall, who would be stationed in the Great Hall or the Entrance Hall, and Madame Pomfrey in the Hospital Wing, which had been magically expanded in anticipation of the forthcoming casualties, as well as Chief Auror Robards at the Ministry of Magic.

Right now McGonagall, Tracey, Daphne, and Harry gathered together as the owl alighted before the main table and transformed back into Hermione.

"They're here," she gasped, trying to catch her breath. "More trolls and inferi than I could count. Not as many Death Eaters as we expected, though." The others nodded and she continued. "They're pretty deep in the forest, so it looks like it will be at least an hour before they get here. More if they get distracted along the way."

The others nodded again, more grimly this time. The Acromantula colony, now on somewhat better terms with Hagrid due to the way he had honored Aragog's death, had agreed to stay neutral in the battle. For them, neutral meant attacking anyone who wandered into their territory. The centaurs would also be harassing the flanks of the advancing army with hit and run attacks. Finally, Hagrid had vowed to stay in the forest with Grawp and fight the enemy there, insisting that he was more familiar with it than anyone else around, and that the pair of them would be of little use out in the open when the spells started flying.

They were not sure if any other dark creatures would be joining in the attack, but at least they wouldn't have to worry about any Dementors showing up. The word had come from Croaker two months ago that after a few demonstrations by Harry and Hermione of the destructive power of their pair of Patroni, the remaining Dementors had fled back to the now deserted island of Azkaban and vowed to stay there.

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An hour later the battle groups were ready and waiting out on the grounds. The number of students in the most advanced group of the PDA was now up to ninety, but only seventy would be participating in the battle. McGonagall had insisted, and Harry and Hermione had readily agreed, that only those students who were of age, and any others who had written permission from their parents, would be permitted outside the castle. Even with the staff and members of the Order of the Phoenix included, there would be fewer than one hundred defenders.

There were plenty of other ways that the students could help out the defensive effort, including firing spells from the windows of the castle if the enemy got close enough, tending to the injured, and relaying messages. The younger students were confined to their common rooms in the charge of the fifth year prefects. Over the previous four months Harry had created hundreds of portkeys, which would be used as a last resort to evacuate everyone remaining in the castle to safety at the grounds of Potter Manor or one of his other properties. However, if it came to that, it would mean that the battle had been lost and no place would be truly safe from the forces of the dark lord.

A large contingent from Ravenclaw was arrayed in front of the castle protecting the main entrance, led by Flitwick, Padma, and Luna. A force consisting mainly of Hufflepuffs and Slytherins was stationed out near the greenhouses under Moody's and Sprout's direction, concealing themselves in a variety of vegetation that had been carefully nurtured in that area for the occasion. A smaller detachment of primarily Gryffindors, but also including members from all four houses, occupied a forward position at the quidditch stadium with Remus, Tonks, Bill, and Fleur. There was also a flying corps, led by Ron, Charlie, and Viktor, consisting of the best broomstick handlers in the upper years. This would be the primary attack arm of the fighters, and also the ones in the greatest danger.

Finally there were the snipers with their Barrett .50 caliber rifles, in four strategic locations high in the castle towers with overlapping fields of fire. Dean and Seamus were stationed in Gryffindor Tower, on the eastern side of the castle, while Justin and Ernie occupied the owlry at the top of the West Tower. Ginny and Neville were ensconced up in the Astronomy Tower near the castle entrance, which was the highest and therefore most exposed position. Unknown to the others, Dan and Emma were at that very moment ascending the ladder to the Divination classroom in the North Tower. There they found that Trelawny had locked herself in her quarters and drunk herself into a stupor. Satisfied that she wouldn't be bothering them, with her tiresome predictions of Harry's death, they set up in the very window from which a beetle animagus had spied upon Harry three years earlier.

Dan had one thought in mind for this battle – keep Harry and Hermione alive at all costs. He and Emma would focus solely on the pair, and he intended to ruthlessly take out anything that threatened them. In addition to his sniper rifle, he had sent Dobby to retrieve his shotgun from where it had been stored at the gun club, and had even obtained a pair of semi-automatic handguns that both he and Emma could wield in case anything got too close.

-ooOoo-

An hour later the students and staff were in position, all of them having donned dragonhide armor and the twins' latest model of shield hats. The main group in front of the castle under Flitwick's direction had conjured a series of boulders and a few walls to use as cover, extending out about a hundred yards. The group under Moody's charge in a flanking position over by the greenhouses had concealed themselves amongst the vegetation. Out at the quidditch stadium Harry and Hermione gathered both the ground-based defenders and the flyers together for final instructions.

While they were waiting, Fleur leaned against Bill, who wrapped an arm around her shoulder, as she thought about how she had come to this point. Four years ago she had been going into her last year at Beauxbatons, the queen of the school. She had been a spoiled rich girl who had everything her own way, the top student in her class as well as the most beautiful. Then the French school had accepted the invitation to participate in the Tri-Wizard Tournament and her life had been changed forever.

As she had expected, she had been chosen to represent her school – and had gone on to finish last in every event. That had been an eye-opener. But even more so had been her three opponents. Cedric, good looking, magically gifted, and the nicest, most noble guy she had ever met. And who had been brutally murdered on the final day of the tournament. Viktor Krum, the world famous quidditch star, but a brooding loner who shunned his adoring fangirls. And who somehow saw the beauty inside a young bookworm that other guys didn't give a second thought to.

And last but not least, a small, shy, unassuming boy who happened to be the most famous student on the planet. Whom she had initially haughtily dismissed as not being worth her time. But who showed more courage and loyalty than anyone she had ever met. Who occupied a world so different than hers, one where a dark lord was constantly trying to kill him, and who was alternately praised and scorned by a fickle wizarding public. Who proceeded to turn her nice, comfortable world upside down. After the events of the final task she knew she could never go back to that safe, carefree, but woefully ignorant existence.

Now, four years later, she found herself preparing to fight by his side, against the greatest evil of her lifetime. And she wouldn't change her choice for anything. She was making a difference in the world and putting her life on the line for what was right. And besides, she had found something else that had been missing from her life as the pampered princess to whom guys were attracted like moths to a flame. She now had love, and was willing to fight and die for it.

By contrast Tonks, who was similarly wrapped around Remus, had been involved in this struggle her whole life, going back even before she was born when her mother had estranged herself from two sisters who had chosen to follow a dark lord. Becoming an Auror was a choice that would allow her to contribute her unique talents to the battle against evil, but she had quickly become disgusted with the Ministry when Fudge refused to acknowledge the return of that same dark lord. She had jumped at the offer to join the Order of the Phoenix and become more actively involved in the fight. From there her story was more similar to that of the beautiful French witch. She had met Harry Potter, she had realized that he was the key to their ultimate victory, and last but not least she too had found love. And she too was willing to fight and die for it.

Ron was battling a case of nerves more serious than any he had faced before a quidditch match. It was even worse than standing up at his best friend's wedding. He furtively glanced around at the other key participants in the battle, settling on Viktor and Charlie, his fellow squad leaders. Viktor had adopted his usual 'game face', the famous scowl that thousands of quidditch fans knew all too well, but Charlie grinned at him and flashed him a quick thumbs-up.

Good old happy-go-lucky Charlie. Charlie the fun-loving older brother who had turned down a lucrative quidditch career to cavort with dragons. Charlie, who would be dead right now if not for Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, another in the long list of Weasleys who owed their life or livelihood to The Boy Who Lived. Ginny, Arthur, and Charlie had all been saved by his selfless actions. Fred and George would still be immature pranksters instead of successful businessmen without Harry's belief in their ability to make the world a better place. Bill was now the most highly respected human employee by the goblins at Gringotts, due in large part to his association with Harry Potter.

And finally there was Ron himself, who would probably have always been the overlooked younger brother feeling sorry for himself at his lot in life if Harry had not befriended him that day on the Hogwarts Express. Now he would forever be known as the best mate of the Chosen One, a key participant in the defeat of the powerful evil wizard that most of the world feared so much as to be unable to say his name aloud – Lord Voldemort. But more importantly, he would be laying his life on the line for the two best friends a guy could ever have.

They were all brought back from their pre-battle musings when Harry began to speak. "Keep in mind that Voldemort probably won't show up until near the end," he reminded them. They knew that his practice was to let others do the initial dirty work for him, plus he would need to rest and recover his magic after the task of moving so many forces into position. "I'm sure he'll make his presence known, so don't worry about looking for him. But keep an eye out for a giant snake," he continued. "If you spot it let one of us know right away." He gestured to himself and Hermione, and then to Bill and Fleur.

"Also, be sure to focus on the Death Eaters initially," Hermione added. "They're the only ones who can hit the flyers, so we need to take them out first." The others all nodded and moved to their positions, checking their wristbands. High atop the castle at the command post, Daphne and Tracey were doing communications checks. The box on the right side of their table was the controller for the wrist communicators that Hermione had created and enchanted, and by touching the runes next to it with her wand Tracey could contact the various team leaders.

"Are you sure you want to do it this way?" Harry asked once more as he mounted his broom and Hermione climbed on behind him. Hermione nodded.

"This way I've got your back, and it's the only way I can keep up with you on a broom," she responded. "Plus, I've got a backup." She then showed him her own shrunken down broom which she then slid into a pocket on her sleeve. A large crashing noise at the edge of the forest signaled the approach of their foe, and the flying troops (which Colin and Dennis had nicknamed the PAF as a takeoff on the RAF) took to the skies while the others arranged themselves in the best vantage points atop the quidditch stands.

As the pair took to the air a private message came in from Tracey. "I've just received word from Robards," she reported grimly. "We're on our own up here. The Ministry's being overrun with inferi and they're just barely holding on. They can't spare any reinforcements." Harry and Hermione shared a determined look. It was going to be all up to them, but they had trained all along with that thought in mind and prepared their fellow students as best as they could. It would have to be enough.

The defenders watched in momentary shock as the waves of trolls and inferi emerged from the forest, but gathered themselves resolutely and prepared to do what they had trained so long for. The flyers streaked towards the advancing horde but everyone else held their fire until the enemy was in range.

Harry's first pass over the attackers was at top speed and they were past in a blur, drawing a few hexes that flew up in their wake. Four pairs of omnioculurs in the castle towers immediately began scanning for targets.

"Harry, you're going so fast I can't hit anything," Hermione complained from behind him on the broom. Each of them had managed to launch only a couple of explosion hexes on the first run.

"If I go this fast nothing's likely to hit us either," Harry pointed out. Hermione thought for a moment and made a slight motion with her wand while clamping her thighs around his hips.

"There, I've just linked us with a sticking charm," she explained. "Now I can keep both hands free and not worry about holding on."

"Sounds kinky," he remarked with a grin as he brought the broom around for another pass. "We'll have to try that out in bed sometime."

Hermione grinned back and slapped him on the shoulder as she peered over it. "Sure, except instead of sticking my crotch to your bum we should probably do it the other way around."

Their banter was brought up short by the sound of a cough from their wristbands. "Do you think you two lovebirds can keep that stuff to yourselves while talking over an open radio?" Dan commented wryly. Both of the teens turned bright red as they heard Ginny giggle and Dean and Justin chuckle in response.

"Daddy, what are you doing here?" Hermione managed, needing to change the subject fast.

"Covering your back, sweetheart," came the reply. This was followed by two loud cracks from his rifle as he finally located a target.

"OK, people, we've still got a battle to fight here," Tracey's voice sounded. Harry dove over the mass of trolls and inferi once more, this time dropping a huge fireball on a group of inferi while Hermione launched several large magical spears that impaled at least two of the trolls. This time a much larger volley of hexes greeted them, and two of the flyers were hit and went tumbling out of control. Bringing up the rear, though, Viktor and Charlie each snared one of the injured students with a levitation charm, and a banishment charm sent them sailing toward the quidditch pitch where a medical team had set up to receive casualties.

"Colin's down," came Ron's voice over the communicator. "There's five or six of them hiding behind the hedge by Hagrid's hut."

"I'm on it big brother," Ginny responded. From the astronomy tower she had a clear view of Hagrid's hut and squeezed off several rounds. Her .50

caliber bullets tore through the unprotected wizards and in seconds most of them were down while the remainder fled back to the protection of the forest.

Meanwhile down on the ground, a house elf popped up next to the downed flyer, and a few seconds later activated a portkey and disappeared along with the injured Gryffindor. Emma and Dobby had worked together to train a corps of willing house elves to rescue injured combatants, and equipped them with portkeys that would transport the wounded either to the Hospital Wing or the field hospital in the quidditch stadium. They also handled the less pleasant task of recovering the bodies of fighters who had been killed.

By this time the main body of trolls and inferi had moved several hundred yards out from the forest and past the lake, the castle clearly in their sights, but still not in range of the main group of defenders. The forward fighters in the quidditch stands were now beginning to engage, and explosive hexes lanced out into the front ranks of the enemy. Up in the towers of the castles, the snipers continued to cut down the trolls with their armor piercing bullets whenever they ran out of Death Eater targets.

"All flyers pull back now!" Tracey's voice sounded. As soon as everyone was clear she nodded to Daphne who touched her wand to several buttons on her map. Instantly a massive wave of explosions lit up the grounds as one of the twins' deadlier inventions came into play, blowing huge holes in the enemy formations. As soon as the smoke began to clear the flyers bore in again, their own explosive hexes adding to the carnage as they continued to seek out any Death Eaters still standing in the open.

Suddenly an eerie wailing noise issued from the edge of the forest, and the flyers closest to the source wavered and began to drop.

"Silencing charms everyone!" shouted Tracey desperately. "Those are banshees!" It was a dangerous tactic, but temporarily necessary. A banshee's wail could be incapacitating, or even fatal. Quickly a bubble of silence surrounded each of the defenders. They could still hear her instructions over their wristbands, but nothing else. Harry flew as near to the plummeting flyers as he dared, and Hermione summoned them with one hand while still maintaining a shield with the other. Meanwhile the spotters were anxiously scanning for the source of the deadly sound.

"Got them!" Daphne shouted. "Over by that outcropping of forest near the lake."

"Can you take them out with one of your explosives?" Tracey inquired urgently.

Daphne shook her head while she touched her wand to another part of the command table, and then to the position on the map where she had located the banshees. "Nope, already used up the ones in that area," she replied, "but I can do this." A flaming pinwheel erupted from a hidden cache and flew over to hover over the enemy's location.

"Snipers, are you still with me?" Tracey called out. The four snipers and their spotters were all wearing headgear to protect their ears from the loud report of their powerful rifles, and thus were also protected from the banshees' wails as well. These elaborate earmuffs had been charmed by Hermione to be linked to the communications network and now Tracey received affirmatives from all four teams. "Your priority targets are marked by the flaming pinwheel. They will appear as women with long black hair."

Within seconds a hail of bullets ended the threat, and up in Gryffindor Tower Seamus breathed a sigh of relief and willed himself to stop trembling. Dean looked up and smiled sympathetically, recalling that Seamus's boggart had been a banshee. "OK, find me some more Death Eaters to shoot while I take out a few more trolls," he instructed his friend.

Having deposited their rescued students at the field infirmary in the quidditch stadium, Harry and Hermione flew back over the location of the latest threat, but found that it had been eliminated. Harry dropped another fireball on their crumbled bodies for good measure and the pair soared back into the battle.

During that distraction the main body of trolls and inferi had continued to advance, and were beginning to surround the quidditch pitch. Now Daphne triggered another trap. Several dozen of Fred and George's portable swamps activated and the ground beneath the enemy turned into a soggy morass. The new enhanced version of the swamps had an additional feature that now came into play – swamp gas. In short order this highly flammable gas had enveloped the dark creatures struggling to escape their mucky prison and at another command from Tracey the defenders on the quidditch stands launched a series of *Incendio* hexes. The results were spectacular, and the quidditch stadium was temporarily hidden from view of the castle by a wall of flame. Instantly hundreds of inferi were incinerated while some of the trolls, with thicker hides, finally managed to crawl out of the inferno, severely burned. But there was no time for celebration as another threat descended from the skies.

"Incoming harpies!" called out Tracey as she focused her omnioculurs in on the swarm of creatures flooding out of the edge of the forest. "Heads up fliers, you've got company!"

"Pair up!" Viktor shouted to his charges, and Ron and Charlie relayed the message to their squads as well. "Watch each other's backs." Before they could react further hundreds of harpies were upon them, slashing with their sharp claws. It was now close combat, and the snipers had to turn their fire elsewhere for fear of hitting their comrades.

After Hermione sent half a dozen harpies crashing to the ground in pieces, the rest of the attackers learned to avoid the broomstick with the tailgunner and focused their efforts on the unprotected ones. It was turning into a general melee, each flier twisting and turning, trying desperately to keep the savage creatures off their backs. "Everyone move into the quidditch pitch!" Harry ordered while he was temporarily unoccupied. There they would have some ground support from the high stands. The flyers obeyed and twenty brooms streaked for the relative safety of the stadium.

All the way there, Harry darted his broom in and out of the swarm, destruction flashing from the wands of its two riders. Once at the stadium, the odds evened somewhat, but more than half of the riders were injured and barely hanging on.

"Watch it Dennis, you've got three of them right behind you!" shouted Ron.

"Copy that Red Leader, I've got him covered," Hermione replied coolly as she blasted two of the harpies pursuing Dennis, then impaled the other

with a flight of magical arrows. "OK, Red One, you're all clear now," she continued. "Let's blow this thing and get out of here."

Ron gave her an odd look but Dennis understood the Star Wars reference and grinned back at her, shooting her a thumbs up. In front of her she heard a groan from Harry, but could feel his amusement through their bond as he shook his head. It really did feel like they were in a dogfight with X-wings and TIE fighters.

Up in the divination classroom, Dan noticed that three harpies had peeled away from the main attack and were heading for the Astronomy Tower, intent on eliminating the threat that had been causing so much trouble for the attackers. He managed to hit one of them that was coming straight in, but his sniper rifle was unsuitable for flying targets, so he laid it aside and reached for his shotgun. This was just like shooting pheasant or grouse. He took aim and led his targets just the right amount.

Boom! Boom! The twelve gauge shot was not quite lethal to such a large creature, but did plenty of damage, and they fell toward the outlying tower out of control. Neville quickly raised his wand and dispatched the wounded pair just as they arrived, and Ginny turned and gave Dan a wave of thanks before returning her attention to the battle.

Dan returned to his sniper rifle, replacing the magazine with a full one and carefully setting the bipod on the window ledge, then focussed in on two more trolls. Two shots later the massive creatures were down with fatal chest wounds. Seeing them up close through the scope, he was amazed at just how large and ugly they were.

"I can't believe Harry jumped on the back of one of those creatures when he was just eleven," Emma murmured next to him, apparently thinking the same thing, while continuing to scan with her omnioculurs.

"Good thing he did, too," Dan pointed out. Emma shuddered, thinking about her beautiful daughter and what might have been and how her fortunes had changed that night. Instead of dying on the floor of the bathroom, her body crushed and broken, she had survived to grow up and marry the boy who had rescued her. Now they just had to make it through this battle.

Still scanning, she spotted some familiar figures in black robes crouched low, picking their way between two of the still smoldering swamps. "Death Eaters sneaking into the stadium!" she called out.

Dan swung his rifle around. "I've got the north end covered." He squeezed off several more rounds and three of the white masked, black robed figures dropped.

"I've got the south end," came Dean's voice over the headsets as more shots rang out.

"Looks like some might have got through," Daphne's calm voice sounded in their ears. "Watch out Tonks, it appears that you have Death Eaters below."

Even as the aerial battle continued above her, Tonks pulled Lavender and Parvati aside and quickly explained the situation. Although not the most powerful witches around, they were particularly proficient with silencing spells and disillusioned movement. And powerful blasting hexes would not be advisable down beneath the quidditch stands where a stray spell could take out a support structure. The three of them quietly descended the stairs and began stalking their foes. A minute later three stunners flashed out of nowhere and the surprised Death Eaters fell to the ground, and were quickly bound with *Incarcerous* hexes.

"You two stay down here and watch for any more," Tonks instructed. The two Gryffindors nodded and moved off into the shadows. The medical team out on the field treating the downed fliers was particularly vulnerable, but they would keep them covered.

By this time the flyers and their ground support fighters had dispatched the last of the harpies. But the delay had been costly. Without the flyers and the forward-based defenders to harass them, the enemy force had surged forward, and was now engaging the main body of defenders. The group holding the quidditch stadium was about to be cut off, and Tracey was moments from ordering their retreat. If necessary, they would all portkey back to the Entrance Hall, where they could move back out and join the other defenders at the front of the castle. But first, it was time to fully commit the remainder of her forces.

Concealed in the vegetation by the greenhouses, disillusioned along with the rest of her housemates, Susan waited for the signal to attack. The inferi gave her the creeps, and the trolls were terrifying. *Come on Suse, pull yourself together*, she admonished herself. *Ron knocked one of those out when he was a first year. Surely you can fight one as a seventh year.*

She had watched with her heart in her throat as Ron had dived again and again to attack the advancing horde, shuddering at the thought of what the trolls and inferi would do to him if he were shot down. She wished that she was a better flyer so that she could be up there with him. She wished that she had taken her training more seriously instead of devoting so much of her effort to flirting with him. If she had, she might have at least been selected to be one of the elite fighters who had joined the Gryffindors at the quidditch pitch, in the thick of the battle.

Next to her, Hannah found her disillusioned hand and gave it a squeeze. "Don't worry," she whispered. "We'll have our chance soon enough. We just have to be ready to do our part." Just then a large group of inferi and a dozen trolls began moving past their position, directed by a handful of Death Eaters, trying to flank the defenders in front of the castle. Her wristband began to vibrate with the attack signal from Tracey.

"*Incendio!*" Susan and Hannah's spells flashed from their wands and joined into an array of colorful streaks of light that crashed into the unsuspecting enemy in front of them. As the inferi began to shrink from the flames, the trolls turned toward them. "*Reducto!*" The two Hufflepuffs instinctively targeted the same troll, and the power of their combined explosive spells ripped an arm from his body and knocked him back several feet.

As they and their fellow students around them continued to pour spellfire into the confused creatures, their Death Eater masters attempted to fire back, albeit ineffectively. Their hastily cast spells either missed the well-concealed defenders or were mostly deflected by their dragonhide armor.



Within a few seconds the Death Eaters were all down, either dead, unconscious, and their dark allies fell back slowly, then more rapidly as panic began to set in.

Now that both of the defending forces at the castle were fully engaged, the attacking creatures were caught in a crossfire and compelled to retreat. High above the battle in the command post, however, Tracey could see that the valiant defenders were still badly outnumbered and the reversal was only temporary.

"All defenders activate eye shields in ten seconds!" she shouted into the communicator as Daphne opened all of the channels. "Harry, Hermione, Ron, Viktor, Charlie – *Solarus* spells on my mark – 5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1 ... NOW!"

At this command all of the defending students and staff touched their wands to their shield hats, switching temporarily to the protective goggle setting that the twins had installed in their most recent version of the multi-purpose headgear. The magical equivalent of very darkly tinted glass dropped down, severely restricting their vision. Meanwhile four flyers had spread out over the enemy forces that still remained on the field to maximize the impact of the desperation tactic. Up in the Divination classroom, Dan and Emma hurried to strap on their welding goggles.

The Hogwarts grounds lit up with the blinding light of three suns and a supernova, as Harry and Hermione's spells merged into one. For twenty seconds that seemed an eternity, the students and staff could see through their darkened goggles as though it were high noon in a white sand desert, and immediately unleashed a torrent of spells on their incapacitated foes. When the sunburst spells finally faded and the defenders switched off their eye shields, all of the remaining Death Eaters that were still alive and conscious were writhing on the ground in agony, their optic nerves temporarily fried. The trolls were wandering around in a blind daze, and the inferi were huddled together cowering from the hated light. Now the light side forces pressed their advantage, pushing the depleted mass of attackers back toward the forest with a hail of incendiary and explosive hexes.

As Harry soared up on his Firebolt high above the field of battle to give himself and Hermione a temporary break before the final mop up operations she took advantage of the respite to wrap her arms around him and lean in close.

"Good news and bad news," she commented in a low voice. Harry nodded grimly.

"If he's not here, that means this wasn't the primary attack. And if this was a diversion I'm afraid of what we'll hear about the Ministry," he responded, confirming her unspoken fear.

Their break came to an abrupt end when Tracey's voice came over their communicators. "Look out guys, there's something big inbound."

They both turned in unison to peer out over the treetops of the Forbidden Forest. A dark ominous shape in the sky was steadily growing larger as it approached. All too soon it resolved itself into a gigantic creature that still haunted some of Harry's nightmares.

"Oh crap, they've got a dragon."

Hermione found little to add to Harry's simple sentiment as he pushed the broom into a dive to return them to the fray. "Charlie," he called out, "we need some advice here."

Charlie had flown up to take a look as soon as he got the word from Tracey. "It's a big one all right," he announced. "It will take about twenty simultaneous stunners to the head to knock it out. Or ten of Harry's I guess, but since we've only got one of him we'll have to make do with the rest of us." He flew back to the castle calling out instructions to the other broomstick squad leaders. "Form up on me. We'll set up an ambush around on the other side of the castle. Harry, you'll have to lure it over to our position once we're ready, like you did in the tournament. Can you handle that?"

"Got it," Harry replied as he landed on the castle rooftop. "Get off Hermione."

"Not on your life, Harry Potter!" she snapped. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I can't maneuver as well with you riding along," he argued. "With that thing I'm going to need all the maneuverability I can get." Hermione frowned briefly, then brightened as she quickly cast a spell.

"Feather-light charm," she explained. "I'm now ten percent of my normal mass. You'll hardly know I'm here." Harry did some mental math and decided he could handle the extra eleven or twelve pounds, but was smart enough to know not to mention any numbers with respect to a lady's weight. "Plus I've got your back. You'll need my shielding more than ever now."

"You think you can stop dragon fire?" he challenged.

"You better believe it," she retorted confidently. Convinced that she wasn't going anywhere, Harry kicked off again and could immediately feel the increased responsiveness in his Firebolt as he streaked out toward the incoming dragon. Down below his comrades were taking cover, temporarily ignoring the remaining groups of inferi that were starting to stir again, and the few scattered trolls.

Now that the dragon was fully in view they could tell that it was a Chinese Fireball. It seemed to be focussed exclusively on the castle, and Hermione concluded that Voldemort had expected all external resistance to have been eliminated by now, and that he might be sending in a dragon at this stage of the attack in an attempt to breach the castle walls. She wondered how he had managed to control it and get it to obey his commands, since dragons were notoriously independent minded and unpredictable beasts.

As the dragon made its approach shots rang out from the Astronomy Tower. "Ginny, hold your fire," Tracey immediately commanded.

"No, it's coming right at me and I've got a straight shot," came the reply from the determined redhead.

Ginny! It's going to roast you alive!" Hermione shouted back as Harry rushed to intercept. "You have to take cover now before ..."

"Ginny stop shooting!" Harry interrupted. "I'm about to fly right in front of you and you might hit us!" That got her attention and they could see her lower her rifle and duck down as they flashed by, while Neville tried to shield her.

Just as the dragon was about to incinerate the top of the tower Hermione fired a point blank blasting hex right at its head. While it wasn't enough to cause life-threatening damage to the heavily armored beast it certainly got its attention. It immediately lost interest in the pair atop the tower, and altered course to pursue its new tormentors. But in doing so, a final sweep of its tail as it changed direction crumbled the roof of the structure and sent it crashing down on the sniper team.

"Ginny! Neville!" Hermione screamed. But there was no time to agonize over the fate of her longtime friends as the dragon unleashed the fiery blast that it had held back a moment earlier at the duo on the broomstick. She immediately put everything she had into a fire deflection shield while Harry quickly cast a flame-freezing charm on themselves and the broom.

But dragon breath was far hotter than any normal flame. As the fiery blast washed over them her shield glowed bright orange, then yellow, then white hot, and the pair disappeared completely from the view of the horrified onlookers in the castle. Finally, when she had nearly exhausted her energy holding the shield, the eruption of dragon fire ended and the broom and riders burst out of the conflagration and shot into a steep climb, the dragon still in pursuit.

Taking stock of themselves, the pair noticed smoke rising from their dragonhide armor and the scorched broom, while Hermione could feel that the ends of her hair, which had been tied into a ponytail at the back of her shield cap, had been singed into a frizzy mass. But the loss of a few inches of hair was a small price to pay for escaping that inferno, she thought gratefully.

"Wow, that was toasty," Harry commented wryly.

Hermione found herself a bit lightheaded at the enormous drain on her magic, and knew she would need time to recover, but managed a bit of humor despite the situation. "I dinna think the shields can take another hit like that one, cap'n," she quipped with a thick Scottish accent. This elicited another groan from Harry.

"Let me guess, you were a Trekkie when you were little, right?" Hermione reached her hand around into his field of vision, and made an odd gesture, forming a V with her two middle fingers.

"Live long and prosper."

The relieved voice of her father sputtered from their wristbands. "Look, Captain Kirk can get the girl after the battle is over. Are you two all right?"

"We're all fine here," Harry reported back. "Almost ready there Charlie?"

"Just a few more minutes, Harry," came the reply.

Harry glanced over his shoulder at the pursuing dragon and slowed his climb. Hermione realized that he needed to maintain enough separation to keep them out of range of another blast of fire, but not so much that the dragon lost interest. She had never taken her eyes off of it herself, and began making some mental calculations.

Harry was apparently having the same thoughts. "Can you tell how close we can let it get before it tries to blast us again?"

Hermione nodded. "I think so."

"OK. Hang on, I'm going to try something." Without any further warning Harry pushed the Firebolt over into a steep dive. Despite the sticking charm keeping her firmly attached to his backside, Hermione wrapped her free arm around his waist and gripped tightly, but still kept close watch on the angry creature that plunged right after them. In a dive, the massive bulk of the dragon worked to its advantage rather than against it, and the winged creature began gaining on them.

"Only a few more seconds like this and it'll be in range again," she shouted. Harry accordingly sped up slightly to maintain their current separation. Hermione could sense that the ground was rushing up at them at an alarming pace, but dared not look down to confirm it. Suddenly Harry slowed once more.

"It's closing again," she responded immediately. "I can see it's preparing another blast." She wasn't sure exactly what he was trying to accomplish but trusted that he knew what he was doing. Just in case, she readied another shield charm. "Any second now ... 3 ... 2 ... 1..."

Harry pulled hard on the handle of the broomstick and their dive suddenly turned into a climb again, causing Hermione to nearly black out, not to mention almost losing her lunch. In the back of her mind she recognized the quidditch move he had just pulled off as a Wronski Feint and promptly decided that she had no interest in ever experiencing one of those again.

Behind them she could now see the results of Harry's maneuver as the dragon's gigantic fireball incinerated the final group of inferi that had gathered themselves together again and were advancing once more on the castle while the defenders were distracted with the aerial combat above them. Heedless of the destruction it had just caused to its nominal allies, the dragon also pulled up and continued the chase.

"OK, quidditch star, we're ready for you now," Charlie's amused voice sounded from their wristbands. "Unless you want to try to plough that dragon again that is."

"No thanks, you can take it from here," Harry shot back. "It doesn't play fair."

Well, bring it around the north side of the castle then,” the stocky dragon handler replied. We’ve got a welcoming committee all prepared.”

From their vantage point in the North Tower Dan and Emma got a close up view of their two children leading the unsuspecting dragon past them into the carefully laid trap. Emma shuddered as the sixty foot long beast strained to catch its tormentors and fry them to a crisp, and Dan moved to put an arm around her. “So this is basically the same thing Harry did in that tournament three years ago?” she asked in astonishment laced with anger. “How could any sane person possibly subject a fourteen year old boy to such a thing?”

Charlie’s ambush worked to perfection. Just as they rounded the final corner twenty stunners flashed out and impacted the dragon’s head. Hermione added one of her own for good measure and the unconscious dragon plummeted from the sky, crashing on the rocks below where the rear of the castle met the lake. Harry continued on and climbed up over the top of the castle where Daphne and Tracey waved from their command post before he descended to land on the front lawn, now blackened and torn to bits from all the fighting and explosions.

Harry’s final stunt had reminded the defenders on this side of the castle that they had some unfinished business, and they had quickly dispatched the rest of the inferi. One or two remaining Death Eaters and a handful of trolls had attempted to escape into the forest, but were met by a hail of arrows from the centaurs and eliminated in short order.

Hermione cancelled her sticking charm and as the two weary head students dismounted from the battered Firebolt they were swarmed by cheering students. Against all odds they had defeated a force that was easily ten times the size of their own. But Harry and Hermione could not bring themselves to join in the celebration, knowing that the battle wasn’t over yet. How many students had been lost? What had become of Ginny and Neville, or for that matter, how had Hagrid and Grawp fared in the forest? And most disturbingly, where was Voldemort?

The last question was abruptly answered in a most unpleasant way when a magically amplified voice suddenly sounded, the message carrying to every corner of the grounds. The voice was a grating, raspy snake-like hiss that Harry recognized all too well.

“HARRY POTTER.”

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## Hermione's Plan Where It All Ends

### Chapter 31, Where It All Ends

"HARRY POTTER."

A hush fell over the castle and its inhabitants as everyone strained to hear the message. Many of the assembled crowd whipped their heads around trying to determine the source of the voice.

"IT IS TIME, HARRY POTTER. YOUR PERFORMANCE THIS DAY HAS BEEN MOST IMPRESSIVE, BUT NOW IT IS TIME FOR US TO FULFILL THE PROPHECY THAT HAS LINKED OUR DESTINIES. TIME TO SEE ONCE AND FOR ALL WHO HAS THE POWER TO VANQUISH WHOM."

The sound of an explosion echoed from the village of Hogsmeade beyond the Hogwarts gates, and a thick column of smoke laced with a few tongues of fire rose into view.

"TO COMPEL YOUR PARTICIPATION I HAVE TAKEN CONTROL OF THIS VILLAGE AND ALL ITS INHABITANTS. IF YOU DECLINE THEY WILL ALL BE COMPLETELY DESTROYED."

Fearful looks were exchanged among the students and staff. Everyone knew that Harry would not let that happen. Hermione's hand, which had instinctively found Harry's arm when the voice began, now squeezed tightly. This is what they had been training for, and yet it was not the situation or the battleground that they had hoped for. The next words confirmed her worst fear.

"YOU MUST COME ALONE, HARRY POTTER, AND WE WILL DUEL ONE ON ONE. YOU HAVE MY MAGICAL VOW THAT YOU WILL NOT BE HARMED BEFORE WE MEET, BUT ANYONE ATTEMPTING TO JOIN YOU WILL BE KILLED INSTANTLY."

"No!" she gasped, now clutching onto him desperately. She had to be with him in this final confrontation. All of their plans depended on it. She simply HAD to be there.

"YOU HAVE FIVE MINUTES HARRY POTTER. COME TO ME NOW OR I WILL BEGIN TO ELIMINATE THIS VILLAGE AND EVERYONE IN IT."

Another explosion punctuated this final declaration, and the castle, both inside and outside, was filled with the screams and shouts of its terrified inhabitants. Amidst the turmoil Harry raised a hand and summoned his trusty Firebolt, while his other arm wrapped around Hermione and drew her close.

"You can find a way to come to me," he whispered urgently. "I know you can do it." She nodded into his chest, her mind racing to come up with a solution. "I'll try to hold him off until you get there."

Finally he released her, and she backed away with extreme reluctance. He mounted his broom and turned to her one last time before he kicked off. "No matter what happens, I'll love you forever."

And then he was gone, soaring into the clear afternoon sky. Hermione turned to see that quite a large audience had witnessed his departure, and every girl and not a few boys had tears streaming down their faces, while the rest had looks of stunned panic. But she didn't have time for any of that now; she had another problem to solve – the most important problem of her life.

Voldemort would have some sort of magical barrier in place that she would have to somehow surmount. And he would undoubtedly be surrounded by Death Eaters with instructions to kill anyone who approached. Stealth was the obvious solution, but in what fashion? Fly in on her broomstick under the invisibility cloak? He would most likely have some means of detecting magical concealment. Then she had it.

"Tonks!" she shouted to the Auror turned Defense Professor who was part of the group surrounding her. All of Harry's key friends and advisors had stepped forward to join her, and some had begun moving the other students away. "Can you conjure up a piece of official looking Ministry parchment?"

"Sure," came the immediate reply. "We send out notices all the time. What do you want it to say?"

"It doesn't have to say anything, just look important. Tie it to my leg." Tonks gave her an odd look but complied. When she looked up after conjuring the parchment she found herself facing a brown owl where the Head Girl had once stood, and the clever girl's plan was now evident.

"Here you go," she stammered, fastening the scrap to the owl's leg with trembling fingers. "Good luck Hermione." Then she stepped back and watched the owl take flight out towards the Forbidden Forest.

As Hermione's animagus form disappeared everyone turned back to ponder their next action. Now Ron stepped forward holding his broom. "Well,

“What are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

“We can’t, you heard him,” came several immediate replies. Ron shook his head irritably.

“That place is probably filled with Death Eaters. What’s going to happen to Harry and Hermione after they kill him?” he insisted, exhibiting his complete confidence in his best friends’ ability to carry out that task. “We can still cover their backs.”

“You’re right.” Surprisingly, Padma was the first to voice her support. “Let’s go.” The flying combat unit mounted their brooms again while the main body of Potter’s Army gathered together to head for the gates and the road to Hogsmeade.

Tracey and Daphne shared a look of dread at the lack of organization, but knew they couldn’t stop the dedicated students from supporting their leaders in any way they could. Their command post would be useless now, since it was configured to repel an attack on the castle. But they hurried back up to the roof to fetch the communications equipment, as it would be as vital as ever to keep in contact during the free-wheeling phase the battle was about to enter.

-ooOoo-

Harry gathered himself together in preparation for battle on the lonely flight into the village. He didn’t see any Death Eaters along the road to Hogsmeade Station, and the streets of the village were deserted. Here and there he spotted some black cloaks huddled at the entrances to some of the shops, and knew that the entire town was being held hostage, just as Voldemort had stated. In the middle of town a ring of fire was blazing away, at least ten feet high and forty feet in diameter. Instinctively he knew that his foe would be waiting for him within. He landed a short distance away, dismounted, and walked resolutely toward the flames. The long quest was nearly at an end; the battle he had been preparing for all his life, first unknowingly and only later in earnest with full knowledge of his ultimate goal, was upon him. He desperately hoped that Hermione would be able to find a way to join him. He had to trust that she would.

As he approached the edge of the fiery wall, it magically parted to allow him to step inside the ring. There, standing in the center waiting for him was his lifelong enemy. Harry paused to regard his nemesis. He looked little different than he remembered from the last time he had seen him in the Ministry atrium – tall, thin, with scarlet snake-like eyes, bearing no resemblance to the handsome teenaged boy who had emerged from the diary in the Chamber of Secrets. Harry reminded himself that the figure before him was not even human, having witnessed it rising from the cauldron in the graveyard as a result of a dark, perverse ritual. Unlike virtually every other member of the wizarding world, he felt no great fear in the presence of the powerful dark lord, as he had spent so much time viewing pensieve memories of their previous encounters and envisioning this ultimate one. He slid his wand into his hand and waited.

“Good afternoon Mr. Potter,” Voldemort hissed. “A fine day to die, is it not?” An evil, twisted grin formed on his snake-like lips and he continued. “By the way, to ensure that you remain for everything I have planned for you this time, rather than making a premature exit, this magical ring that surrounds us is more than meets the eye. It prevents apparation or any form of magical transportation. So that portkey I imagine you’re wearing will be of no use here. Now, if you are quite ready?” Now he too raised his wand and took his stance. They each bowed slightly, never taking their eyes off the other. Harry took a deep breath, calling on the magic around him. This was it.

A hoot from above them interrupted the solemn tableau, as a brown owl came descending into view from the south end of town. Hermione had soared out over the Forbidden Forest and circled wide, out of view of any watchers, to approach the village from that direction. Her ruse depended on everyone passing her off as a harmless post owl. The tactic proved to be successful, as Voldemort smirked when he saw her fly over the flaming walls of his magical enclosure and settle on Harry’s shoulder, extending her leg to him bearing the distinctive parchment of a Ministry missive.

“You needn’t bother reading that message,” he sneered. “It will only tell you what I already know. My forces will have neutralized your pathetic Ministry of Magic by now. You can expect no aide from that direction.” He raised his wand again. “Now, shall we return to ...”

Voldemort broke off in shock at the sight before him. In the blink of an eye the innocuous looking owl had transformed into a girl who now stood alongside his enemy, her hand linked with his, an impudent smirk on her face. Incensed at the realization that he had been tricked, he hurled his signature spell at the insolent interloper.

“*Avada Kedavra!*”

To his astonishment his killing curse impacted against a slab of rock that had sprung up from the ground in front of his target. She had been moving her wand to summon it even before he had finished his incantation. He recognized the mudblood that had been so close to Potter for so many years from the descriptions given by Snape and Pettigrew, and also knew that she had now become his lover. Instinctively, he began to cast another killing curse, only to have to break it off to defend himself from a powerful bone-breaking hex that Potter immediately sent his way, while the shards of stone that had been dislodged from rocky barrier were still flying through the air. He turned it aside with more difficulty than he would have expected, but had no time to ponder the implications of that as spells began flying at him from both of the opponents before him.

Harry and Hermione worked in perfect synchronization as they launched hex after hex at their foe and shielded or blocked the dark curses he returned, while dodging the ones that were unblockable. Deflected spells shot into the sky like multi-hued fireworks and it was only a matter of time before it happened – simultaneously cast hexes from the wands of Harry and Voldemort intersected and the brother wands connected once again. As before a golden thread joined them together and then splintered into a glowing web that enclosed them in a cage of light. Only this time there were three combatants in the cage, not two.

Hermione again linked her hand with Harry’s, making readily available another pool of magical power he could draw from as he struggled to control the beads of light that had formed on the golden thread. With her wand in her left hand she sent a flaming spear hurtling toward their foe, but to neither her nor Harry’s surprise a second wand instantly appeared in *his* left hand and he blocked it with a quickly raised shield. Then he returned a nasty looking purple flame that Hermione recognized all too well, but she blocked it with a look of fierce determination on her face. *Not this time!*

she thought smugly, allowing herself a moment of triumph. A squeeze of her hand from Harry accompanied a feeling of his admiration for her through their bond, and she resumed her duel with the dark lord.

-ooOoo-

The fliers were the first to reach Hogsmeade. Cautiously, they hovered high above the town as they scanned the empty streets below. They spotted the figures inside the ring of fire, but knew that was not their responsibility. Finally Ron, tired of the waiting, began to lead them down for a closer look. Fifty feet from the ground, approaching The Three Broomsticks at the end of High Street, all hell broke loose.

A dozen wizards in black cloaks suddenly appeared in front of the tavern as disillusionment charms were cast aside, and a dozen streaks of light in a rainbow of colors shot toward the descending broomriders. Ron, out in front, was only able to turn his broom to intercept the golden jet before it impacted, blowing his Cleansweep to smithereens. Nearly half of the riders were similarly hit and began to drop from the sky. Viktor, further back, had neatly dodged the spell that had targeted him with the practiced ease of the experienced seeker he was, and immediately pushed his broom into a power dive toward his redheaded comrade. Charlie, who had likewise evaded his attack, attempted to slow the fall of as many of the other riders as he could, while some of the other brooms, intact but now being ridden by students who had been temporarily stunned, began to soar wildly out of control.

Ron, aware of the ground approaching at a rapid rate, braced himself for the impact as a thought of regret flashed through his mind – regret that he had failed his best friends. But just as he was about to make a large stain on the landscape he was hit from the side by a flying blur as Viktor reached him just in time. But the high speed and additional weight caused the Bulgarian to lose control of his broom and the two of them crashed heavily into the woods at the end of the street.

"Fliers are down! Fliers are down!" Charlie made the emergency call as the remaining students who had not been hit went into evasive maneuvers and returned fire. After a brief but intense exchange of spells the Death Eaters pulled back close to the shelter of the Three Broomsticks, but continued to keep the injured crash victims pinned down.

The main body of students had just cleared the Hogwarts gates when the distress call came in. Tracey immediately designated a group of senior PDA members to go to their aid, and Luna, Lavender, Parvati, Susan, and Hannah locked onto the signal from Ron's pendant and apparated away. Once there, Luna and Hannah immediately began to lay down cover fire as Lavender, Parvati and Susan hastened to check on the injured.

Susan reached Ron first, and was relieved to find him conscious, but nursing a separated shoulder from his collision with Viktor. Viktor, who had borne the brunt of the crash, had a broken leg but was still firing spells back at the Death Eaters. Parvati quickly immobilized his leg while Lavender shot a relieved look at Ron before tending to Dennis Creevey. For each of the victims they checked that they were able to be safely transported, then slapped a portkey on them and flashed them to the Hogwarts infirmary before moving on to the next.

-ooOoo-

The entire nature of the battle had now changed. Formerly the students and staff were defending prepared positions against an attacking force. Now the roles were reversed and they were the attacking force assaulting the Death Eaters who were holding the town and knew that they would be coming. Furthermore, in their haste to reach Hogsmeade, the advancing students had left their most experienced leaders behind, as Moody and Flitwick were both unable to keep up, one because he had only one good leg, the other because the two legs he did have were just too short. As might be expected, the initial results were not good.

Just as the main force of students hurrying along the road to the village reached Hogsmeade Station, the Death Eaters sprang another ambush. This time an array of killing curses flashed out from both sides of the road, and the eager students leading the charge fell, never to rise again. Near the front of the group Padma, who had been struggling to keep them under control, was alert enough to drop to the ground as soon as she saw the flashes of light. She, and a few others who followed her example, quickly began conjuring boulders and walls for shelter as the Death Eaters continued to pour spellfire into the panicked students.

"Everyone stay down!" Tracey's voice now shouted in the communicators. "Continue to cover up and fall back!" Fifty yards or so behind the others, she and Daphne, along with Moody and Flitwick, set about preparing a defensive position for the battered army to retreat to. Padma was everywhere, darting fearlessly out to grab injured students and pull them to cover, while continuously maintaining a powerful shielding charm to turn away the hexes that flew her way. Slowly but surely, order was restored to the light side forces.

-ooOoo-

But back at the site of the downed fliers, Lavender, Parvati and the other rescuers could only hear the screams and commands that came over the wristbands. And a few killing curses could be heard being cast over the open channel. Parvati immediately assumed the worst.

"Padma!" she screamed, leaping to her feet. And before anyone could stop her, she disappeared with a crack as she apparated back to her sister's side.

Only to appear right in front of Padma just as a Death Eater launched yet another killing curse right at the Ravenclaw twin. To Padma's horror, her sister popped into view only to collapse into her arms with a lifeless stare in her eyes as she intercepted the deadly green curse.

"Parvati! No! No!!" Padma fell to the ground in shock, her arms still wrapped around her twin as Anthony and Lisa raced to her aid, but unable to restore the part of her soul that had just been brutally ripped away from her. Anthony pulled both of the petite Indian girls back behind a wall that Padma had just conjured while Lisa unleashed a furious barrage of hexes that had their attackers ducking for cover.

-ooOoo-

Back at Hogwarts, not everyone had rushed off blindly without a plan. Remus had gathered Tonks, Bill, Fleur, and a number of the Gryffindors and

others that had been defending the quidditch stadium and headed for the Weeping Willow and the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack. After a long run down the dark passage they emerged from the battered and broken down house near the spot where the remaining downed flyers and their rescue party were still trading fire with the Death Eaters in front of the Three Broomsticks. Remus raised his wrist communicator to his mouth and spoke softly.

"Tracey, are you there?"

After a few seconds a voice sounded. "This is Daphne. Things are pretty crazy here right now. Where are you Remus?"

"I have a group at the Shrieking Shack." He went on to describe their position relative to the others.

"Hang on," Daphne instructed. She touched her wand to two runes on the communication box. "OK, you're on a private channel with Luna. See if you can eliminate the opposition at The Three Broomsticks and then some of you hold that position, while the rest work your way back towards us. A large force of Death Eaters has us blocked by the station."

Another voice came on line. "Hello Professor," Luna said calmly. Remus smiled despite the grim situation, as Luna sounded as unflappable as ever. "Viktor and Ron and the other injured flyers have been evacuated to Hogwarts. There are still ten of us here able to fight." Remus consulted briefly with Tonks and then outlined their plan to Luna while his pink haired wife informed Bill and Fleur and the others in their combat group.

Staying disillusioned, the fighters from the Shrieking Shack quietly moved around behind the unsuspecting enemy. Five minutes later they sprang their own ambush and the dark side forces were quickly overcome. The tide had started to turn in Hogsmeade and the tavern was once more in friendly hands.

-ooOoo-

The scene in the Hogwarts Hospital Wing was chaotic, and about to turn contentious. Ron and Viktor had been healed by Madame Pomfrey, and wanted to leave to rejoin the fight. And if they were going, the other injured fighters fully intended to accompany them.

"Look," Ron finally insisted more forcefully than he had ever spoken to a teacher before. "I AM going to be with Harry and Hermione at the end whether you like it or not. If I have to fight my way out of this castle I will. Viktor rose and stood next to him, adding his own determination, and the beleaguered school nurse relented.

"Come on, this way," Ron shouted as he raced for the stairs, heading not for the Entrance Hall but in another direction entirely. Once in the third floor corridor, he tapped the statue of the humpbacked witch with his wand. "*Dissendium!*" he shouted, and the statue opened to reveal the tunnel to Honeydukes.

Because they knew that Wormtail was well aware of the secret tunnels of Hogwarts, and not being sure how much of that information he had passed on to the Death Eaters, Remus and Tonks had worked diligently to secure the tunnel network during the summer prior to the beginning of the school year. In each one they installed a Dark Mark barrier at the far end. In the event that barrier was breached, there was a triggering ward in the middle of the passageway which would slam down a solid stone wall to seal the tunnel at the castle end. In an emergency the castle could be evacuated by way of these passages, but no one would be able to enter.

Along the way the procession picked up other fighters who had been treated and released from the infirmary, as well as Justin and Ernie who had returned from their sniper nest in the owlry. They informed Ron that Dean and Seamus had gone to rescue Neville and Ginny in the wreckage of the Astronomy Tower. While part of his heart tugged at him to go check up on his little sister, Ron kept to his primary mission to go to the aid of his closest friends. As the group, which had by now grown to more than twenty, approached the end of the tunnel in Honeyduke's basement, Ron held up his hand for them to stop.

"We need to be quiet from this point on," he whispered. "Who can do nonverbal stunning spells?" Viktor, Justin, Ernie, and half a dozen others nodded and Ron motioned them to join him at the front. Then they all disillusioned themselves and noiselessly climbed the ladder. Two minutes later the rest of them heard six muffled thumps and the cellar door opened once again and they were waved forward. Up inside the sweetshop silencing spells had been cast and a group of hostage villagers were being released, while the now stunned and bound Death Eaters were piled against a wall. Viktor, Ron, and the two seventh year Hufflepuffs peered out one of the windows and contemplated their next move.

-ooOoo-

Back out along the road near Hogsmeade Station, the bulk of the army was still pinned down, unable to advance past the gauntlet of Death Eaters. Tracey crawled over to Padma, who was curled up in a ball hugging herself, while weeping at the loss of her twin sister. "Padma, you have to pull yourself together," she whispered intently. "Harry and Hermione need you." Padma finally looked up and a new expression of determination filled her eyes. Tracey was right. This was what she had spent ten months training for and she wasn't about to let her best friend down. Daphne joined them as they peered over the conjured boulder they were crouching behind.

"Any ideas?" As they pondered their situation Flitwick scurried up to join them and Padma and Tracey moved apart to make room for the diminutive Ravenclaw head of house.

"Do you young ladies recall the exhibition Mr. Potter and Miss Granger put on for us last summer?" he asked. They all nodded. "Mr. Moody thinks that the apparation technique they employed would be very useful here."

Padma's eyes lit up. "Of course!" She had been quite impressed at the speed with which the duo had pulled off the maneuver, popping up repeatedly in different positions and then disappearing before their opponents could shoot a spell at them. "How do you want to work it?" The four of them discussed exactly what sequence of apparation locations they would employ, and then Padma moved over to Anthony and Lisa to fill them in on the plan. She shuddered as she realized that they were the only other seventh year Ravenclaws still able to fight.

Just as they were about to put their plan into effect, they heard a rifle shot, followed several seconds later by another, and noticed one of the Death Eaters along the side of the road fall forward. Deciding that this was a perfect distraction, the six of them disappeared, only to reappear instantly behind one of the lines of Death Eaters.

*Reducto ! Reducto !* Each of the attackers shot two explosion hexes into the backs of the unsuspecting enemy, then popped up seconds later behind the other enemy line on the opposite side of the road and repeated the process. Once more on each side and their foe was completely disoriented and beginning to panic. The remainder of the student army surged forward and the rout was on. Within minutes the army was moving once more toward Hogsmeade, this time with considerably more caution, and Tracey was relaying word of their success to the two other groups who already had footholds in the village.

-ooOoo-

Ron and the others had noted that a large force of Death Eaters was besieging the building that housed Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. They were leery, no doubt, of getting too close, recalling all too well the fate of the last batch of Death Eaters to attack one of the twins' joke shops. Just then Tracey's voice sounded from their wristbands reporting the success at Hogsmeade Station. When she heard their report she mentally berated herself for not having a mirror link to Fred and George. She informed Ron that Remus and his group had control of The Three Broomsticks and instructed him to try to neutralize the forces occupying the other end of the village. From his earlier aerial reconnaissance, Ron knew that Harry and Hermione's final showdown with Voldemort was taking place in between their two locations, so the best thing they could do would be to isolate that confrontation from the rest of the battle.

Pulling out his PDA pendant, which was second only to Harry's and Hermione's in its communication ability, he sent a query to Fred who he presumed was holed up inside the joke shop. He immediately got a message back that they were OK and anxious to enter the fight. His texted reply consisted of two words. '*Create diversion.*' He trusted that the devious minds of his brothers could come up with something suitable. He was not disappointed.

Two windows of the store blew out and a dazzling array of fiery streamers shot forth, exploding into massive starbursts. While the entire enemy force hunkered down, keeping a nervous eye on their assigned 'hostages' the disillusioned force from Honeydukes moved up behind them. When the last firework died out they attacked with a blast of spellfire of their own.

When the occupants of the joke shop heard this, they burst out with wands blazing, diving to the ground while behind them another assortment of flaming pinwheels flew up into the air to draw the fire of any Death Eaters still targeting the building. Once more the hours of training paid off and the light side forces overwhelmed the relatively inexperienced Death Eaters.

Meanwhile the group that had taken The Three Broomsticks had snuck around behind the Post Office and taken out the Death Eaters occupying that structure. With these two victories, the entire west half of the town, including, most importantly, the area occupied by the fiery circle, was under the control of the good guys. The primary mission to 'cover Harry and Hermione's backs' completed, the students and staff established a defensive perimeter and set about to liberate the rest of the village. Fortunately for them, the Death Eaters still occupying the other half of the village were all new recruits, and not accustomed to acting on their own initiative, sat tight and awaited instructions from their master rather than begin slaughtering their hostages.

-ooOoo-

Within the flaming ring Hermione continued to trade spells with Voldemort, but was not able to slip anything past his defenses. This was by far the most difficult foe they had ever faced – the fight with Bellatrix Lestrange had been child's play by comparison. Not only was he locked in a test of sheer magical power with Harry through their linked phoenix feather wands, as well as dueling her with his second wand, but she could also see that a mental struggle was occurring between the two wizards as well. Harry's scar was glowing bright red and through their soul connection she could feel the mental attacks and counterattacks being exchanged. She and Harry had managed with some effort to learn to cast spells with two hands simultaneously, but this full-fledged three front combat on Voldemort's part was an incredible display of magical power and concentration.

She sent a tenuous Legilimency probe of her own at the dark lord but he immediately detected it and repelled it, unlike Pettigrew who had not even noticed her intrusion in a similar situation last summer. She decided to focus on spellcasting, both offensive and defensive, while maintaining her own Occlumency shields and hope they could eventually wear him down.

Harry had come to the same conclusion. His scar burned continuously, but his mental shields were so far up to the task, and he had surprised Voldemort with his own Legilimency attacks. He kept one hand firmly attached to Hermione's to share magical energy with her, and he could feel the strain Voldemort was undergoing through the vibrations in the golden thread linking their wands. Every time his opponent attempted to pour more magical power into the connection to force the beads towards his wand, Hermione instinctively stepped up her attacks, causing him to divert power back into blocking her.

Right now they were in something of a three way balance, although Voldemort was still focusing most of his attention on Harry. Harry knew, however, that none of his opponent's curses would hit him as long as Hermione had any magical energy remaining – she would defend him with everything she had. If they could just hold on long enough, they would eventually overcome the dark lord. Even though he had more raw magical power, they were more able to replenish their magic by using the Mayan technique of drawing on the magical energy of the life around them. In a battle of attrition, they had the advantage, if they could only stay with it. The long months of physical conditioning might conceivably be the difference. Or, if they got any sort of a break ...

For his part, Voldemort had most certainly not intended on facing two opponents. Up to that point everything had gone according to his plan. The trolls and inferi should have eliminated any opposition outside the castle, and the dragon had likely done serious damage to the structure itself before being subdued. Potter should have been battered and magically exhausted by that time, but his foolish sense of honor would compel him to drag himself to the village where the triumphant dark lord would finish him off once and for all.



The supremely powerful wizard had even allowed for the possibility of their wands locking up again, and had forced Ollivander to make him another wand before the old wandmaker had somehow managed to escape. (Two Death Eaters had been severely punished with the *Cruciatus* curse for that blunder.) Even if Potter had equipped himself with a backup wand of his own, Voldemort would have still had the upper hand.

He had intended to overpower Potter, but now was forced to deal with an additional combatant. One-on-one they both knew that with his greater power and experience he would eventually be victorious. But now Granger was keeping him off balance, as he couldn't devote his full attention or full power to subduing his primary foe. Initially he resolved to ignore the impertinent intruder, holding her at bay until his nemesis was destroyed, then killing her at his leisure. She was, after all, an annoying mudblood futilely attempting to aid her companion out of a misguided sense of that weakness called love.

But he grossly underestimated both of his foes. She blocked or countered every spell he threw at Potter. It didn't seem possible that a schoolgirl could know so many dark spells. Even so, he would have prevailed if he had been able to cast them with full power. But the connection between the two phoenix feather wands was sapping just enough of his magic to keep that from happening. And somehow Potter was able to sense when he was about to cast a curse with his other wand and put maximum pressure on the connection, throwing him off. Not since the last time he had dueled Albus Dumbledore had he faced this ability. He stopped verbalizing his spells, but by then it was too late. Now not only was the mudblood blocking his curses, she was getting in some nasty ones of her own, and Voldemort was on the defensive in a duel for only the second time in more than two decades.

*"Crucio !"* Hermione had been expecting this attempt and successfully blocked the torture curse aimed at Harry by conjuring another slab of stone which shattered under the impact. Voldemort grew even more enraged. She would certainly be his next target and she readied herself to block it again. But it was not the *Cruciatus* curse that Voldemort sent her way.

*"Imperio !"*

Immediately a calm, peaceful, very pleasant feeling washed over Hermione. Now this was nice. Much nicer than whatever it was that she had been doing. And Harry was holding her hand. That made it even nicer. She felt him give her hand a squeeze and she squeezed back.

"Stun Potter."

Stun Harry? She supposed she could do that. He was standing right next to her after all. But ... why would she want to do that? Yes, the peaceful, happy feeling would remain, but if she stunned him he'd probably stop holding her hand. That wouldn't be as nice. No, she thought, that wouldn't do at all. Stunning him was not a good idea.

"Stun Potter!"

Well, if it would make this annoying voice go away, perhaps it would be worth it. Then everything would go back to being peaceful and calm again. But ... why stun Harry? How would that make things better? She would much rather kiss him than stun him. That would make both of them happy. She gave his hand another squeeze and received one in return.

"You Filthy Mudblood! Why would someone want to kiss something as disgusting as you? Stun Him!"

*Look Mr. Annoying Voice. You don't have to be rude about it. You know, things were really quite peaceful and pleasant here until you started shouting at me. And for your information, Harry certainly enjoys kissing me. We are married after all.*

"Marry a Mudblood? What a foul, loathsome, revolting thought! What was Potter thinking?" A shudder went through her, originating from some alien source. "Have it your way, then, go ahead and kiss him. But get on with it!"

*You know, I'm not sure I want to do anything that you would suggest. You really are an unpleasant person. Well, I certainly do want to kiss Harry. But honestly, we generally try to avoid that kind of public display of affection.* The phrase, 'public display of affection' triggered something in her mind, something that this euphoric mood seemed to be suppressing. She and Harry were supposed to be doing something else. Something important. Perhaps this was not a good time to kiss him. *No, I don't think I will kiss him right now. I think he's busy. Yes, that's right, he is. He's busy trying to destroy a dark lord. And I'm supposed to be helping him.* She received another reassuring squeeze of her hand from Harry, and knew she had made the correct decision.

"Stupid Mudblood Bitch! Do what you're told!"

*No!* The calm, peaceful, happy place vanished and she found herself back in Hogsmeade, facing her raging foe. But before either of them could make another move two distant cracks echoed from the hills beyond the village, accompanied by the amazing sight of Voldemort's right shoulder and arm being blown away.

-ooOoo-

(Previously, back at the Astronomy Tower.)

Ginny groaned as she gradually regained consciousness. Her head was killing her. It felt like a roof had fallen on it. As her eyes opened and she looked around, she decided that pretty much exactly described what had happened. She and Neville would have been crushed by the top of the Astronomy Tower, except that Neville had shielded them. The sheer weight of the falling debris had knocked them down, however and partially buried them. Then she turned and spotted her partner.

"Neville!" Next to her Neville was lying still and unmoving. She now realized that he had focused the shield on her, and that his legs and torso had been crushed. Desperately, she reached her hand to his neck and felt for a pulse. *Yes! He was still alive!* She retrieved her wand from her wrist

holder and began levitating wooden beams and boulders off of herself and him, but then voices began sounding from her wrist communicator. She had no idea what had happened to her headset – it must have been knocked off. It took a minute for her to piece together the story but the essential part was that Harry had flown into Hogsmeade to face Voldemort alone. *No! She had to help him!*

Although she had never shared these thoughts with anyone else, the reason she had trained on the sniper rifle was so that she could aide Harry in the final confrontation with the dark lord. She knew that she would not be able to face the evil wizard who had possessed her directly, but this way she could attack him from a safe distance, and most importantly take him by surprise. She had to go to Harry now!

Ginny finished freeing herself, then found her sniper rifle and uncovered it. The spare magazines of ammunition were buried under Neville, but the magazine currently in the rifle was still half full. The headset was still missing so she pulled a pair of earplugs out of her pocket and put them in. Now, how was she to get to Hogsmeade, and more importantly, get within shooting distance without being spotted by Death Eaters?

She paused as more voices sounded from her wristband. Both of the groups of fighters who had gone after Harry had been ambushed. She swallowed hard and fought down the sense of panic when she realized that Ron would have been among the fliers who had been shot down. But regardless if she ever saw her brother alive again, she had to go to Harry's aide. Ron would have wanted it that way. Hearing about the broomstick fighters gave her an idea though.

"*Accio Nimbus 2010!*" Taking a page from Harry's exploits in the First Task, she summoned her broomstick. While waiting for it to appear she spoke into her communicator. "If anyone can hear me, this is Ginny up on the Astronomy Tower. Neville's hurt bad. Please send someone to dig him out."

The other sniper teams were still linked to her channel. "We're on our way," came Dean's voice in reply. Just then her Nimbus flew into view and she snatched it out of the air. It was a struggle to handle the heavy rifle by herself, but she was determined. Her broomstick dropped a foot when she hauled it up and slung it over her shoulder, but she quickly regained control and shot out over the Hogwarts grounds.

Realizing that she could not fly directly to Hogsmeade without suffering the same fate as the other fliers, she took the long route over the lake and forest, unknowingly following the same path that Hermione had flown earlier. From high above the forest, having disillusioned herself and the broomstick, she paused while looking over the village in the distance. At one end of the small town were some hills, which offered a clear overlook down High Street. They would be perfect. As she approached, she spotted a small cave nestled into the hills and flew into it. It was clearly deserted, although it had been used at some point in the recent past. As she dismounted her broom and unslung the Barrett, it dawned on her that this must be the same cave that Sirius had hidden in when he came to see Harry during the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

Feeling that this was a good omen, she levitated a few rocks into place to rest her bipod on and hastily constructed her sniper nest. From her position it was a bit over half a mile into the center of the village, but well within her effective range. She could see a large ring of fire in the widest part of the street and quickly concluded that her target must be within. Peering through her sniper scope she confirmed her assumption. She was initially surprised to see that Hermione stood alongside Harry, but a moment's reflection reversed that. After all, where else would Hermione be than by Harry's side? However, from her training she knew she would have to recalibrate her scope after moving her location and she looked around for other targets.

In the opposite direction from her position she could see flashes of spellfire from near the train station. Once again sighting through the Barrett's high powered scope she spotted some Death Eaters crouching behind cover alongside the road. Perfect calibration targets. She sighted and squeezed the trigger.

"Aaah!" Ginny cried out in pain from the recoil of the high caliber rifle. *In her hurry she had forgotten to renew the cushioning charm on her shoulder!* As quickly as she could she cast a pain-numbing charm on her badly injured shoulder, followed by the belated cushioning charm and winced as she sighted the rifle again. Her first shot had missed slightly high and to the right. She made an adjustment and fired once more. A scarlet hole blossomed on the back of the Death Eater and he slumped forward into the road. Bullseye!

Unnoticed by Ginny, her shots and cry had gotten the attention of another creature patrolling the outskirts of the village. A large snake lifted its head and flicked its tongue in her direction, then began slithering towards her.

Heedless of the approaching danger, Ginny pivoted her rifle again and once more sighted on the figures in the fiery ring. For some reason Hermione and Voldemort were not moving, seemingly locked in some sort of struggle of wills. This would be the best shot she would ever get. To give herself an extra margin of error, she decided to aim to the side of Voldemort away from Hermione and bring each successive shot closer in. She had three bullets left. Her first shot just missed his right arm. The second shot ripped into his right shoulder.

Ginny let loose a scream of triumph and pumped her left fist into the air as she watched her hated enemy stagger backward through her scope. But suddenly her view was blocked as a gigantic snake reared up before her, and she tried to swing her rifle up to engage this deadly new threat.

-ooOoo-

Down inside the circle of flame, Harry and Hermione wasted no time taking advantage of their opportunity. The loss of Voldemort's right arm and more importantly the phoenix feather wand it wielded immediately broke the golden connection with Harry's wand. *Expelliarmus ! Projectilius!* Hermione's hex sent Voldemort's other wand spinning away while Harry, his wand now free again, sent a massive magical spear right through the dark lord's chest, pinning him to the ground. *Reducto ! Reducto !* Two simultaneous explosion hexes joined to disintegrate the snake like visage and the wizard once known as Tom Riddle once more ceased to exist.

"*Annihilato Spiritus!*" In unison they chanted this incantation aloud and this time the defeat of the evil wizard had a different outcome than it did on that long ago Halloween night. This time, the misty form that rose from the body that lay destroyed before them would not escape into a far corner of the earth, able to be resurrected at some future time. This time, the soul destruction spell eliminated that possibility forever.

With the death of Voldemort the magical ring of fire he had created to isolate their duel vanished, and the remaining Death Eaters in Hogsmeade screamed as their Dark Marks burned white hot one last time before fading away. All of these Death Eaters had been recruited during the last year, as all of Voldemort's original followers were now dead or imprisoned. Although each of them had willingly taken the mark (there unfortunately seemed to be an unending supply of wizards willing to succumb to the message of superiority and the lure of power offered by dark lords) none of them were fanatically loyal. As a result, the knowledge that Harry Potter had just destroyed the supposedly most powerful wizard in the world was sufficient to cause them to try to get as far away from The Boy Who Lived as possible. With that thought in mind, every last one of them who was still conscious immediately portkeyed or disappeared away.

Harry and Hermione were instantly set upon by a wildly cheering mob that had gathered just outside the flaming circle and rushed forward as soon as it had dissipated. To everyone's surprise, however, the triumphant pair ignored them.

"Did you see that?" Harry shouted to her as soon as the soul fragment had vanished. At the very end, just before Voldemort had lost consciousness, Harry had finally broken into his mind, and Hermione had sensed his successful penetration and shot out a probe of her own. The dark lord's final thoughts had been directed toward his familiar (no doubt because of the Horcrux it housed) and they had briefly caught a glimpse through Nagini's eyes.

"Yes! What was it?" Hermione shot back, oblivious to the tumult surrounding them.

"It looked like Nagini was attacking Ginny!" Harry replied frantically. "That spot looked familiar but where was it?" Hermione shook her head, trying to recall where she had seen that location before.

"It was a cave ..." she began.

"Sirius's cave!" Harry exclaimed. And right there before the startled eyes of the students still intent on celebrating their victory Harry and Hermione disappeared and were instantly replaced by a jaguar and an owl. Instinctively the students parted as the jaguar sprang forward and raced down the street toward the outskirts of town, the owl winging her way in his wake.

-ooOoo-

Desperately Ginny struggled to bring the heavy sniper rifle to bear on the massive serpent, but her injured shoulder slowed her down and the snake was striking at her before she could fire. She managed to block Nagini's first lunge with the rifle, and then fell backwards and scrambled to her feet while her wand shot into her hand.

*"Reducto! Reducto!"* To her horror, the spells merely bounced off the enormous snake, which was somehow shielded from magical attack. The momentary hesitation that gripped her due to this unexpected result proved to be her undoing as the serpent struck again. Ginny screamed as it clamped down on her injured shoulder, but her dragonhide armor turned away the poisonous fangs. She was not so lucky on the next strike, as one of the fangs pierced the skin of her arm beyond her protective vest. Within seconds she slumped unconscious as the deadly venom surged into her body.

The owl overtook the jaguar just as he bounded up the rocks to the entrance of the cave and flew straight at the giant snake, pulling its attention away from the unmoving body of the small redheaded witch. They had both seen Ginny's hexes repelled by the snake's enchantment and knew that their wands would be useless in this fight. Once she had it focused on her, the owl swooped down at it, then pulled up sharply into a climb, enticing it into extending its body upward in a futile strike at her. The jaguar seized this opening and leapt on the snake, sinking his powerful jaws into the most vulnerable part of its neck at the base of its skull.

The snake whipped its body back and forth in an attempt to dislodge the large feline predator, but to no avail. The jaguar clamped down even harder, crushing the spine of the serpent. In less than a minute the horrible creature lay motionless on the ground and the witch and wizard returned to their natural forms. They immediately raced over to where Ginny lay, pale and still. Before they could do any more than determine that she was still alive, heavy footsteps sounded behind them as their fellow fighters finally reached them.

"Ginny!" Ron shouted as he pushed his way through the faster students who had reached the scene ahead of him. "Is she all right?"

Hermione rose to her feet as Ron knelt down and gathered his sister into his arms. "She's still alive but you need to get her to Madame Pomfrey as soon as possible. Tell her she's been bitten by the same snake that bit your dad. St. Mungo's knows how they treated him, and we got to Ginny a lot quicker so she should be able to recover." A swirl of colors signified the activation of a portkey as Ron and Ginny disappeared.

Returning their attention to Nagini, their initial attempts to cut the snake open with slicing and cutting hexes failed, as they had expected. "How are we going to get the Horcrux out?" Hermione mused aloud, while the pops of apparation continued to signal that more and more of their comrades were joining them as word of the situation spread.

Harry's eyes lit up and he gave her a smile, then stretched out his hand. "Gryffindor!" he called out, and the air before them shimmered as the bejeweled sword appeared. Harry caught it and turned to the long body of the serpent. When he reached out with the tip of the sword to pierce the snakeskin, sparks shot up at the point of contact as the heirloom of Gryffindor contended with the enchantment cast by the slain heir of Slytherin. Calling on his own magic, Harry pushed harder, and slowly the blade penetrated the charmed scales and the sparks ceased, signaling his and the sword's victory.

With one final thrust he laid the serpent open lengthwise and Hermione and the onlookers leaned forward to see the slightly glowing brooch that they had previously glimpsed only in a pensieve memory. With a silent flick of her wand Hermione levitated the Horcrux from the belly of the snake and settled it on a flat boulder near the cave mouth.

Silently the couple linked hands and regarded the object that represented the culmination of their long and arduous struggle. As their allies from Potter's Army surrounded them, Bill and Fleur instructed the others in what was to come next and passed along the words of the incantation that

would finally put an end to the threat that had so darkened their lives these past several years.

Harry firmly grasped the Sword of Gryffindor in both hands and raised it above his head, but before he began his downward stroke Fred and George stepped forward and raised their wands high.

"For Gryffindor!" they cried. Then Charlie, and Lavender, Colin, Dennis and their other house members present echoed the battle cry, "For Gryffindor!"

Next Ernie and Justin stepped from the crowd, and Hannah and Susan joined them. "For Hufflepuff!"

Now Luna and Padma moved up, along with Anthony. "For Ravenclaw!"

Finally it was Tracey and Daphne's turn. "For Slytherin!"

Not to be outdone, Fleur's voice rang out clear and loud. "For Beauxbatons!"

Taking his cue Viktor now stepped up. "For Durmstrang!"

Tonks took her turn and changed the focus. "For the Aurors!"

Bill likewise raised his wand. "For Gringotts!"

Tonks nudged Remus forward and the soft-spoken wizard gathered himself and raised his own wand as the others watched in rapt attention. "For the werewolves, and other persecuted creatures!"

Hermione silently summoned Dobby and when the house elf popped into view she took his hand and joined it with hers on her wand as she lifted it to point at the Horcrux. "For the house elves and all other magical beings!"

Now Harry stepped forward once again.

"For James and Lily Potter, and all the victims of the first war."

"For Cedric Diggory and Sirius Black and all the victims of the second war." He paused a moment and took a deep breath.

"For Albus Dumbledore!"

And with that he brought the sword crashing down onto the brooch, cleaving it cleanly into two pieces. For a final time the misty shape emerged and a chorus of voices shouted out the incantation.

*"Annihilato Spiritus!"*

-ooOoo-

The next several minutes passed by in a blur as pandemonium erupted in the hills above Hogsmeade. There was whooping, shouting, screaming, and crying. Hermione hugged everyone in sight with tears streaming down her face, albeit with one arm since her other arm was firmly wrapped around Harry. The unbelievable sense of relief and release of the moment was making her light-headed.

When she reached Tracey the Slytherin girl excitedly informed her that she had just received a mirror call from Robards. While the Ministry building had been heavily damaged, they had finally succeeded in destroying the last of the invading inferi. This joyful news lightened the happy couple's hearts even further. Off to the edge of the crowd they spotted Bill and Fleur wrapped up in each other, and next to them Viktor with his arms enfolding a serenely smiling Luna. But just past them Padma stood off by herself looking lost and they quickly made their way over to her.

"Padma, I'm so sorry," Hermione consoled her friend, while Harry wrapped his free arm around her. The slightly built Indian witch buried her head in Harry's chest and sobbed.

"I don't know what I'm going to do now!" While Harry held her tight Hermione stroked her back and promised her that she and Harry would always be there for her, whatever the future held. When she recovered her composure she thanked them, then decided to portkey back to the Hospital Wing to look after her sister's body.

By this time everyone back at the castle had heard the incredible news, and Hermione was anxious to get back to share the story with her parents. With fireworks exploding in the background from a special stash that the twins had been saving for just this event, she and Harry slowly made their way away from the cave into a clear area.

Hermione pulled out her shrunken broom from the pocket on her sleeve and expanded it, then turned and smiled at Harry.

"Can I offer you a lift back to the castle?" He grinned and climbed on the broomstick behind her and wrapped his arms around her, just as she had done so often when flying with him. Leaning close he whispered in her ear as he snuggled up tight against her bum.

"Will I need a sticking charm?"

She giggled and whispered back, "Maybe later." Then she kicked off and soared out over the village, then across the lake toward the castle. As they approached the entrance, the sun was just beginning to set over the castle spires and Hermione paused and hovered the broom to enjoy the view. Harry gave her a squeeze and she sighed and leaned back into his arms in perfect contentment. Now they could begin the rest of their

lifetime together.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

## Hermione's Plan Epilogue

### Epilogue

July, 2010 - 12 years later

"I'm home!" Hermione called out as she appeared in the entrance hall at Potter Manor. When there was no immediate response she shrugged and removed her work robes, a nicely fitted set with the Potter family crest over one breast, made of fine magical silk infused with protective charms. While it was necessary to wear the standard wizarding clothing out in public (in the wizarding world at least) she and Harry rarely wore them at home, choosing instead to dress more comfortably. She caught herself as she was about to lay them over a railing and with a flick of her wand a cupboard door opened and a hanger came sailing over to her. With another gesture of her wand the hanger inserted itself into the robes and flew back into the cupboard. Mustn't make any more work for the house elves than necessary, she reminded herself. It also set a good example for her children.

As if reading her mind a small house elf popped into existence before her. "Welcome home Mistress Miney," squeaked a small nervous voice. "Can I gets you anything?" Hermione smiled and knelt down to be closer to eye level with the shorter creature. Minnie had decided last year that she was getting on in age and would need to begin training her replacement. Through the House Elf Liberty Placement Service (HELPS) that had been founded by Harry and Hermione she had found no shortage of house elves willing to work for the Potters, and this young female elf had been signed on as an apprentice.

"Thank you Daisy," she replied, taking her new servant's hand and giving it a little squeeze. "A glass of iced tea would be lovely. And is Brian ready to be fed?" Daisy nodded enthusiastically.

"I goes and gets him and your tea right away." She turned away and was about to pop out of the room when she suddenly stopped and turned back, dropped into a little curtsy, then continued on with her assignment. Hermione smiled fondly – she thought the little elf was so cute, and she tried so hard to remember the duties Minnie was teaching her. With a contented sigh she concentrated briefly and apparated to her bedroom.

Once there she continued making herself comfortable by removing her shoes, skirt and blouse, leaving only a small pair of knickers, then reached into a dresser drawer for a pair of shorts. During the summer her home outfit was usually a brief pair of shorts and a tank top or a bikini top. If her parents were visiting she might forego the top entirely. While she and Harry had not adopted the nudist lifestyle favored by her parents, they were comfortable with it, and their sunroom, swimming pool, and sundeck were designated as clothing optional. That suited Dan and Emma just fine, as that was where they spent nearly all of their time when they came to Potter Manor, and Dan still frequently congratulated himself for talking Minnie into adding these amenities that long ago summer when they were training Potter's Army. Even when her parents weren't around, Hermione still swam and sunbathed topless, with Harry's wholehearted approval. As for the children, Hermione agreed with her parents that children were natural nudists, who had to be taught to wear clothing, and they were all brought up, like Hermione had been, being perfectly at ease with various levels of undress. For now, Hermione left the tank top off until after she finished feeding her young son.

Daisy popped in again with the iced tea. "Miss Padma be bringing Brian along now," she explained.

"Thank you Daisy. Why don't you take some time off and play with the children for a while until suppertime?" Hermione suggested. The young elf's face brightened and her head bobbed several times, then she disappeared, forgetting to curtsy again.

"Welcome home, my sister." Padma came slowly into the room, loosely holding onto the hand of a small toddler. Harry and Hermione's youngest son had just learned to walk a month ago, and insisted on walking everywhere by himself. When he spotted his mother his face brightened into a big smile and he tried to pick up his pace, only to take a tumble forward. Padma was alert, though, and caught him before he did a face plant and both women laughed as Hermione took her son and started nursing him.

It wouldn't be too much longer, Hermione thought somewhat wistfully, until this part of her life was over. While in some cultures children nursed until the age of two or even longer, in her society they rarely went past one. Brian had just turned one, and another few months was about as long as she would be able to stretch it out. She just loved the feeling of closeness and contentment she got when nursing her children, and she knew she would miss it. She and Harry had decided that three children would be it for them, so this was her last opportunity.

Hermione looked back up at her close friend. Padma had developed from a very pretty, slightly built girl into a beautiful woman. Her hips had filled out nicely, as had her bust, but her waist was as slender as ever, making Hermione quite envious of her figure. Her clothing accented these features. Her normal 'at home' outfit consisted of a flowing floor length wrap skirt that was slit up the side, revealing an occasional glimpse of a shapely leg, a bare waist, and either a halter style top or (like today) a colorful satiny scarf that was tied into a bandeau style top. This was in keeping with her cultural heritage, in which women's clothing traditionally had bare midriffs but long skirts. Over the years of being with Harry and Hermione she had lost some of her modesty, and occasionally wore shorts, bikini bottoms, or other clothing that revealed her lovely legs, but not when other people were around.

Hermione, on the other hand, had put on nearly twenty pounds and added a couple of inches to her figure in the past twelve years. Ten pounds had

come the first year, from the combination of them ceasing the long hours of vigorous physical training and all the feasts they had attended. First there were all of the banquets in their honor, and then they had spent the rest of the year after leaving Hogwarts travelling. And every country, even every town, they visited wanted to honor them with a celebration, and all the fine dining had brought consequences with it. The rest of the added weight had come from motherhood and the natural process of maturation that came with aging.

The extra two inches on her hips, she had been told by her mother, she just had to accept as it was genetic. The two or three inches on her waist were something she was resolved to reduce at least somewhat, now that she was finished having children. She now had even more admiration for the way her mother, now at age sixty, had kept in shape over the years with her devotion to her exercise classes. On what she considered the positive side of the ledger, she had also gained two inches in her bust, and gone up a cup size – or would have if she ever wore a bra. The support charm Fleur had taught her was essential now, but its necessity was a natural consequence of time, gravity, and nursing three children.

It was a large consolation that Harry was perfectly happy with what he called her ‘curvier’ figure, which was obvious by the way he still couldn’t keep his hands off of her. When they were together she was never surprised when his hand came to rest on her hip, or his arm managed to find its way around her waist or stretch out across her shoulders, or his fingers suddenly began massaging her neck or stroking her back. Her response was always to lean happily into his embrace, and their friends never tired of teasing them about their seemingly constant need for physical contact. She didn’t mind it a bit.

“I just got home and finished changing myself,” Padma continued on from her earlier greeting. “Harry’s out in the back yard with the children. I believe it’s flying lessons today.”

“Who all is still here?” Hermione inquired as her eyes dropped back down to the little mouth eagerly draining her breast.

“Little Hermione, as always, and Ron’s two oldest. Charlie’s boy. And ours, of course. None of the other little ones.”

Hermione smiled again. Fleur and Bill had celebrated the victory over Voldemort the same way she and Harry had, except with a fertility charm instead of a contraception charm, as evidenced by the birth of their first daughter nine months later. When Fleur had announced her intention to name her Hermione, Ron had good-naturedly objected. He had planned to honor his best female friend himself in that way if he had a daughter, but it would be too confusing to have two Hermione Weasleys.

His brothers had pointed out teasingly that given his family history, it was unlikely that he would ever *have* a daughter. It was different for Bill and Fleur for whom a daughter was not at all unexpected due to Fleur’s veela heritage. At the time, Ron had just married Susan three months previously at Christmas, and the strawberry blonde Hufflepuff was understandably flustered at this discussion. After all, she wasn’t even pregnant yet, although Molly had hinted that she expected an announcement at any time. Susan, though, had gone into healer training after Hogwarts and wanted to finish that before starting a family.

The predictions of his brothers had held up, however, and now Ron and Susan Weasley were the parents of four rambunctious red haired boys. Susan had confided to Hermione that she was going to try once more for a girl, then give up after five.

“Let me guess,” Hermione responded, “Hermione is telling everyone exactly what they should be doing, Vik, Jimmie, and Prajit are ignoring her, and Lily is scolding Harry for goofing off. Oh, and Artie’s just having fun.”

Padma laughed out loud. Hermione Weasley, despite all of her parent’s efforts, was something of a diva. The oldest Weasley grandchild, now eleven, with stunning good looks inherited from both parents, she had naturally been the focus of a lot of attention since the day she was born. Vik Weasley (Ron’s second), Jimmie Potter, and Prajit Patil at six years old were tight as thieves, and would probably be best mates all their lives. Seven year old Arthur Weasley was as fun loving as his father Charlie. Harry Weasley (Ron’s first) and Lily Potter, both eight, constantly got on each others’ nerves, just as his father and her mother had, and for much the same reason. Simply put, Lily was driven and Harry was a bit of a slacker. Whenever Lily would put her hands on her hips and snap, “Honestly, Harry ...” Harry and Hermione had to bite their lips and turn away to keep from losing it. But the two of them loved each other like sister and brother and would drop their squabbling in an instant and stick up for each other if either was picked on.

-o-

As the closest thing to royalty the wizarding world had, Harry and Hermione knew their children would be the subject of media attention that rivaled anything Prince William and Prince Harold had to put up with. The fact that Potter Mansion was still unplottable, and not connected to the floo network, thereby being accessible only by portkey, afforded them some semblance of privacy. Although the growing family always attracted notice when out in public, they could at least relax at home.

Fortunately, their children had learned to deal with all of the attention reasonably well, and had so far remained relatively unaffected by it. It had helped that their daughter, Lily Jane, combined the best qualities of both of her parents. She had Harry’s green eyes and charming smile, and Hermione’s curly brown hair; Harry’s athleticism and knack for quick improvisation, and Hermione’s intelligence and love for learning. But most of all she had a strong sense of responsibility and compassion for others. As the eldest, she set an excellent example for her siblings.

James Sirius Potter, who with his father’s messy black hair and his mother’s chestnut brown eyes looked even more like his namesake grandfather than Harry did, had inevitably discovered that he had been named for two of the most famous pranksters in Hogwarts history, and had developed a similar personality. When his ‘uncles’ Fred and George learned of this propensity, they were thrilled, and attempted to further corrupt him at every opportunity. Fortunately for the Potter household, his parents were the most powerful witch and wizard of their generation, and had plenty of experience dealing with pranksters, not to mention finely honed instincts for detecting things that were not quite as they should be. It also helped that his sister Lily had always been able to keep her brother under control, and could rein him in whenever necessary.

Harry and Hermione had wanted to name their third child in honor of their late, beloved headmaster. While the names Albus, Percival, and Wulfric were a bit much, Brian was perfect. To his parents’ surprise, Brian Cedric Potter was born with blonde hair and blue eyes. Fred and George had

given them a hard time by claiming that it was a good thing that he didn't have red hair, or people would *really* start to talk. Fortunately, Emma had laughingly informed her flustered daughter that she had had blonde hair when she was younger, and of course many babies were born with blue eyes. At only one year old, Brian's personality had yet to fully emerge, but the toddler in her lap who had just switched from one breast to the other was so far a very happy, contented child. And all three of the children knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were very much loved by their parents.

When Harry and Hermione had finished their stint of traveling and decided to settle down, they were at something of a loss deciding what to do with their lives. While they had firmly convinced themselves that they would prevail against Voldemort and be able to live long and happy lives together, their focus had necessarily been on doing everything they could to ensure that they were still alive at the end of the final battle. Thus, they hadn't really given much thought to what came after. They were overwhelmed with offers – they literally could name their own terms in any position of whatever occupation they chose, including Minister of Magic.

When the wizarding public had learned that the Ministry of Magic had nearly been destroyed by Voldemort's attack, and that Hogwarts had been successfully defended with minimal damage against a much larger enemy force, not to mention that Harry Potter had destroyed the most feared Dark Lord in living memory, Scrimgeour's days were numbered. For the foreseeable future, Harry Potter was a god. The media fell all over themselves to praise anything associated with him, not that it was necessary. It was 1981 all over again, only this time the public had a living, breathing hero to focus their adoration on.

If he wanted to be Minister of Magic, there was a large portion of wizarding Britain that would have been perfectly happy to give it to him. Fortunately, he had no such desire, nor did Hermione. What they did have in mind were quite a few changes that needed to be made, and now they had the clout to pull it off.

Their first task, immediately following the battle, was to help decide on the awarding of honors. It was a foregone conclusion that the two of them would receive Orders of Merlin, first class – the youngest ever winners of that award. The other leaders in the battle and Horcrux hunt were awarded Orders of Merlin, second class, including Tracey and Daphne, Ron, Viktor, and Charlie, Remus, Tonks, Bill and Fleur. Ginny likewise received one for her heroics at the end. Harry had pushed for her medal to be a first class as well, but Ginny talked him out of it. All of the other students and staff that participated in the battle received Orders of Merlin, third class, including Dan and Emma Granger, the first ever muggle recipients of the wizarding honor.

As for the position of Minister of Magic, Harry and Hermione consulted heavily with Arthur Weasley, Connie Hammer, and Gawain Robards, none of whom wanted the job either. But they were willing to make recommendations, not only for the position of Minister but also department heads. In the end, Amos Diggery became Minister with Arthur as his top assistant. Hammer and Robards kept their previous positions, but their influence in the government, as known confidants of Harry Potter, was now considerable. All of the department head positions went to wizards and witches who had consistently supported Dumbledore over the years in his struggle to open the eyes of the world to the threat of Voldemort.

When Remus received his Order of Merlin, and Harry made a scathing reference to the anti-werewolf laws during the presentation, the Ministry fell all over itself in its hurry to overturn them. When Lord and Lady Potter followed this up several months later with a blistering attack on the way other magical creatures were treated by wizards, they immediately had everyone's attention. At a press conference in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic, standing right before the Fountain of Magical Brethren, and flanked by the top officials of the Ministry *and* Gringotts Bank along with Dobby, Winky, Magorian, and Firenze, the pair called on the wizarding world to turn that symbolism into reality.

In her speech Hermione called them to task for their long history of denial of rights and outright persecution of goblins, centaurs, and elves, while Harry related the assistance each of the groups had provided to him in defeating Voldemort. The pair concluded by embracing each of the representatives of the other races in turn, and the wizarding public was stunned. Over the next several weeks the points the pair had made were debated and reflected upon, and a large portion of the public came to acknowledge that there was certainly some validity to them.

Treaties were negotiated with the goblins and the centaurs with language that made it clear that these were agreements between equals. Fleur and Viktor were of immense help in bringing the French and Bulgarian Ministries on board, given their own war hero status. Other European Ministries followed suit, eager to find favor with the Potters, who included lobbying as part of their travels to the continent. Within a year the International Confederation had ratified both treaties.

The situation with house elves was more of a challenge. Eventually the Ministry was able to craft a law called the House Elf Protection Act, which criminalized certain previously common treatments of house elves. Penalties ranged from fines to removing the abused house elves from their masters. The problems were to convince the abused house elves to leave, and what to do with them. The former was a slow process, as many of the subservient creatures wished to stay bonded. There were not a few others though, who like Dobby desired to escape their unhappy situations.

The House Elf Liberty Placement Service was established and funded by the Potters to give these freed elves somewhere to go, and enable them to find another family to serve. At the house elves' option, they could either be bonded or hired. In this way many families, like the Weasleys, who had never had a house elf obtained one, and they were almost universally grateful for the assistance and treated them well. Initially most of the newly placed elves chose to be bonded, but the employment option was being exercised more with each passing year.

The toughest part, for Hermione at least, was finding the patience to let the process unfold slowly, rather than freeing every house elf in the world immediately. Her mother, who had taken the time to get to know quite a few of the delightful creatures at Hogwarts, was a vital asset to her in this effort to control her instinct for instant justice.

In terms of an occupation, though, they were flooded with potential opportunities. Any Ministry department would have eagerly welcomed them, but they knew they needed to keep some distance from the political process for a while. Every quidditch team in the English league (excepting, obviously, the Holyhead Harpies) offered Harry a position as starting seeker and the English National team guaranteed him a roster position as at least a reserve. Every wizarding business was willing to pay enormous amounts to have their names associated with them, even if they didn't do any work, just for the publicity. Robards offered them immediate positions as Aurors, skipping the normal training period, and Gringotts would have taken them on in any capacity they wished as well. McGonagall also made it clear that they had teaching positions at Hogwarts waiting for them



whenever they wanted them.

In the end, Hermione took a position that allowed her to satisfy her thirst for knowledge as well as make significant discoveries that had potential to impact the entire magical world. She became an Unspeakable in the Department of Mysteries.

After the final battle the pair knew it was time to return their time turner to the Department of Mysteries, and they did so with a mixture of relief and regret. By that point they had aged about two years past their contemporaries, and the physical toll on their bodies was a strain. The ability to expand time to do all the things they wanted to do was enticing, however, and potentially addicting. In the end though, they gave it up. Croaker and two others were waiting for them when they arrived at the Ministry that day and made their pitch.

After some negotiation they decided that both of them would officially be on the secret roster of Unspeakables, but that Harry would only participate as needed, or on special cases. In effect they were job sharing, probably the first example of that employment practice in the wizarding world.

Initially, Harry spent most of the rest of his time familiarizing himself with his estates and learning the things that were necessary in overseeing his large portfolio of holdings. Following the successful model of his experience with Fred and George, he also began investing in some of his other friends as well, helping them to start up businesses of their own when they were ready.

When the Potters began having children he and Hermione split time with them at home, and while Hermione was nursing he would bring the babies to her at work at feeding time. Since Hermione spent more time at her work and he spent more time with estate matters, he naturally fell into the role of stay-at-home dad. During this time the couple made a significant discovery. Harry loved kids. And kids loved Harry.

It began with Hermione Weasley, who enjoyed being with him so much that she gradually began spending more and more time at Potter Manor, especially when the younger children began to arrive. Eventually Bill and Fleur, who were both still working at Gringotts, decided that they had no need for other child care, since she was there all of the time. Then Bill joked at one of their weekly dinners together (in order to maintain the closeness they had developed with the older couple, Harry and Hermione established a practice of having them over once a week) that they should be paying Harry, or perhaps he should start a child minding service.

Instead of laughing it off Harry got a thoughtful look on his face that Hermione recognized all too well. Thus began what became informally referred to as Potter Academy. It was the most exclusive school in the world. If it had a waiting list, it would number in the thousands. But you could not apply to it; admission was by invitation only. And tuition was free. Simply put, Harry started inviting the children of his closest friends to Potter Manor on a regular basis. And along with playing with them, he began educating them.

One of the legislative reforms that Harry and Hermione had pushed through was the easing of restrictions on the underage use of magic. Children were now permitted to practice magic in the presence of a parent or qualified instructor. So besides teaching them how to handle a broomstick, he began explaining the fundamentals of magic, focusing on feeling the magic in themselves, how it flowed, and what it felt like when they released it. Since all magical children experienced bouts of accidental magic, they had a reference point for what he was showing them.

When their parents agreed that they were old enough to have a wand, he taught them simple spells, focusing their attention again on feeling the magic flow. In addition to spellwork, they learned about other magical races and how their magic worked, with demonstrations by Dobby and Griphook. He also taught them about the nonmagical world (he and Hermione had decided to drop the word 'muggle' from their vocabulary) and a more relevant version of History of Magic. They talked about common magical creatures and magical plants. Finally, with Dan and Emma's help, they learned to brew some simple potions. And he made all of it fun.

Hermione Delacour Weasley would be the first 'graduate' of Potter Academy to enter Hogwarts, beginning in the coming school year, and the Potters and Weasleys were anxious to see how she would fare. They expected that she would be performing at no less than the level of a third year student. She had the potential to eclipse the marks of her namesake, be the top of her class, Head Girl, quidditch captain, and bedazzle a whole generation of Hogwarts males with her beauty. The biggest problem was likely to be how they would be able to keep her from becoming too full of herself.

Indeed, she was to become the best student any of her teachers had ever seen. At least until three years later when Lily Potter arrived. As time went on and more and more of the children who had benefited from Harry's tutelage entered Hogwarts, the faculty would find that they had to rethink their entire approach to magical education.

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Now that her young son had finished eating and had fallen asleep, Hermione took him to his room and put him in his bed. After setting a silencing charm to keep the noise of the house out, and a monitoring charm to let her know when he awoke, she and Padma started toward the stairs where she heard the sound of running footsteps. In seconds four children went flying by her.

"Harry, Vik, and Artie have gone home and the rest of us are going to go swimming now," Lily stopped to tell her before racing after the rest of them to their rooms to get changed. Hermione grinned at Padma and returned to her room. There she undressed again and tugged on a bikini bottom, then donned a coverup to head down to the pool. At Hermione's unspoken question Padma pulled her wrap skirt apart to reveal that she was already wearing a swimsuit bottom. She rarely swam in the pool with the others, but she would be prepared if she wanted to dip her legs in for a bit. Hermione smiled at her and followed her down to the pool area.

There Harry greeted them with a tight hug for Padma and a nice long, lingering one for Hermione. Then he sat down behind her on her a lounge chair, lowered the coverup partway down her back, and began to massage her shoulders and neck as she and Padma told him about their days. He then filled them in on how the flying lessons had gone, pausing occasionally to plant little kisses on the back of her neck.

"Hermione's more like you on a broom," he quipped, causing her to turn and stick her tongue out at him. "She's a very competent flier but not willing to push herself or take risks. If she plays quidditch she'll make a better keeper or a beater, assuming she inherits her father's height. She'd probably do best as a keeper, since she's phenomenal at calculating angles. When we practice on the ground no one can get anything past her."

He stopped for a few seconds to nuzzle her neck again, causing Padma to giggle at Hermione's momentary loss of focus as she closed her eyes at the blissful feeling.

"Lily's fearless, but has an instinctive feel for how far she can go before she gets into trouble," Harry continued. "She reminds me of Ginny on a broom, so she'd probably make a good seeker or chaser. Harry is determined to be a keeper like Ron, but with his size and strength he might be better as a beater. I should suggest to Fred and George that they work with him on it a bit. With the younger ones it's too early to tell."

With that Harry stopped and leaned back on the lounge chair, pulling Hermione back down with him and wrapped his arms around her. She snuggled into his chest and closed her eyes, luxuriating in the feeling of him holding her, like nothing could ever take them away from each other. Unfortunately this only lasted until their children spotted them snuggling and splashed them to get them to break it up. She pretended to glare at them, then caught Padma's smirk out of her eye and turned the glare on her 'sister' for good measure.

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'Sister' was a good description of the relationship that had developed between the two women, as she and Harry both considered Padma to be a member of the family. The saga of how Padma had come to be a permanent part of the Potter household was both unusual and poignant.

She and Justin had gone their separate ways after graduation, as both of them knew they would, but parted as good friends. The irony of the situation was that intolerance was present on both sides. Justin knew that his upper-class British family would never accept his relationship with a 'woman of color' and hadn't even told them they were dating. On the other hand, Padma knew that her conservative family that could trace its pureblood roots back thousands of years would never tolerate a muggleborn spouse for her. (A half-blood heir to the Potter and Black lines yes, but not a muggleborn.)

Tragically, her parents blamed her for Parvati's death, since she had been so adamant about joining Harry Potter's student army, and refused to even speak to her. Since so many of her Ravenclaw classmates had been killed as well, there was little comfort to be had from that quarter either. When Harry and Hermione compassionately offered a place for her to stay with them she latched onto it like a lifeline.

She had been an absolute wreck when they took her in, but with their kindness, compassion, and love, she gradually began to heal. And the two of them began to fill the large empty spot in her heart left by the loss of Parvati. There were awkward moments, to be sure. She was certainly not used to the way they lived, particularly their mode of dress. The first time she happened upon them swimming laps in the pool one afternoon, she just sat and watched open-mouthed. The mixture of excitement, appreciation, and desire that coursed through her as she took in the briefly clad figures (primarily Harry, but also Hermione to some extent) powerfully yet gracefully gliding through the water was intoxicating.

Since none of them wanted her to be alone in the mansion, she accompanied them on their travels. The first extended trip was around England itself. Hermione took Harry to see the things he had missed growing up, and the trio wandered through museums, churches, and castles, and hiked through picturesque countryside. As they were touring the muggle sites of the country (with the Potters' fame they couldn't have set foot in any magical areas without being swarmed with well-wishers), Padma was initially at a large disadvantage. Fortunately, with her foreign appearance, she was able to pass off her ignorance of muggle ways as unfamiliarity with a different culture. Between what she had learned in the mandatory Muggle Studies class and Harry and Hermione's patient explanations, she eventually became comfortable and competent with the nonmagical lifestyle. The soft-spoken, intelligent Ravenclaw was a delight to travel with and talk to, and Harry and Hermione grew ever more attached to her.

The trip to France opened Padma's eyes to yet another facet of Harry and Hermione's world. Bill and Fleur accompanied them on this one, with Fleur playing the exuberant tour guide. The real shock came when they came to the beaches of the Riviera. In introducing Fleur to the concept of the bikini, Hermione had created a monster, as the part Veela embraced the miniscule swimwear with a passion. When they hit the beach she was the first to discard the upper portion of her swimsuit, as her top hit the sand even before they finished setting up the loungers. When Hermione followed suit, Padma found herself in a potentially embarrassing position.

When Hermione had considered installing a pool at Potter Manor the previous summer, she had worried about how her classmates would react to the nearly nonexistent muggle style swimwear, and in Padma's case her fears were well founded. The conservative Indian girl was not comfortable baring anywhere near that much skin. But Hermione and Fleur worked with her to find something that would suit her, and she ended up with a fashionable one-piece suit and sarong combination. The next day she switched to a two-piece suit with another matching sarong, and she had found her comfort level.

Over the course of the week they spent at the beach she became emboldened enough to begin to bare her legs, at least in Harry's presence if not in front of other men, aided by the relative privacy of the sun and wind screens that lined the beachfront. When they returned to Potter Manor this bikini/sarong combination would become her standard apparel around the sundeck and pool. Eventually, over the years, she even tried sunning topless with Hermione occasionally, but covered up or rolled over when Harry was present. All-in-all, everyone was satisfied with the situation that evolved, which permitted each of them to wear as much or little as they liked.

With any other couple, the growing closeness of an attractive woman could have led to serious problems. But Padma had far too much respect for both of them to do anything to interfere with their relationship, and with their soul bond they were both aware of each other's feelings so that Hermione knew that she did not need to feel threatened. Thus the growing love they all felt for each other took the path of platonic, sisterly affection. Of course, if there had been any possibility that Harry would have taken a second wife, Padma would have leapt at the chance. Even if he had still been considering that option for continuing the Black family line though, Padma was no longer an option for him. With Parvati's death, she was now responsible for the Patil line. And that fact led to the second stage of the drama.

Three years after he had shut her out of their family's life, Padma's father had come back to attempt to mend their relationship. The reason for this soon became clear – he expected her to do her duty and produce an heir. Over the next two years the pressure steadily mounted and eventually she knew that she had to do something. With Hermione's help, and Harry's agreement, she came up with a plan, and a year after the Lily's birth she left England for India and an arranged marriage. Five years later she returned as a widow with a four year old son.

From the beginning there were suspicions, but a cursory check by interested reporters revealed that there was in fact an elderly wizard, a distant relative of the Patil family in India, who had provided legitimacy to Padma's child. Paternity was another question entirely, as he had been infirm and not expected to live much longer when she arrived in India, lingering only five years after their marriage. But it would have been professional suicide for any reporter to suggest that the child was Harry Potter's without absolute proof, as well as instant ruin for the publication that ran the story. Even had Harry not retaliated, he had powerful friends, including the highest ranking goblin at Gringotts. As far as the general public was concerned, those that were aware that Padma was living at Potter Manor, and suspected that something might be going on, figured that if any wizard deserved to have a beautiful mistress it was Harry Potter, and if Hermione Potter didn't have a problem with it neither did they.

The real story was that Padma had conceived through artificial insemination, with Harry as the donor. Harry willingly produced sperm samples, with Hermione's enthusiastic assistance (confirming that she hadn't lost her touch since the days of living together in the flat at Cambridge and the Head Suite before their marriage), and Hermione took them to India under cover of a clandestine Unspeakable mission. Thus Padma had her fondest desire fulfilled – a son, fathered by Harry Potter – and she knew that she could be content with her life.

While it was possible that she could choose to give up her life with the Potters and find a real husband – she was still a beautiful woman after all, with no shortage of potential suitors – she felt that it was not a certainty that she would find this kind of love elsewhere and was unwilling to risk losing what she had. After Prajit's birth she did take a lover for a brief period just to experience 'what it was like' but that only confirmed her decision. Of course, Harry and Hermione accepted Prajit into their family on Padma's return, and both of them grew to love him as their own. The Potter children accepted him as well, and when they were older the adults would explain how they were actually half-siblings. When Brian was born a year later, Padma and Prajit were just as excited as the rest of them, and the family grew together as one.

Harry had resolved the issue of the Black family line years earlier. After determining that Remus's lycanthropy had rendered him sterile, as expected (and everyone had a hard time envisioning Tonks as a mother anyway), he transferred the Black title and all its associated vaults and properties to the Weasleys. Given that both Molly and Arthur were distant cousins of Sirius, this was acceptable to the wizarding community at large. Bill was the one Harry actually bestowed the title upon, as he considered him to be the most responsible and most capable member of the family. Since the actual line would have descended through Bill in any case, as the eldest, this did not seem out of place, and he took the seat in the Wizengamot when he turned thirty. The rest of the Weasley children had no problems with this, as Percy would have been the only one of them with political aspirations. Harry had spoken to Ron before making the final decision, and Ron assured him that he was fine with the title going to Bill, and had no desire to be on the Wizengamot himself. Any lingering resentment he might have felt was quelled by the information that all of the Weasley children would be receiving a substantial annual stipend from the Black (now Weasley) family trust. Thus the Weasleys, one of the oldest pureblood families in Britain, were finally recognized as a noble house.

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"Mama's here!" Sitting at the poolside Padma and Hermione laughed at the younger Hermione's excited announcement of Fleur's arrival, for they knew the reason. When her daughter had turned ten Fleur announced that she had to begin wearing the tops of her swimsuits. While this was a normal development in the lives of French girls (and English girls too, for that matter), the headstrong young witch had vigorously objected, pointing out that neither Mrs. Potter nor her mother wore them most of the time. In the end, Fleur had compromised with her, agreeing that she could continue to go without when she was at Potter Manor, but only when none of her Weasley relatives were around (they being more traditional wizarding families) and only when Fleur was present. Within seconds the offending top was gone and she was back in the pool frolicking with her brother and the Potter children.

This was Bill and Fleur's evening to come for dinner, and more importantly the three witches were getting together to plan a landmark event – a party celebrating Harry and Neville's thirtieth birthdays and their accompanying induction to the Wizengamot. Accordingly they told Harry and Bill to stay out of sight, and headed over to a far corner of the sun deck. There Hermione conjured a screen like the ones sometimes used on the Riviera beaches that would afford them some privacy. Fleur immediately got comfortable by stripping down to a thong bikini bottom and Hermione removed her coverup. Padma untied her wrap skirt and discarded it, then after some hesitation untied her top and removed it as well. Fleur arched an eyebrow at this, but smiled her approval. Hermione reached out and gave Padma's hand a squeeze to add her own encouragement and the three of them settled into their lounge chairs to get down to work. Padma conjured a pad of parchment and an auto-notes quill and they began sharing their ideas.

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They were inviting nearly all of their classmates from Hogwarts, as well as students in other years who had been in Potter's Army, and their favorite professors. Hermione shuddered slightly as she recalled their graduation. Only twenty students (half of the number who had been sorted seven years prior) had lived to participate in the ceremony, which had been delayed for a week out of respect for those who had died and to permit the injured to heal. Parvati's loss had reduced the Gryffindor contingent to seven, but it had been the largest. There were three from Slytherin, four from Ravenclaw, and six from Hufflepuff, the latter two houses having suffered heavy losses on the road to Hogsmeade. The following year's class was similarly hard hit.

All of their professors had pulled through, most with injuries of varying degree, although it had been touch and go for Hagrid. As night fell upon the battlefield that had once been the grounds of Hogwarts, a band of centaurs brought his battered and unconscious form to the castle. They had found him beneath his dead half brother, surrounded by mounds of dead trolls. When Hagrid went down severely injured, Grawp had stood over him and defended him to the death, falling on him with his last breath to shield him from the enemy. Hagrid had taken a long time to recover from his loss, and at McGonagall's suggestion relinquished his teaching position so that he could focus on his duties as gamekeeper, which had been his first love. He had later told Harry and Hermione that it had been something of a relief, as he had never really been comfortable as a professor.

Hagrid's place as Care of Magical Creatures professor was assumed by Charlie. While everyone was surprised that he was willing to give up his dragons after all those years he had spent with them, he assured them that he liked other magical creatures as well, and actually regarded this as his dream job. It was a few months before people caught on to his other reason for staying at Hogwarts.

Everyone had always figured that Daphne would end up with an older man, since she was so much more mature and sophisticated than the boys

her age, and she dominated any relationship she was in. What they hadn't expected was that she would end up with a Gryffindor, despite her dalliance with two of them her seventh year. But in the preparations leading up to the final battle, and during the battle itself, she became very impressed with Charlie and he likewise became impressed with her. He quickly recognized the clever, intelligent, passionate person inside the beautiful, flirt, but aloof exterior. And she was drawn to his sense of humor and amazing coolness under even the most difficult circumstances, not to mention that he was a very nice physical specimen.

When the following school year started, it was announced that Daphne would be staying on to apprentice under Professor Slughorn, and help him out with his classes, as he groomed her to assume his position in a few years. It didn't take long after that to figure out that there was a hot new romance at Hogwarts. Two years later they were married, Daphne became the Potions professor, and Hogwarts had its latest husband and wife teaching tandem.

Tracey also maintained her relationship with Daphne, in both a personal and professional sense. The other Slytherin went into the commercial end of the potions profession, selling not only ingredients, like a normal apothecary, but actual ready-made potions. She got the idea from her Muggle Studies class when Emma described the concept of take-away food, where one bought meals already prepared as contrasted to a grocer where the raw materials were purchased. When she discussed her idea with the Grangers late in the school year, they referred her to Hermione and Harry, who readily invested in her business, knowing how bright and capable she was.

Dan and Emma remained at Hogwarts another year, while they worked with Hermione to revise the totally outdated OWL and NEW examinations in Muggle Studies. (Again, her status was now such that if Hermione Granger Potter said the examinations were outdated, the Wizarding Examinations Authority jumped to update them.) After that they returned to their home and began to rebuild their dental practice. Emma often wished that she had a house elf to help out with keeping everything running smoothly, and Dan commented on how dull life seemed after their experiences during the war. They tried to keep up with the friends they had made in the wizarding world, and later were delighted to have grandchildren to spoil, becoming even more frequent visitors to Potter Manor.

Remus and Tonks had stayed on a few more years in the Defense position, until McGonagall could find a competent replacement, then moved on. Tonks returned to the ranks of the Aurors and advanced to senior Auror status, becoming second in command under Shacklebolt, who took over for Robards when he retired. Remus joined the Ministry to direct the werewolf outreach program that was initiated after the revision of the werewolf laws.

When Harry transferred the Black family holdings to Bill he set aside a portion for Tonks. Even though both she and Remus objected strenuously, arguing that they had a simple lifestyle and didn't need the money, Bill and Harry were equally adamant. They opened a vault for her and endowed it with 100,000 Galleons, as well as several Black family heirlooms and some jewelry. Tonks complained good-naturedly that with these jewels she was always the most lavishly dressed woman at any formal Auror dinners. She and Remus were more than happy to move out of Grimmauld Place and they bought a simple house near her parents. Harry also arranged to purchase the Shrieking Shack from Hogwarts and presented it to them as a belated wedding present. With Dobby's assistance they fixed it up and they lived in it while they were teaching at Hogwarts, and then whenever they visited after they moved into their next jobs.

Dobby kept himself busy with a variety of jobs, sometimes working on projects for Harry as well as continuing to maintain the Black properties. He also spent a lot of time as with HELPS as the primary recruiter, persuading other abused elves to leave their masters. Dropping the name of the great Harry Potter worked wonders in his efforts. Winky kept her job with the Weasleys which she was extremely happy with, and aided them in rebuilding the Burrow.

Bill and Fleur returned to Gringotts, and Bill eventually rose to a rank just below that of vice-president, managing the curse-breaking division. Fleur worked part time for him in a research position while raising their family, having added a son seven years after their daughter was born. They lived in the former Black primary mansion at 12 Grimmauld Place, but it looked nothing like it had when the Blacks occupied it. They spent their summers, of course, at the Brighton beach house, where the Potter family were frequent weekend guests.

Molly and Arthur rebuilt the Burrow as soon as the war ended, and moved back at the end of the summer. With Arthur's new position in the Ministry, and the Black estate income, they were no longer strapped for money and settled into a comfortable if somewhat lonely existence since all of their children were now out of the house. After several years of research the St. Mungo's healers came up with a nerve restoring potion and after a few more years of treatment and therapy Arthur was able to discard his flying carpet/wheel chair and walk again, albeit with a limp.

Molly was ecstatic at the news of Fleur's pregnancy, and in due time doting over her grandchildren and urging her kids to have more became a fulltime occupation for her. She was to a large extent successful at this, as Bill had provided her with two, Ron four, and Charlie two with another on the way. Fred and George had never married, which everyone but Molly thought was a good thing, although they continued to have an interesting relationship with Angelina and Alicia.

Hermione thought that Susan had been a good choice for Ron, as her Hufflepuff qualities (loyal, hardworking and patient – particularly patient!) enabled her to put up with him, and also to deal with her growing family. Her healer training served her in good stead as her sons found ever more creative ways to injure themselves. Ron had unabashedly parlayed his fame from the war into a position with his favorite quidditch team, the Chudley Cannons. Since quidditch was the one thing he had always worked hard at, he had earned his way into a legitimate position as their starting keeper, and enjoyed a solid career. He and Susan had moved into the Black family house in Birmingham, near her family, despite Molly's wish that they would live closer to the Burrow. They quickly pointed out that they were always only a quick floo trip away, but in fact enjoyed the separation. They were also frequent visitors at Potter Mansion, and were godparents to Lily, just as Harry and Hermione were godparents to their son Harry.

Besides obsessing over her grandchildren, Molly Weasley's other concern was her wayward daughter. Things had been cool between them at best ever since the summer that Molly's constant harping to Ginny about her inability to win Harry had driven her into a bottomless hole of low self esteem and destructive behavior. Harry and Hermione had concluded that the fiery redhead's primary goal in life was to be the opposite of her mother. She would NOT get married, she would NOT settle for being a housewife, she would NOT have a boatload of kids, and she would definitely NOT get fat.

It wasn't as though Ginny was doing anything harmful. She was living the glamorous life of an international quidditch star. Her talents had been even more on display her seventh year at Hogwarts, and she had been snapped up by the Holyhead Harpies upon graduation. She had become so good that she had made the last two English World Cup teams. She was easily the most well-known player on the team, given her beauty, her flamboyant and fearless style of play, and her status as a war hero. The press was constantly swarming over her, and the papers and magazines were full of stories about which gorgeous hunk she was last seen with. And she made it easy for them, attending the most prominent parties and balls all over Europe, and her wit and sharp tongue were always good for a memorable quote.

At this point Hermione shook her head sadly. Thinking about Ginny often made her think about Neville. He had always loved Ginny from a distance, never giving up hope that she would someday return his affection. It wasn't as if he never saw her though, as they remained good friends to this day. He attended all of her quidditch matches, and the two of them had dinner together frequently, at least when Ginny was between beaus. Ron had once made a snarky comment that Ginny needed someone who would tell her she was beautiful every day. While Hermione thought that was being a bit harsh, she did feel that a guy who was sensitive to a woman's feelings was a rare find. Like Harry was. And like Neville was. Both of them were examples of men who would have no problem finding something to compliment their beloved about every day. Every woman should love a guy like that, and Ginny was no exception.

Most of her friends thought that Ginny was being foolish, as Neville had turned into quite a catch. And with his taking his Wizengamot seat, more notice was being paid to his bachelor status, as he was expected to continue the Longbottom line. Indeed, he was about to be moved to the top of *Witch Weekly's* 'Wizarding World's Most Eligible Bachelor' list. Soon witches would be swarming around him angling for the opportunity to become Lady Longbottom. The problem was that Ginny just didn't seem to be able to get past seeing him as her good old friend Neville. But now time was running out.

Neville had suffered cracked ribs and broken legs from the collapse of the Astronomy Tower but had been healed in time for the graduation ceremony and the presentation of the Orders of Merlin. Afterwards he had also gone into business, and although he didn't need startup money from Harry, the Potters had invested anyway, just because of the profit potential. He put his herbology knowledge to good use by raising magical plants, and selling them for their various uses. His friendship with Daphne, and by extension Tracey, obtained for him information about what herbal potions ingredients were in demand, and supplying their potions store was a profitable portion of his business. He had also developed new strains of magical flowers, and now brides throughout magical Britain and even into the continent were demanding Longbottom Lilies for their weddings. His prize creation was the Ginevra Lily, a flaming red-orange flower that literally glowed. Hermione made a note to order thirty of them for the party.

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"I assume our representatives from the press will be attending?" Padma asked. Hermione smiled and nodded. After taking some time to grieve over the loss of her best friend, Lavender had been hired by *Witch Weekly* and immediately assigned to the 'Potter Desk'. (She was undoubtedly the first ever Order of Merlin holder to work at that magazine.) Her friendship with Harry had served them both in good stead. She never wrote stories with unconfirmed rumors about Harry and his family, and he was always honest with her when she contacted him for confirmation. She was the only writer with portkey access to Potter Manor, and she had consistently proven herself trustworthy. Even though she probably knew more than another reporter about the Potters' relationship with her former best friend's sister, she had never written a word of it. Initially, her bosses were annoyed with her for not running the juiciest gossip on the famous couple, but eventually when every one of her stories turned out to be true, and she consistently got stories that none of the other gossip columnists got, she was handsomely rewarded.

A year later Colin Creevey joined her as her photographer, and much the same story occurred. He got pictures no one else could get, and he was the only photographer the Potters were friendly with. He became the official photographer at all of their private functions.

Just recently, Lavender and Colin had gone out and started their own publishing company. Their initial efforts revolved around two publications. *PotterWatch*, a daily single page report on the latest happenings with the Potter family, was similar to what they had been doing at *Witch Weekly*. *Teen Witch*, a weekly paper, was modeled after *Witch Weekly* but aimed at the young teen and preteen market, which was about to explode with new customers as the postwar baby boomers began to enter their teens. The cover story on the first issue, scheduled to go on sale in August, was about the new wave of students entering Hogwarts in the fall, and featured Hermione Weasley, complete with a five page photo spread. It was destined to sell out in a matter of days, and demand for poster size photos of the beautiful young witch would erupt shortly thereafter.

As it turned out, Lavender and Colin's association was not strictly professional, and they had married a few years before.

Colin's brother Dennis also played professional quidditch, although not quite at the same level as Ginny. He had assumed the position of seeker on the Gryffindor quidditch team the year after Harry graduated, and had played well enough during his three-year stint to attract the attention of the scouts.

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"Is your boss coming?" Fleur teased Padma.

The Indian woman laughed and nodded. "He wouldn't miss it for the world."

The 'boss' in question was Justin Finch-Fletchly. After leaving Hogwarts he had struggled, like many muggleborns, to determine his place in the world – primarily wizarding, primarily muggle, or some balance of both. He had eventually decided to use his family contacts to start a crossover business, importing useful muggle items into the wizarding world. He was familiar with the Misuse of Muggle Objects regulations, which prohibited enchanting muggle objects to do something other than their original intended function, but didn't have a problem with it since the items he sold were only used for their original purpose.

When he discussed his idea with his fellow muggleborn Hermione, she informed him about her Charms honors project. Justin immediately saw the implications of making electronic devices able to function in the wizarding world, and negotiated a licensing agreement with her. The problem was

that the enchantments she discovered were not easy to cast, and not just any witch or wizard was able to make them work properly.

When she heard of this Hermione offered to do the enchanting herself in her spare time. Justin would purchase the devices in bulk, ship them to a dropoff point where Dobby would transport them to Potter Manor, and Hermione would perform the enchantment. Then the shipping process would be reversed. Justin was also smart enough to recognize that he had a potential public relations gold mine on his hands. With Hermione's agreement, and another licensing fee, he was permitted to use her name in marketing. Eventually 'Granger Enchanted' would become the trademark signifying the highest quality in charmed muggle goods. Even when others saw his success and started competing product lines, customers would prefer and pay more for Justin's items. The whole concept soon became a very lucrative undertaking for both parties, and the Potters and the Finch-Fletchlys grew even wealthier.

When Padma returned from India, Hermione was pregnant with her third child, and Padma offered to help. Being an extremely capable witch herself, she learned how to do the enchantments and took over that task for her best friend. Then they decided that they could eliminate the shipping cycle and Padma could go to Justin's plant and do the enchanting there. Her time spent traveling with Harry and Hermione, plus her years spent living with them, had familiarized her enough with the muggle world that she knew how these electronics functioned and what they were used for, so was able to tell when an item had been successfully enchanted. She now spent several hours a day at this task, hence Fleur's joking reference to Justin being her boss.

As for their other classmates, Justin's fellow Hufflepuffs Hannah Abbott and Ernie Macmillan had married and now had three children, two of whom attended Potter Academy. Ernie had joined the Ministry, and was advancing at a rapid rate. Ron was betting that he would eventually become Minister of Magic. Harry thought Bill was more likely, while Hermione suspected that Tracey Davis could give both of them a run for their money if she decided to act on her political ambitions.

With regard to the other Gryffindors, Dean Thomas had taken up painting, and had also managed to straddle the magical and non-magical world. His studio had both normal pictures and wizarding ones. A painting of his of Harry, Hermione, and Ron showing them together just before the final battle hung in the entrance hall of Potter Manor, and a more intimate one of just her and Harry was in their bedroom.

Seamus had fulfilled what he claimed was every Irishman's dream and purchased (with Harry's assistance) his own pub, the Hog's Head in Hogsmeade, when Aberforth Dumbledore died a few years after his brother. In return for Harry's help he kept his ears open for information gleaned from the shady characters who frequented the place. Although he cleaned it up a bit, the tavern kept its rather dodgy reputation, which appealed to upper year students from Hogwarts who wanted a bit of a thrill. Seamus would regale them with tales of some of the bizarre things that he claimed had happened during his years at Hogwarts. Few of the students in his enraptured audience ever suspected that most of the stories were actually true.

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"And we're sure this is going to work with the schedules of our quidditch stars?" Hermione confirmed.

"Yes," Fleur responded. "Ginny says she'll be off that entire week, and Viktor's schedule will be the same."

This was the year of the Quidditch World Cup, and England and Bulgaria had both reached the semifinals, which would take place during the middle of July. If their teams both won, as expected, Ginny and Viktor would resume training in early August and would meet each other for the championship at the end of the month. This would be Ginny's second World Cup, but her first time in the finals. For Viktor it would be his fifth, and potentially his third championship. It was widely speculated that this might be his final season.

Once things had calmed down after the final battle Viktor had rejoined the Bulgarian team. Due in no small part to the fact that he had been away from the game for a year, they did not reach the finals for another shot at the title they had narrowly lost to Ireland prior to Hermione and Harry's fourth year. During the preliminary rounds, though, he had secured tickets for his comrades in arms to come to watch the matches, particularly a certain blonde Ravenclaw. Luna attended every one of his matches, as did Ron. Harry and Hermione had joined them at the last two, and it was quite an experience for Hermione. On one side of her sat Luna, with her stream of consciousness commentary on the match that resembled free association more than anything else, and on her other side was Harry, whose remarks on Viktor's strategy and the match in general were always concise and to the point.

The following academic year Viktor had returned to Hogwarts to help out where he could and to resume his role of mentor to the Slytherin students. He also managed to spend quite a bit of time 'helping' the Head Girl from Ravenclaw. McGonagall had confessed to Hermione that she had faced something of a dilemma over whether to appoint Ginny or Luna to the position, since both had shown excellent leadership the previous year. Ginny had deduced her headmistress's difficulty, and commented to Hermione that while Head Girl would be an honor, what she was really looking forward to was being quidditch captain. Hermione dutifully relayed this sentiment to McGonagall and the problem was solved. While Molly wasn't happy with the result, Ginny had stopped being concerned about her mother's wishes by that point.

To many people's surprise, Luna turned out to be a very good Head Girl. While the prefect meetings tended to be hilarious, with her occasional off the wall comments, she always managed to get her point across and was always on top of things. She had an uncanny ability to spot problems developing ahead of time, and solve them before most people even knew something was amiss.

She married Viktor promptly upon graduation, and the two of them toured the world. During quidditch season she traveled along with him to all his practices and matches, and during the off season he traveled along with her, searching for whatever strange creature had caught her fancy at the time. They didn't have any children yet, but Hermione knew that they both wanted them, and suspected that this would be the impetus for Viktor's retirement if the rumors turned out to be true.

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They had made quite a bit of progress with their planning and were about to call it a day when they heard footsteps approaching and Lily's head

needed around the corner of their privacy screen. "Daddy says to tell you that supper's almost ready and that Grandma and Grandpa will be here in fifteen minutes. And he wants to know if you're done planning his surprise birthday party yet so that he can come out and join you and enjoy the view."

They young girl looked out from the sundeck and her eyes roamed about the yard, clearly curious as to why the view would be better from this spot than from any other. Then she glanced back at the three witches reclining on the lounge chairs struggling to keep a straight face and her eyes narrowed in suspicion. Hermione and Fleur, who had no problems with Harry seeing them topless, turned to Padma, who glanced down at her own uncovered breasts, shrugged, and nodded.

"Don't worry, Lily, Daddy's just guessing about his birthday party," Hermione told her daughter, partly to alleviate her concern and partly to change the subject. "He knows we'll be having a party, but he doesn't know about any of the details, OK?" The bright young witch nodded her understanding. "And we're finished here so tell him he can come out and sit with us if he wants to." As the Potter daughter skipped away back to the pool, Padma rolled onto her stomach and the others banished the pads of parchment to her room for safekeeping.

A fresh from the pool and thoroughly soaked Harry poked his head around the corner and grinned at them. "And what are my three favorite witches plotting out here?" Hermione jumped up and pulled him into a wet hug, and could not help but admire how good he still looked in his brief swimsuit. He had put on some weight in the intervening years as well, but he got more exercise than she did and was still relatively fit.

When Hermione finished her hug Fleur was next. As she wrapped her arms around Harry she wiggled her torso a bit, teasing him as she always did, then leaned back and kissed him on both cheeks. To Harry's surprise he found Padma embracing him as soon as Fleur was done. Hermione and Fleur giggled as his eyes widened when he felt her bare chest pressing against his and noticed that his hands on her back didn't encounter any fabric. He pulled back a little and Padma shot him a mischievous look with her dark brown eyes, then turned quickly before he got more than a brief glimpse of her and lay back down on her lounge chair, her face flushed at the thought of how bold she had just been.

Harry just shook his head in a what-am-I-going-to-do-with-these-women manner and moved over to Hermione. There he flopped down on her lounge chair and pulled her on top of him, where she immediately snuggled into his chest, causing the other two women to roll their eyes and groan. Ten minutes later Lily came back to announce the arrival of Dan and Emma. When she saw her parents cuddling together she put her hand on her hip, let out a deep sigh, and rolled her eyes in such a perfect imitation of her mother that Padma and Fleur burst into laughter. With that, they all got up and Harry chased a shrieking Lily back toward the pool while the three women got dressed and they all headed in for dinner.

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Saturday, July 31, 2010

The feast had been concluded, and the guests of honor had been persuaded to say a few words (very few, given their natural reticence) and Hermione was relaxing out on the back lawn of the manor, taking a short break from the crowd of well-wishers. She noticed Susan approaching her with an eager look on her face, and the former Hufflepuff quietly asked if they could talk in private. Hermione rose and they began walking toward the woods.

"I have some good news and I wanted you to be the first to know," Susan whispered.

"Let me guess, you're pregnant again," Hermione smiled back as Susan nodded happily.

"Not only that, but it's going to be a girl!" she gushed.

"Oh that's wonderful!" Hermione wrapped her friend up in a hug.

"I wanted to talk to you about her name," Susan went on as they reached the edge of the woods and stopped.

"Oh," Hermione returned, caught momentarily by surprise. "You're not still thinking of ..." Susan shook her head, still smiling. Hermione gave her a quizzical look. "On no, not Harriet," she began to object. But Susan shook her head again.

"We were thinking Amelia Jane." Hermione felt her eyes tearing up and hugged Susan again.

"I think that would be lovely. I'm so happy for you." The two women spent a few minutes talking about the details of Susan's pregnancy and then walked back toward the manor house hand in hand. As they neared the rest of the group there was another redhead waiting for her.

"Hey, Hermione," Ginny called out jokingly. "Mind if I have a turn?"

"Guess it's my day to hear about big news," Hermione said slyly. Ginny turned and looked questioningly at her sister-in-law and Susan beamed and nodded. Ginny's squeal turned the heads of some nearby partiers and the two Weasley women hugged. After giving Ginny some details, Susan left them and went back to the house to share her good news with a few others.

"So, what's your story?" Hermione asked as she and Ginny retraced the route that she had just taken with Susan.

"Well, for starters, I'm retiring from professional quidditch," Ginny grinned at her. Hermione's jaw dropped.

"So, had enough of the celebrity lifestyle?" she teased after she regained her speaking ability.

"Actually, yes," the smaller girl replied. "I'll play until after the World Cup final and then I'm done."

"And ...?" Hermione prompted, knowing there was more to the story than this.

"I'll be joining the staff at Hogwarts as a flying instructor." This generated yet another excited hug. "With the postwar babies starting this fall, they're expecting their largest class ever," Ginny continued. "Over the next few years they'll be doubling their staff, so that they have two professors for every position," she explained. "This year besides flying and coaching quidditch I'll be helping out a bit in Charms and Defense as well."

"Oh, that's fantastic," Hermione replied, hugging her again. "I'm sure you'll love it. Have you told anyone else yet?"

"Fleur, just now," Ginny answered as they broke apart and began walking again. "She thinks it's perfect. Says now there'll be someone there who can keep Hermione under control." The older Hermione laughed. That was probably true, since the young part-veela who was her namesake idolized her glamorous, quidditch-star aunt.

"You know, I'm surprised that McGonagall hasn't got you and Harry back there yet," Ginny commented as they neared the woods.

"Well, we do sort of have a standing offer," Hermione admitted. "We might consider it after the kids are out of the house."

"Oh no, not before my children have had a chance to attend 'Potter Academy'," Ginny protested.

Hermione came to an abrupt stop and gave Ginny a long look. "Is there something else you're not telling me about?"

Ginny shrugged nonchalantly, but the corners of her mouth twitched. "Did I mention that Neville's joining the staff at Hogwarts this fall too? In Herbology," she added when Hermione didn't immediately respond. Hermione just stood there giving Ginny a piercing stare.

Finally she asked, "Is this for real or just until the next hot guy comes along?"

"Ouch." Ginny's face fell but she did not become angry at the uncomplimentary implication of the challenging question. "I guess I deserved that." She gestured for Hermione to sit and the two of them settled down on the grass by a tree. Hermione could sense Harry's concern for her through their soul bond as he wondered what had become of her, but she sent back a feeling of reassurance that she was fine.

"I've been a right idiot," Ginny began. Harry and Hermione had often shared that sentiment about her between themselves, but for now she kept silent. "Do you know why I've never dated a guy for more than a year?" Hermione nodded. It was because she compared every guy she met to Harry and none of them ever measured up. "Of course you do, you're the most brilliant witch of our generation after all," Ginny quipped with a wry smile. Then she allowed her gaze to wander off toward the quidditch pitch where a pickup game was taking place.

"You know, I fell in love with him all over again after that night you and he came after me in the broom closet," she said softly. "How can you not love a guy like that?" Hermione had no response. She *did* love him, after all. And she knew that Ginny had more to say.

Ginny turned back to Hermione. "If you were to list all of Harry's great qualities, how high would you put his gorgeous eyes, his cute smile, and that messy hair that makes girls want to run their hands through it?"

"Well, I like those things about him but they're not at the top of the list," Hermione replied, taking the question seriously.

"How about his fame, wealth, and influence?"

"Not very high at all."

"What about the excitement he generates in people just by being around him?" This was an insightful observation, Hermione thought. Harry did have that effect on people. And their time at Hogwarts had seemingly been one thrilling moment after another. The adventures they had experienced together had been what had brought the trio into their close friendship.

"I can see how that draws people to him, but it's not something that will sustain a relationship if there isn't more to it," Hermione answered. She knew that Ginny had long envied the three of them for those adventures and the close bonds that had resulted.

"And what about his selflessness, his willingness to think of other people before himself? The way he'll do anything for his friends?"

"You mean like go after an annoying little girl to rescue her from a troll?" Hermione suggested.

"Yeah, or take on a basilisk to rescue an annoying kid sister," Ginny added. "Or go after a former girlfriend to keep her from making a mess of her life."

"That one's pretty high up," Hermione agreed.

Ginny leaned back and sighed. "I've been looking for all the wrong things. All this time ..." She turned toward Hermione again. "Who am I dating now?"

Hermione thought for a moment. Usually it was easy to follow Ginny's love life from the stories about her in the wizarding tabloids. But there hadn't been anything for quite a few months. "I can't recall reading anything at all this year so far," she admitted.

"I spent quite a bit of time with Neville at Christmas," Ginny continued. "Did you know that he's been my best friend since we left school? We talk all the time. He's always been there for me whenever I needed advice, encouragement, congratulations, or a shoulder to cry on." Hermione was wondering how the two of them had managed to stay in such close contact when Ginny smirked at her and added, "After the battle Daphne gave us a pair of the charmed mirrors you made. I didn't realize it at the time but she was trying to get us together all through the tournament by making me jealous."

Hermione nodded while things fell into place in her mind. They had been surprised that Neville hadn't stayed another year at Hogwarts to



apprentice under Sprout, in order to stay close to either Ginny or Daphne. Of course, when Hermione set her sights on Charlie that part of the mystery had been cleared up. But now it turned out that Neville and Ginny had been in contact all along. And Molly had been annoyed that Ginny had spent so little time at home during the holidays.

"Well, at Christmas time, Neville asked me if I had gotten everything out of my system yet," Ginny said as she resumed her tale. "And I finally got it. All the things I wanted in a guy, all the really important things, I had right in front of me all along. I just had to grow up and get over all the fantasies. I can't believe it took me so long."

"Well, stubbornness is a Weasley family trait, and a few of you have been known to have thick skulls," Hermione teased while wiping some moisture from her eye, realizing now where this conversation was going.

"So anyway, we've been seeing each other since then, and now we agree that we're ready to move our relationship to that next step," Ginny admitted.

"I can't believe the two of you have been keeping that a secret for this long," Hermione exclaimed.

"Yeah, pretty Slytherin of us, huh?" Ginny grinned. "But we wanted to make sure it would work before we told anyone. You guys would have been all over us and you know how my family is." Hermione had to agree with that sentiment. That kind of pressure was not conducive to nurturing a fledgling relationship, particularly when the two participants had known each other for so long.

Ginny rolled toward Hermione and propped herself up on her elbow. "During your last year, you slept with Harry in the Head Suite, didn't you?" Hermione choked a bit before she could clear her throat and answer. She had not expected the conversation to take a turn like this.

"We shared a bed, if that's what you mean." At the question in Ginny's eyes she clarified. "We didn't actually have sex until we were married."

Ginny snorted. "Yet another thing in common between Neville Longbottom and the Boy Who Lived." Now it was Hermione's turn for the questioning look. "He wants to wait too."

"And you ...?" Hermione inquired delicately.

"How many guys do you think I've slept with, Hermione?" Ginny asked with an unreadable expression on her face. Hermione shrugged, not wanting to guess. She only knew of one boyfriend for sure that Ginny hadn't had sex with. Now Ginny grinned at her. "Not a one." Hermione tried not to show her surprise, but failed, causing Ginny to break into laughter. "It's amazing how creative the newspapers can be. But none of my relationships have ever lasted that long. I've always ended them before they got that serious." Hermione nodded both her understanding and that she believed the younger girl. "Neville's known all along," Ginny added. "I think that's part of why he's been so patient. And to tell the truth, I think a big reason I haven't is that I didn't want him to think poorly of me." Hermione pondered that assertion and decided that it made sense. Wanting to maintain Harry's good opinion of her would have been enough to cause her to refrain from going too far with a guy as well, back when they were just very close friends.

"So, why did you ask about the Head Suite?" Hermione asked, getting back to Ginny's original question.

"We're planning to ask McGonagall if we can share living quarters at Hogwarts," Ginny replied. "I was thinking it seemed weird that we would be sleeping together but not having sex. But now that I know that we have such excellent role models ..." she explained teasingly.

Hermione reached out and smacked her on the arm, then turned serious. "Do you really think McGonagall will let you do that?" she asked doubtfully.

"Have you ever been in the faculty quarters at Hogwarts?" Ginny queried, temporarily avoiding the question.

"Yes, when my parents taught there."

"That's right. Well, Neville visited his gran also, but you're the exception," Ginny responded. "Most students have no idea where the faculty quarters even are. I couldn't even tell you which of our professors were married, other than Remus and Tonks and your parents." Hermione supposed she agreed with that. "My point is that they're very private, and I'm pretty sure that they take the view that what the faculty do on their own time is their business." Hermione conceded that might be the case. "And besides," Ginny concluded with a smirk, "she's pretty anxious to hire us, so we have some negotiating room."

Hermione laughed, and the two friends fell into a comfortable silence. Hermione was inwardly ecstatic that things had finally worked out for the two Gryffindors. Once again she could sense Harry's curiosity through their bond, and she knew she would need to get back soon to satisfy it. She climbed to her feet, then reached down to give Ginny a hand up. She wrapped the smaller girl in a tight hug, then kept her arm around her as they walked back toward the house.

Beside her Ginny was bubbling with excitement, having shared the secret that she had kept for the past half year. "Yes," she sighed. "I've finally found my knight in shining armor. And he has all of the really important qualities of the Boy Who Lived." Hermione smilingly agreed with her. Then Ginny giggled. "Except for the scar."

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A/N I toyed with the idea of ending this story with the word 'scar' and wrote the previous scene accordingly. But then, I'm not doing anything else in this story the way JKR would, so why start now?

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“Quiet Please.”

Even more than twenty years after Voldemort’s final defeat, Hermione Granger-Potter still commanded instant respect in the wizarding world, and the anteroom full of nervous first years immediately fell silent. Many of them stared in awe at the woman who was the most famous witch in Britain, and most likely all of Europe, as they awaited her instructions. When all was ready, she opened the doors and the new Arithmency Professor, Head of Gryffindor House, and Assistant Headmistress led the procession into the Great Hall.

After twenty years as an Unspeakable, Hermione knew that it had been time to move on, and she had known all along where her career would ultimately lead. Now she was back at Hogwarts and she and Harry were looking forward to many decades at the place where it had all begun for them.

Since she and Harry had both worked in the Department of Mysteries, she had kept her maiden name for professional use, and it would be no different here. And so as she approached the Head Table, where her husband smiled at her from the golden chair once occupied by Albus Dumbledore, Professor Granger motioned her charges to stop and picked up the Sorting Hat from the stool.

As the sorting wound slowly through the alphabet, Hermione permitted herself an occasional glance around the large room, noting the faces of so many of her friends who had also ended up back here. Ginny, Neville, Charlie, Daphne, and Padma all were seated at the Head Table on either side of Harry. For whatever reason, likely in large part because they had put their lives on the line for this school, her class had felt an especially strong connection to the ancient castle.

Finally, two thirds of the way through the sorting, a grinning sandy-haired boy stepped forward, and no one in the hall would begrudge the bit of moisture that gathered in her eyes as Hermione called out his name and lowered the hat onto the head of her youngest son.

“Brian Potter.” A hush fell over the large room as everyone awaited the ancient artifact’s decision. Hermione’s eyes once more locked with Harry’s and they shared the same feelings of pride and anticipation through their soul bond. Just as it had with her other two children, the hat took its time, noting that this child had characteristics that would fit in well with each of the houses – intelligence, loyalty, cunning, and courage. But in the end, there was really only one choice.

“Gryffindor!”

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