

Coming Back

Part 1- Discovery

Prologue – August, 1998

“I have to leave.”

Hermione had suspected that this was the reason Harry had asked her to come to Grimmauld Place today, alone. Something in his tone of voice on the floor, how strained and serious he sounded, had led her to guess what he was going to tell her, so she'd had a little time to prepare her response.

She wished that she could say this came as a surprise, but it didn't, not really. Concerned, as she always was, for his well-being after the final battle, she'd kept a close eye on him the past few months. She'd probably spent as much or more time with him than anyone else (which had been the source of some dissatisfaction in the two youngest Weasley siblings, for separate but related reasons).

Harry had always been uncomfortable with his fame, and shied away from publicity, but there'd been no avoiding either since his defeat of Voldemort. It had been a constant, unceasing pressure on him – everyone wanted a piece of his time. It wasn't malicious, for the most part, just the entirety of wizarding Britain wanting to express its gratitude. But it had been overwhelming for her best friend.

She'd done her best to shield him, try to get people to back off, but sometimes it seemed like she'd been the only one. Ginny tried, but found herself caught up in the adulation as well, and just didn't have the experience to deal with it. Unlike Hermione, she'd not been alongside Harry at the center of everything that had happened to him for the past seven years, but only witnessed most of it from the periphery. Ron was even less help, as he reveled in the attention. Hermione realized that it was what he'd been yearning for all his life, but her understanding his behavior didn't do anything to lessen its negative effect on Harry's state of mind.

“I understand,” she replied as calmly as she could. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“No, I think this is something I have to do myself,” Harry responded frankly. “I appreciate all you've done for me, especially this past year. I never would have made it without you. And I enjoy your company. But I need to make my own decisions now.” He looked up at her and shrugged. “And if I'm gone maybe things will, you know, settle down a bit and people will be able to get on with their lives.”

“I understand,” Hermione repeated, trying to discreetly wipe away a tear that insisted on forming in her eye. It was true that many of her classmates, who would have completed their seventh years without the disruption caused by the war, were undecided about whether to return to Hogwarts for an additional year or study independently to take their NEWTs. She believed that a lot of them were waiting to see what Harry Potter did.

“What about Ginny?” she asked after several seconds.

Harry shrugged again and looked down at his feet. “It's funny, isn't it? After a whole year of wanting something, once you get it ...” He trailed off, then shook his head and continued. “Somehow it no longer feels right.”

“Do she and Ron know?” Hermione inquired cautiously.

“I mentioned it as a possibility a few days ago,” he informed her. “Neither of them took it well. Ron thinks I'm daft. Ginny, well, as you might guess she's not happy with me at all.” From her seat on the sofa beside him, Hermione reached out and gave his hand a squeeze in a show of support. Harry glanced up and shot her a small but appreciative smile.

“With any luck it might help you and Ron, too,” he offered a bit tentatively. This time it was Hermione's turn to sigh and look down at her feet. She knew exactly what he was saying. Ron had been quite firmly expressing his opinion that she should be spending more time with him and less with Harry. Suddenly, she jerked her head back up and shot him a look of alarm.

“Harry, please tell me that has nothing to do with your decision,” she demanded with a note of dismay in her voice.

Harry was shaking his head before she even finished. “No, no, not really,” he assured her. “It just seemed like a possible benefit. Without me around to get in the way, maybe ...” He broke off, not needing to finish the thought which he could tell was making both of them uncomfortable.

They sat in silence for some time. Hermione could feel her chest tightening with a crushing pressure as the reality set in that she might never see Harry Potter again. She realized that this was exactly what it was like to feel that your heart was breaking. The tear in her eye returned, along with reinforcements.

“You will come back though?” she pleaded.

“I ... someday, I guess,” he replied hesitantly. She shook her head, not satisfied.

“Promise me,” she demanded. He took a deep breath, then nodded.

“All right. I promise that I'll come back eventually,” he pledged. He barely had enough time to raise his arms as she threw herself at him in a fierce hug.

“Oh Harry, you're the best friend I've ever had or ever will have,” she declared with absolute certainty. “I couldn't stand the thought of you leaving my life forever.” She tightened her grip for another few seconds, then relaxed and moved back and locked eyes with him.

"I love you."

Harry's eyes widened as he was momentarily taken aback, before he recognized the self-evident truth of her words – of course she loved him. No one would have done all the things she did for him over the years otherwise.

"I understand," he confirmed.

"Please keep in touch?" she implored. At his hesitation she quickly continued her plea. "At least let me know you're OK. I wouldn't be able to bear the uncertainty."

"I will," he vowed.

"And if you ever need me ..." she persisted. Harry smiled and hugged her again.

"I'll let you know," he agreed. "Good bye, Hermione. And I love you too."

-oooOOOooo-

17 Years Later – Late August

Teddy Lupin was on a trek through a wilderness, somewhere in Wales, as far as he knew. At least the last recognizable landmark, which they'd left behind early that morning, had been in Wales. His godfather, Harry Potter, had sent him very elaborate instructions that he'd had to follow, partly as a test of his abilities, he suspected.

One very big positive about this journey was his traveling companion, Victoire Weasley, who at this time was taking a turn in the lead – she'd insisted on doing her share of the work as a matter of principle. One of Harry's conditions had been that they cover their tracks completely, so the one leading magically cleared their path while the one following magically restored it to its undisturbed state. After his first time in the trailing position Teddy realized the considerable advantage to this assignment – the opportunity to observe Tori's delightful posterior.

It took some willpower for Teddy to control his hormones, as his Veela companion was dressed in short, snug-fitting cargo shorts and a tank top – a very *tight* tank top. Her hair hung in a loose braid down her back and if she'd had a pair of automatic handguns strapped to her hips she'd have strongly resembled a certain video game character from the late 1990's.

The besotted young man was so focused on his girlfriend's bum that he didn't notice right away as the vegetation began to change ... as well as the temperature. It was only when Tori stopped and turned around that he noticed the perspiration on her skin, as well as on his own, and realized that it had become quite hot and humid.

"Isn't this amazing?" she exclaimed, gesturing toward the surrounding flora and fauna. "There are plants and animals here from ... practically everywhere. Just in the past five minutes I've counted at least a dozen different kinds of ferns, from three continents!"

Teddy glanced around sheepishly, only now fully observing the altered ecosystem. Tori shot him an exasperated glance, accompanied by an arched eyebrow that led him to suspect that she knew exactly what had been occupying his attention. With a final smirk she turned, and after consulting her watch and a magical combined pedometer/compass device, resumed their hike. Teddy was forced to bite his lip hard when she added a slight wiggle to her hips as she set off.

An hour later Teddy was in the lead and sweating buckets. He'd removed his shirt some thirty minutes earlier when the two had switched places, eliciting an appreciative, admiring nod from Tori. For a brief instant he'd considered suggesting that she follow his example, but managed to refrain. By this point it was quite obvious that she wasn't wearing anything under the tank top, now thoroughly soaked and molding itself to her torso even more closely than it had before.

Suddenly, after he parted a particularly dense mat of vines, they found themselves confronted with a rock formation containing a hidden pool of sparkling, clear water, fed by a waterfall. It was the perfect picture of a tropical paradise. As Teddy came to a halt, Tori moved up beside him.

"Fancy a swim?" she suggested coyly, shooting him a quick smile that froze him in his tracks. He stood rigid for the next several seconds as one of his most treasured fantasies played out before his eyes. He watched her step up to the edge of the pool, removing first her boots, then her shorts, and finally her tank top. Now clad only in a brief pair of knickers, she shot him another seductive smile over her shoulder and jumped in.

When she surfaced a dozen or so feet out toward the middle of the pond, she began treading water and pushed her long wet hair back from her face. "Well?" she called out. "Aren't you going to join me?"

Forcing himself to breathe again, Teddy nodded vigorously and tugged off his own boots and shorts. Taking one final deep breath he jumped in, making a large splash. Bobbing quickly to the surface, he swam cautiously over to where she waited. *Control yourself! Control yourself!* he repeated in his mind as he nervously approached her. But as soon as he was within arm's reach she threw her arms around his neck, pulled their bodies together, and kissed him!

On the verge of having his mind turn completely to mush, Teddy managed a less than half-hearted protest. "Tori! What are you doing?"

"Thanking you for bringing me here" she replied with another hug. (*A naked hug!* Teddy's mind screamed at him. *Tori's hugging me and we're practically naked!!*) "This place is amazing!" she gushed. Then she pulled back, fixed him with a piercing blue-eyed gaze, and added, "And moving our relationship forward a little bit."

"A little bit?" he gasped.

“Just a little,” she teased. Next, she took his hand and moved it toward her bare breast. But just as it was about to make contact they suddenly became aware that they were not alone. A pack of wolves had materialized on the rocks surround them! And their wands were back on the shore!

Suddenly a giant panther leapt down from some boulders higher up the rock formation, and the wolves scattered. The panther padded calmly along the rocks, stopped several feet from where they’d left their clothing, and sat back on its haunches, regarding them with an even gaze. Tori shot a glance at Teddy, frowned briefly, then nodded determinedly. Taking care not to make any sudden moves, she swam slowly toward the panther until she reached shallower water, and then stood.

The panther’s head jerked back when it became aware of her state of undress. Tori allowed herself a smile – this creature was definitely human, and male. She was now certain she knew who it was. Then the panther licked its lips and she hesitated – she’d seen that particular expression of lust many times. But the magnificent creature merely nodded toward the waterfall and some of the mist that formed just above where it cascaded into the pool gathered into a cloud.

To the two teens’ astonishment, the misty cloud floated over to Tori and hovered around her, slightly obscuring her from view. With a delighted laugh as she realized the purpose of this feat of magic, she quickly exited the pool and walked over to her clothing, still under the silent, watchful eye of the panther. Teddy followed suit and once they were dressed again (and dry, the mist having dispelled once it had served its purpose), they turned their attention back to their presumed host.

But the panther next quickly bounded to the top of the cliff towering above them, then turned toward them expectantly.

“How do you suppose we’re expected to follow?” Teddy wondered. Tori examined the cliff face, then pointed out some intermediate ledges.

“Levitate each other?” she suggested. Teddy studied the ledges for a moment and agreed.

“Sticking charms too, just to be safe,” he added.

Working in concert, each levitating the other in turn, the pair made their way to the top. Once they arrived they paused to catch their breaths while the panther gazed at them and nodded, clearly pleased with their efforts. The two teens took a moment to admire the view - the waterfall, the jungle beneath them, and the broad expanse of the valley stretching out as far as they could see before everything seemed to dissolve into mist.

When they were sufficiently rested the panther transformed, as they’d expected, into the wizard that had disappeared from Britain so many years ago – Harry Potter. With a grin, he motioned them to follow him as he led them on a short walk to a cave. They complied, their excitement mounting with each step. They were about to meet a living legend of the wizarding world! Once they arrived at their destination he turned to them and caught Teddy up in a welcoming embrace.

“So how’s my godson?” he asked with a broad smile as he indicated that they should take a seat. “And you must be Bill and Fleur’s daughter?”

“How did you know?” she wondered. She was pretty certain that Teddy hadn’t communicated this information beforehand.

“Your mother was the most beautiful woman I ever met – until now,” Harry replied. He shot her a sly grin. “For some reason you remind me of her.”

He gestured toward the pool they’d just come from. Tori blushed at the reminder that she’d exposed herself to him, but was inwardly quite pleased with the compliment. “And when did you encounter my mother under similar circumstances?” she challenged.

Now it was Harry’s turn to blush. “Not exactly the same, but we did have something of an adventure together in a lake once,” he responded. He took a moment to recall the former Fleur Delacour in a silvery, skin tight swimsuit that left nothing to the imagination.

He shook off those thoughts and turned to Ted. “Congratulations on making Head Boy,” he declared with sincere admiration. Tori beamed and hugged her boyfriend proudly. “And it seems additional congratulations may also be in order?” Harry continued, alluding to the rather close relationship he’d been observing.

Tori laughed while Teddy grinned, and they blushing agreed that it was indeed for keeps. Teddy explained that they planned to formalize their engagement on her seventeenth birthday, which would be next spring.

Harry nodded thoughtfully. “I’m trying to decide which is the bigger accomplishment, but I think being Head Boy takes a back seat.” Teddy nodded vigorously and Tori blushed again.

“Why do you say that?” she wanted to know.

“There’ve been lots of Head Boys,” Harry reasoned.

“But lots of guys end up with Veela mates too,” she countered.

Harry shook his head. “Being a Veela is the least of it,” he contended. “Once I really got to know Fleur Delacour I realized there was far more to her than just beauty – she was as brave as any Gryffindor, ambitious as any Slytherin, intelligent as any Ravenclaw, and as loyal as any Hufflepuff. From what I’ve observed today I suspect the Sorting Hat said something similar to you.” He paused as he recalled a long ago comment that those words somehow triggered in his mind – *books and cleverness ... friendship and bravery and ...*

Tori noticed the faraway look on his face. “It sounds like you were in love with my mother,” she commented with no small amount of surprise in her voice.

Harry shook his head and shot her an amused smile. “No, I admired her. I was not remotely in her league.”

The two students shook their heads and shot each other glances of disbelief. He was Harry Potter! How could any witch alive be 'out of his league'?

It wasn't too difficult for Harry to read their thoughts, so he explained. "You have to realize – I was just a clueless fourteen year old skinny little boy when I met her, and she was a very mature seventeen year old woman. She and your dad, on the other hand, were a good match right from the beginning."

Tori was taken aback by the direction the conversation had taken. As far as she knew, her parents, like everyone else she came into contact with, greatly admired Harry Potter, were even somewhat in awe of him. And yet to hear him talk, it sounded like he considered it the other way around.

"They always spoke highly of you," she pointed out. Harry nodded and smiled, accepting the compliment.

"Be that as it may" he declared, returning to his original contention and redirecting his comments to his godson. "You have a real treasure here, Teddy. It's extremely rare to find such a combination – beauty, brains, courage, and loyalty."

The three of them relaxed in the cave opening as the talk turned to lighter topics. It was simply furnished with lounge chairs and end tables. Teddy observed that it seemed almost like a front porch with a spectacular view.

Harry agreed, and an idea occurred to him. "What do you think, should it have a porch swing?" he suggested. Both teens nodded enthusiastically and before they could blink the older wizard had conjured one with a simple wave of his hand. After sharing a wide-eyed glance at the impressive display of magic, they gratefully accepted his offer and climbed onto the swing, cuddling together as they settled into a gentle rocking motion. For several minutes they silently watched the shadows creep down the valley as the sun set behind them.

While the initial excitement of meeting Harry Potter had not diminished too much, the two teens were gradually becoming more comfortable with him, and discovering, to Tori's amazement at least, that he acted like a pretty regular guy. Teddy had the advantage of having limited communication with his godfather over the years, and so had at least some idea of his self-effacing personality. But this was still their first face-to-face meeting.

For a while the conversation was mostly between Harry and Teddy, but eventually Tori gathered her courage and decided to return to their initial topic of discussion and press the issue.

"Have you ever been in love?" she queried her host.

Harry regarded her for a moment, then shook his head slowly. *Had he?* He found his thoughts drifting back to his farewell with Hermione seventeen years earlier. He'd certainly loved *her*, but that wasn't the same thing – or so he'd thought at the time. But in his travels he'd met many couples who'd started as best friends, and whose affections had gradually grown to more, and had been very happy together. He'd often wondered if that could have actually been what he felt for the girl with whom he'd shared such a close bond, forged during the most intense experiences and emotions of his life. However, it was far too late to do anything about that now.

Tori had taken careful note of his introspection and became convinced that there had been someone in his past whom he'd loved, perhaps without realizing it at the time. But who was it? The matchmaking side of her personality now had a new goal!

"Perhaps you should take your own advice," the young Veela suggested with a cheeky, impudent tone in her voice. "Beauty, brains, courage and loyalty. Did you once know another witch with those qualities?"

Somewhat flustered at her ability to read him so well, Harry redirected the conversation to a different, but from his point of view, related subject.

"So, tell me more about things back home," he inquired with apparent casualness. "How are your aunt and uncle doing?"

Tori was initially puzzled – she had quite a few aunts and uncles and wondered which ones he was referring to. But then she realized that he must be talking about Ron Weasley, whom everyone knew had been Harry Potter's best mate in school.

"You mean Uncle Ron and Aunt Ginny?" she clarified. "Great. Uncle Ron played quidditch for a while with the Chudly Cannons as their reserve keeper (her dad had said it was mostly for publicity) and now he works with Uncle George. Aunt Ginny still plays quidditch. She's not married." (She suspected that Ginny was seeing Blaise Zabini, but kept that to herself. It was also possible that her flamboyant aunt was Harry's long lost love.)

Harry grinned at the news about Ron. It was nice to hear that he'd managed to live one of his dreams, at least for a while. "Actually, I was asking about Hermione, not Ginny," he corrected, still maintaining an air of friendly interest.

Tori frowned in puzzlement. "Hermione? You mean Professor Granger? She's not my aunt," she objected. She paused briefly as she recalled something she'd learned long ago. "I do remember hearing that she dated Uncle Ron for a while, but that was before I was born."

Harry was startled into speechlessness. *Ron and Hermione ... not married?*

Tori quickly noted his open-mouthed astonishment and the color that was draining from his face. She nudged Teddy and caught his eye, seeing that he was as taken by surprise as she was.

"Uncle Harry?" "Mr. Potter?" their voices chorused. "Are you all right?"

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Victoire Weasley was on a mission. She'd always loved stories with happy endings, where the hero gets the girl, and here she was faced with one where she could be a part of facilitating exactly that result. The romantic in her firmly believed that Harry Potter and Hermione Granger should be together. Now, back at Hogwarts, she had a chance to begin that process.

She'd reached her destination and now found herself knocking on the door of the office of the Assistant Headmistress. When the answering voice invited her in, she took a deep breath and allowed herself a satisfied smile.

"Hello Miss Weasley," her favorite professor greeted her. "Welcome back to Hogwarts. What can I do for you?"

"Hi Professor Granger," she responded happily. "I actually have some information for you this time." Hermione cocked her head with curiosity and indicated that she should continue.

"I just met an old friend of yours last week," the younger girl announced. "Harry Potter."

Hermione's reaction to this news was nearly as vigorous as Harry's had been earlier. She was so shocked she needed to sit down before her knees gave out. "H ... Harry? You've seen Harry?"

While she paused to re-gather her wits she found herself reminiscing to that long ago day when her best friend had bid her farewell, and what had followed. She'd continued dating Ron for a month or so after Harry left, but her heart wasn't in it. It turned out that Harry was both the glue that held the three of them together as well as the buffer that kept the other two thirds of the trio's heated interactions under control. She'd no idea that he'd played such an essential role in her and Ron's relationship with each other. The breaking point had come when she went back to Hogwarts to finish her schooling and he didn't.

After scoring O's in all her NEWTs, she'd been asked to stay on and teach. Over the years she'd ably instructed first Muggle Studies, then Arithmancy, and finally Charms. She'd eventually been made Assistant Head, a position she'd assumed just last year. She'd more or less adopted Minerva McGonagall as a role model, minimizing her social life and throwing her energies into her teaching career. But she'd always wondered how things might have turned out with Harry, if only ...

She shook her head. She'd long considered these to be the two biggest mistakes she'd ever made – letting Harry go and not realizing how she really felt for him. He'd kept his promise to stay in touch by sending her a letter and a gift once a year on her birthday, so she knew some of what he'd been doing, but had been continually frustrated that she couldn't contact him.

Her musings were cut short when Victoire cleared her throat and handed her a box and delivered the rest of her message with a smug smile on her face. Inside the box was this year's birthday present, a jade necklace that matched the jade earrings he'd sent her last year. But the necklace was also a portkey! It would activate on her birthday if she wanted to come visit him!

Visit Harry? Of course she wanted to! Over the next half hour Hermione proceeded to pump Victoire for information, insisting on hearing everything she'd learned about Harry, along with all the details of their encounter. Finally, she leaned back in her chair as the delighted young Gryffindor left, neither of them able to keep large smiles off their faces.

-ooOoo-

September 19

Hermione had been steadily growing more anxious as this day had approached. *What will he be like? Will we still get on as well as we used to after all these years?* These were the two most critical of the many questions that had been percolating through her head.

At breakfast, she informed McGonagall that she'd be out of the castle all day, and the Headmistress had smiled and wished her a happy birthday. Back at her room, she carefully dressed as Victoire had instructed, packing the additional things she'd need in a small bag. She shook her head again as she added the swimsuit, finding it hard to believe that she was actually going to wear something like that in front of Harry.

When she'd tried on the small bikini the other day she'd spent several minutes tugging at the top, unable to get it to cover her to her satisfaction, swearing at her mum for buying her something so revealing. After hearing Victoire's story, she suspected the younger girl would approve wholeheartedly. Of course, this suit would look perfect on *her* – with her slender hips, long, slim legs, and impossibly flat tummy. The only place Hermione could hold her own was in the bust, but then she was thirty-six years old while the young Veela was only sixteen. In a year or two her body would finish developing and then she'd have an absolutely flawless figure, just like her mother.

She wondered if she would have the nerve to follow her student's lead. Once more she shook her head – the girl was a matchmaker, no doubt about it. That thought led her to recall her mirror's response to her attempts to get the bikini positioned properly. "You look lovely, my dear," it had finally declared. "Your young man will be quite happy with it."

"I don't have a young man," Hermione had corrected. "I'm single ... I've always been single." She managed to refrain from adding, *'and I always will be.'*

"That's a shame," the mirror had continued. "A lovely young lady like you should have a man." Hermione had brought the exchange to a conclusion by muttering that mirrors should be seen and not heard.

With one last look around her room, and a deep breath to calm the butterflies in her stomach, she took the necklace from its box, fastened it around her neck, and spoke the activation phrase.

"Take me to Harry."

Coming Back

Part 2 - Reconnecting

Coming Back, Part 2 – Reconnecting

Hermione found herself landing in a clearing, stumbling only slightly before regaining her balance. She quickly took note of her surroundings.

It was warm. Very warm. The vegetation appeared to be tropical. So far, everything matched Victoire's description. Nearby two wolves were lying in the sun, and they immediately perked up on her arrival. Hermione initially tensed, but then she relaxed, recalling that part of her student's tale.

One of the wolves got up and trotted away while the other sat up and watched her. A guard and a messenger, she decided.

Now she took the time to look around, spotting quite a few unusual magical plants, as well as rare nonmagical species not normally found in Britain, some of which were endangered. She smiled as the thought crossed her mind that Neville Longbottom would have a field day here! She caught a glimpse of a patch of fluxweed, and another of knotgrass, both of which she remembered fondly as being used in Polyjuice potion. Then she smiled as she spotted the pale purple flowers of a dittany plant, the essence of which she'd put to use on more than one occasion to heal her boys' injuries.

Suddenly there was a shimmer in the air before her, and a man appeared – a man somewhat taller than herself, deeply tanned, dark hair ... and gorgeous green eyes.

"Harry!" she gasped. "Is that really you?"

He was staring at her as well, and could only manage a whisper. "Hermione." He took a step forward and opened his arms, and she promptly threw herself into them.

Seconds passed while they clung tightly to each other, neither having any intention of letting go, while they each recalled long ago memories of all the many hugs they'd shared. After more than a minute without either loosening their grip, both began to chuckle.

"While this would be an enjoyable way to spend the day, I thought you might want to do some other things, too," Harry quipped. Smiling, they stepped back to regard each other.

Before him Harry beheld a beautiful woman who had taken the place of the remembered teen that had been on the verge of adulthood. Her hair, while still long and curly, was more controlled instead of bushy, currently tied into a loose ponytail that fell down her back. Her more womanly figure very neatly filled out the shorts and tank top she was wearing – it required a bit of an effort not to dwell too long on how well this particular outfit displayed her body. His gaze traveled up past firm thighs, well shaped hips, a nicely indented waistline, and last but not least, some eye-catching cleavage. *Wow! Hermione has developed some amazing curves!*

For her part Hermione noted much more dramatic changes. The boy who'd left seventeen years ago was now a man. He'd matured in every way since she'd seen him last. His hair was worn longer, his glasses were gone, he was lean and muscled, and moved with the confidence and grace of a predatory cat – and he was clad in only a well-worn pair of cargo shorts. *My goodness, Victoire was not kidding about him being a hunk!*

She'd never been physically attracted to him while they were younger (it had been Ron's long, lanky body that had made her heart flutter back then) but now ... she fought to keep from shuddering as a wave of desire rolled across her body. Oh my!

More than anything this made her realize how much of his life she'd missed, and tears began to form in her eyes. Harry noticed, prompting him to hug her again, more tenderly this time.

"I missed you so much!" she moaned. "And I missed out on so much of your life. Why did you stay away so long?" Harry murmured soft apologies, giving her a squeeze of contrition.

"I knew I needed to grow up," he tried to explain as he released her. "So often I stood back and let you make decisions for me. I had to learn to live my own life." His eyes sought hers, seeking understanding, and after a moment she nodded reluctantly.

"I traveled everywhere, learned so much," he continued. "There were many times where I thought about how much Hermione would love this, thought about asking you to join me on one of my journeys. But by then I figured you had your own life with Ron, and it wouldn't be fair to him or you. And it wouldn't be the same any more with three of us."

Hermione realized the point he was making. When two thirds of a trio pair up the other is left out. "So, if you'd known I was single?" she inquired in a low, hopeful voice. Harry nodded emphatically.

"I'm sorry. I just assumed..."

Hermione embraced him again, letting her tears dampen his warm chest where her head rested so comfortably. Finally she found her voice again. "Well, there's nothing to be gained by regretting mistakes of the past," she declared. "I'm here now."

Harry grinned, relieved that they'd dealt so well with that potentially touchy topic. "Let me show you around." Without further ceremony he apparated them to the top of a nearby mountain.

Hermione gasped at the spectacular view. "Where are we, anyway?" she inquired breathlessly.

"A magical valley in Wales," Harry responded. "That's a secret, by the way. But I've made lots of changes. I found this place about ten years ago,

and have been creating a magical wildlife preserve.”

He was interrupted by a trumpeting sound drifting up from below. Hermione’s eyes widened. “Is that what I think it is?” she demanded.

Harry nodded excitedly. “Yep. An erumpent.” He began to run through a list of magical creatures he had collected.

Hermione could only shake her head in amazement. “Luna would love this place,” she murmured half out loud.

Harry grinned again. “She does.”

Hermione jerked her head back in shock. “Why didn’t she ever tell me?” she protested.

Harry held out his hands in a placating gesture. “She can’t; she’s under a magical oath. She can write about the creatures she sees here, but not where ‘here’ is. She found it five years ago, and comes here every summer to study another magical species. She even brought in the Crumple-Horned Snorkack.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at his presumed teasing and huffed. “You know very well there’s no such thing,” she chided.

Harry only grinned again. “Want to see one?” He wrapped his arm around her waist and a second later they popped up in other spot, this one containing an entirely different sort of vegetation than the first.

“So, where is it?” Hermione queried, looking around.

“It’s invisible right now,” he replied. Hermione shot him another well-remembered look of skepticism. “Just sit here quietly,” he insisted. “They only show themselves when they feel it’s safe.” She shrugged and settled herself on the ground next to him.

As soon as she became still she began to feel magic well up around her, and immediately snuggled closer to Harry. It was a feeling of complete trust and contentment. She quickly deduced that it was some sort of magical effect he was creating, but on the other hand she’d always trusted him completely, so it wasn’t at all a foreign sensation for her.

“There’s one just ahead of us,” he murmured softly.

“How can you tell?” she protested.

“Shhh. I’ll explain later,” he promised. “For right now you need to project an image of being non-threatening.” Hermione relaxed and leaned her head onto his shoulder, feeling his arm wrap around her own. Even if this alleged creature never appeared, this was not an unpleasant way to spend some time.

She marveled at how the two of them had regained their closeness so quickly. In fact, it seemed they were being even more physical with each other than they had been before. It was something of an effort to restrain herself from touching him even more. If they’d still been teenagers, she would have put it down to raging hormones, but they were both in their thirties now!

Just then, a short distance away, a creature gradually faded into view. It was impossible to describe. It could be considered part miniature rhinoceros, and part elephant, but it had fur, and claws, and other parts that didn’t seem like they should go together on the same animal.

“Luna is still trying to figure out if it’s male or female or both,” Harry whispered into her ear. “Her goal is to get them to breed.”

The snorkack eyed them carefully, then wandered away, occasionally digging its small misshapen horn into the ground. Hermione continued to watch in fascination, while inwardly conceding that she needed to reevaluate some long held beliefs.

“Oh, let me show you something else,” Harry blurted out. He popped them away again, this time to a dark, forbidding place. “Have you ever seen *The Princess Bride*?” he asked eagerly.

Hermione nodded absently as she examined their new surroundings. “Yes, I saw the movie and read the book. Why?” Suddenly she whirled to stare at him. “You’re kidding!”

Harry grinned again. “Nope.” He swept his arm in wide gesture. This ... is a Fire Swamp.”

While Hermione stood there openmouthed, a jet of flame burst out of the ground a few feet away, startling her into flinging an arm around Harry’s waist. He responded in kind, drawing her into his side, and while neither mentioned it aloud, the action generated very nice warm fuzzy feelings inside each of them.

Just as she was about to ask about the ROUS, she spotted first one, then a few more ugly creatures creeping up around them, and knew without being told exactly what they were. But as she moved her hand to her wand in its holster on her hip, she was surprised once more.

In the blink of an eye Harry turned into a panther, let loose a fierce roar, and the rodents promptly scattered and fled. Just as quickly, he changed back again and returned to her side. Spotting her wide-eyed expression of astonishment he shrugged nonchalantly. “Didn’t Tori tell you I was an animagus?”

Hermione shot him a look of mock exasperation. “Yes, she did, but it’s still something that takes some getting used to,” she grumbled. “And why didn’t you ever think to mention that yourself, in one of your annual letters?”

He just shrugged, and gave her another grin. “I wanted it to be a surprise,” he claimed.

By now Hermione had calmed down, but she soon found herself shivering as the forbidding nature of the place began to reassert itself. “Let’s leave,” she suggested.

Harry nodded, and she caught a more serious, caring expression on his face as he replied simply, “As you wish.”

Hermione’s eyes widened again as they disappeared. *Did he mean it that way?*

Harry continued their tour into the early afternoon, popping them to other locations of varying climate and vegetation, each of them habitat for different creatures. In addition to the erumpents, some of the more impressive animals included colonies of hippogriffs, three types of winged horses including thestrals, unicorns, auguries, and many other smaller magical creatures. Harry was particularly proud of the griffin and the demiguise.

The last place he took her to was jungle-like with trees and plant species native to South American rainforests. She waited for a minute while he looked around, then was startled to hear him hissing. It took her a moment to realize he was speaking parseltongue, and then she spotted the longest snake she’d ever seen uncurling itself from under a bush.

It didn’t seem particularly magical, and as she worked up the courage to look more closely, it appeared to be a boa constrictor, extremely large for that species, and therefore presumably rather old. Harry seemed to be carrying on a conversation with it. After a few exchanges it turned to look at her and nodded a greeting, then slowly coiled itself up into the bush again.

An idea as to its identity suddenly came to her. “Harry ... is that ...?”

He turned to her and grinned. “My old buddy from the zoo,” he confirmed. “I remembered that he told me he always wanted to see Brazil, so this is the next best thing. I bought him from the zoo a few years ago when they decided he was getting too big to keep.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice conspiratorially. “I might have helped them come to that conclusion just a little. He’s near the end of his lifespan now, and doesn’t move around too much. I try to come to see him once a week or so to make sure he’s had something to eat.”

Hermione was impressed with his thoughtfulness, as well as his loyalty, and told him so. He just shrugged it off, which she remembered fondly was the same way he’d usually responded to praise when he was younger. Some things never changed, she decided as she gave him an affectionate hug.

Harry decided to finish the tour at the pool with the waterfall that she recognized from Victoire’s tale. It was indeed a breathtaking location right out of a tropical fantasy.

“So, is this the pond I heard so much about?” she asked innocently. Harry nodded with a smile.

“Yep, it’s one of my favorite spots to relax,” he informed her. “It’s really refreshing.”

“You know, Miss Weasley told me that I should bring a swimsuit bottom along,” Hermione revealed. “I wonder why?” she added teasingly.

To her satisfaction, Harry promptly turned bright red. He stammered something about Miss Weasley being a very attractive young lady while it was now his companion’s turn to grin. With an effort he recovered his poise, and attempted to turn the tables.

“And did you take her advice?” he inquired challengingly. But to his surprise, Hermione merely returned him an enigmatic smile, rather than becoming embarrassed herself.

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” she replied coyly.

“Uhhh ... OK ... I suppose we should move on then,” he stammered. Without thinking he offered her his hand and she took it, and he started toward his cave. While they made their way there he found his head awl with unexpected thoughts. *What’s going on here? We’re holding hands. Hugging. And are we both flirting with each other? What’s going on?*

As they walked along, Hermione interrupted these disturbing (but not in a bad way) musings by returning to a previous topic, inquiring about Ted and Victoire and the whole secrecy issue.

“Oh, I’ve been keeping in touch with Teddy all along, sending him birthday presents like I have you,” he revealed. “He wanted to come visit, so as a treat for his coming of age I gave in and sent him directions. He decided to bring Tori.” (Hermione inwardly felt somewhat miffed that unlike with her, Harry’s communication with his godson was apparently two-way to at least some extent.)

“I made the instructions a real challenge,” Harry continued with a smirk. “They had quite a time getting here. So anyway, he’s under oath. I obliviated her.” Noting Hermione’s head snap toward him in surprise he quickly added, “At her request. She wanted to tell you everything, so I just removed the location. I decided that he should know how to get here in case of emergency.”

Hermione nodded – that made sense. But in that case ...

“What about me?” she wondered. Harry met her eyes with a solemn gaze.

“I trust you.” She shivered slightly at the intensity in those words. The way he said them almost sounded like a different three-word phrase of endearment.

Before those thoughts could go any further, Harry announced that they had arrived. Stepping around an outcropping of rock he led her into the cave that was otherwise well hidden from view. Looking around, she was initially unimpressed. It was rather simply decorated, with outdoor furniture and

what she'd learned was a recently added porch swing. It didn't seem like much of a permanent dwelling.

But then, he surprised her again by taking her hand and walking *through* the back wall!

They emerged in an entirely different room, one with a distinctly modern appearance, particularly for the wizarding world. It was furnished in a muggle style, with all the latest luxuries, including ... a computer!

She spun around and stared at him. "How ...?" was all she could manage.

Harry was clearly pleased with himself, and was happy to explain. "The Americans and the Japanese have figured out how to shield electronics from magic. They've been competing with each other to be the first to come out with magic proof versions of each new technological advance. They're still a few years behind the muggles, but it's a lot better than being several decades behind like they are here in Britain."

More like a century behind, Hermione found herself correcting in her mind as she struggled to take in this astonishing information. Harry showed her his cell phone and grinned. She could only gape in amazement.

"Go ahead, try it," he urged. Her hand trembling slightly, she took it, stared at the keypad, and then punched in her mother's number.

"Hi mum. It's me, Hermione."

Harry stepped away to give her some privacy as her mother wished her a happy birthday. She explained that she was outside Hogwarts for the day and using a friend's cell phone. Her mother wondered which one of her friends owned a cell phone, forcing her to admit it was Harry. A minute or so of explanation later, Mrs. Granger concluded by telling her daughter to take her head out of her arse and tell the man how she felt about him!

This had been an ongoing point of contention between the two of them. Hermione always maintained that she was fine being single, and that her life as an educator was very rewarding. Her mother had come to the conclusion about ten years ago that her daughter was acting like a literary heroine waiting for her hero to return to her – a modern day Penelope remaining faithful to Odysseus. Hermione would not admit, even to herself, that there might be some truth to that analogy.

When the phone conversation ended, Harry took her up some stairs through another invisible doorway to a large open room equipped with plush sofas, a recliner, a 72 inch flat screen HD television, an impressive looking sound system, and a wet bar.

Hermione rolled her eyes – this was most definitely a 'guy' room. She glanced at Harry and raised an eyebrow at the telly.

"Satellite dish," he responded with pride.

"Yeah, I can see you wouldn't get cable out here," she quipped.

She allowed him to push her into the recliner, and even consented when he urged her to lean back in it. When she was settled he gestured at the wall and the lights dimmed. Another wave and ceiling dissolved.

Hermione gasped. He'd recreated the Hogwarts Great Hall ceiling with its sky view!

"Wait until night, the stars out here are incredible," he announced excitedly. Hermione remained stretched out in the recliner for several minutes (she had to admit that this *was* rather comfortable – perhaps the male of the species was on to something here) as she struggled to assimilate everything she was experiencing. This was beyond anything she could have imagined about the heretofore hidden life of her best friend.

Eventually she was able to compose her thoughts again, and they resumed their conversation. She'd noted that he hadn't been using a wand, and took this opportunity to ask about that. This led to a serious discussion about the nature of magic.

Harry informed her of a critical insight he'd gained in his travels – not all magic users used wands.

"It turns out to be mostly a European thing," he claimed. "This would include the places we colonized, like Canada, Australia, the States, and so forth. In the Mideast and parts of Asia they use staffs. Native Americans, including the Mayans, Aztecs, and Incans, chant their spells. I even found a place in Africa where they cast magic by singing!" He nodded at the amazed look on her face to reassure her that he was perfectly serious. "And in eastern Asia they meditate, then cast spells without any focusing device."

Harry paused, noticing the sparkle in Hermione's eyes, her quickened breathing, and the way she leaned toward him as she absorbed this new, alternate view of magic. To some extent, it was the way she had always reacted when learning something new, but right now he felt himself responding to her excitement on a more physical level. Back at Hogwarts, when she'd reacted this way they were usually at a study table surrounded by books, and wearing formless robes or other heavy clothing. But here they were in a warm, intimate setting and she was attired only in a pair of tight shorts and a thin, snug-fitting tank top that revealed just how excited she was!

Over the years he'd yearned for the company of his best friend, but it had been on an intellectual and emotional basis. He'd missed her companionship, her warmth, her steadfast loyalty, her unreserved affection. Now, the final piece clicked into place and he found himself desiring her physically as well. It was with a sense of nervous anticipation that he began to wonder just how the rest of her visit would play out.

For her part Hermione was having a similar revelation. Not only had Harry physically matured, but intellectually as well, and it was a major turn-on for her! The last time she'd been so unexpectedly impressed by something a close friend had said was when Ron had suddenly showed concern for the safety of the Hogwarts house elves during the final battle.

"What I ultimately discovered," Harry continued, unconsciously moving closer to her. "Was that magic can be a tangible substance. I learned to sense it, to feel its presence."

“Like with the snorckack,” Hermione observed, connecting this information with her earlier query. Harry nodded, pleased with how quickly she’d grasped the concept.

“Exactly. I couldn’t see it, but I could detect its magic, and since I’m so familiar with everything around here, identify it and determine its approximate location,” he confirmed. “Now, when we cast spells, what we’re all doing, using different methods, is taking our magic, gathering it, and redirecting it. But the most powerful magic users are also able to supplement their own magic with the magic surrounding them. There’s more of it in some places than others – Hogwarts or here, for example – but there’s magic everywhere.”

Hermione had to restrain herself from grabbing him and showing her appreciation for his new look and attitudes right then and there. The atmosphere was becoming so charged, it felt as though if they leaned any closer together sparks might jump from one to the other. She sought to ease the mounting pressure with humor. “You sound like Yoda teaching Luke about the Force,” she joked.

Harry grinned, reached out his hand, and levitated her chair with her in it, eliciting a squeak of surprise. “Harry!” She quickly recovered though, and broke into a laugh, clapping her hands delightedly. He let her down carefully, then jumped to his feet and hurried over to a storage bin, pulling out something that looked like a fancy flashlight.

“You’re kidding,” she protested as he displayed it to her. “You actually made a light saber?”

“Yeah, but not really,” he admitted as he flicked it on and waved it around a few times. “It’s just a light beam. Actually, a focused *lumos* charm. It still looks cool though, don’t you think?” Hermione agreed wholeheartedly and asked if he could show her how to make one for herself. Harry readily assented. Then he grinned again and swept his hand across the space between them.

“These aren’t the droids you’re looking for,” he intoned soberly. She smiled at his silliness, but then he continued. “Hi, I’m James Evans.”

Hermione assumed he was still teasing until she realized what he’d just done. She no longer had the ability to say his real name! It wasn’t an obliviation, since she still remembered it; she just couldn’t say it aloud.

“That’s amazing,” she blurted out. “Some sort of combination of confundus and compulsion charms?” Harry nodded, then cancelled the spell.

Before they left the room he magically unlocked another storage bin that she couldn’t even see before he opened it. Almost reverently, he withdrew an object that appeared to be a simple cube, about a foot and a half square, of sleek gray material that resembled highly polished granite. Her first impression was that it looked something like a very large paperweight. He rested the palm of his hand on its surface and concentrated briefly, and in a few seconds the dark block began to turn semi-transparent. Hermione gasped when she recognized it what was contained within its smoky depths. The Elder Wand.

“After quite a bit of thought and study, I decided this was the best way to keep it out of anyone else’s hands,” he explained. “It’s encased in a high performance resin. Anything strong enough to break it or melt it would damage or destroy the wand.” It turned out that one of the enchantments on the wand prevented *him* from destroying it while he was its master. (1) (He decided not to reveal at this point that Luna had the Resurrection Stone. She’d found it where he’d dropped it in the Forbidden Forest, one day while she was looking for bowtruckles, and used it to talk to her mum.)

Over supper Hermione brought Harry up to date on some of their friends. Neville was now her colleague on the staff at Hogwarts as the professor of Herbology, and was married to Hannah Abbott. He’d dated Ginny for a while after Harry left, but they’d broke up, discovering they weren’t compatible. He wanted a simple life while she wanted more glamour. At that revelation Harry mused that this indicated that he and Ginny wouldn’t have worked out either.

“Tori said that she’s a quidditch star,” he noted. Hermione nodded, but then glanced away. “What?” he asked, wondering what she was hiding.

“Indications are that she’s taken up with Blaise Zabini,” she revealed. Harry pondered this information for a few moments.

“He was one of the Slytherins who didn’t go bad, right?” he clarified.

“Yes, but he’s still pro pureblood,” she pointed out. Harry shrugged.

“Well, that’s her choice, I guess,” he decided. “What about Ron?”

“He went through several girls while he was playing quidditch,” she told him. “He basically took advantage of his celebrity status.” Harry managed a chuckle – his best mate had always been a lot more interested in fame than he himself had been. “He’s now hooked up with a witch who works at WWW with him named Felicia,” Hermione continued. “Actually, they’ve moved in together, which Molly’s none too pleased with.” Harry nodded, having no trouble imagining the Weasley matriarch expressing her disappointment in the morals of her youngest son.

“George married Angelina and they have two kids, one named Fred,” she went on. “And let’s see, Bill and Fleur – you know about Victoire of course, but did she tell you she had a brother and a sister?” Harry shook his head as a small smile broke out on his face. He knew how happy Molly and Arthur would be to have several grandchildren.

“Charlie’s still working with dragons ...”

“I know,” Harry cut her off. Hermione shot him a questioning look, before the implication hit her. “Harry Potter! Tell me you do NOT have a dragon here!”

“Not yet, but we will soon,” he announced with satisfaction. Seeing that she was not at all pleased by this thought he quickly added, “It’ll be a Welsh

Green. They're native to this area." Hermione reluctantly conceded this to be true, and they were able to return to their previous conversation.

"So, what about you?" Harry wondered after she'd finished the rundown on the lives of their friends. But Hermione only shrugged.

"I went on a few dates after I broke up with Ron, but nothing came of them. It's your fault, actually."

"What? How ...?" Harry, caught up short, didn't know quite how to respond to this.

"I kept comparing other guys to you and they always came up short," she explained calmly.

"But we never dated!" he protested.

Hermione shrugged, in hindsight thinking that they certainly should have. "We may as well have, with all the time we spent together," she reasoned. We actually lived together for six months! So it's only natural that you're the standard I measure other guys against." She paused while he absorbed that thought. "You should be flattered, you know," she added with another teasing smile.

There she went, flirting with him again! The same thought flew through both their minds.

Harry first had an odd look on his face, but then grinned. "I suppose you're right," he declared with mock arrogance. Hermione laughed and punched him on the arm. But then she turned serious and revealed her real dilemma - did guys want to date her because of her heroine status or because they were honestly interested in a bossy know it all?

Harry leaned in and took her hand. "Well, I'm quite fond of the bossy know it all," he declared solemnly. "She saved my arse too many times for me not to appreciate that particular personality trait."

Silence fell as they both gazed into each other's eyes for several moments.

Hermione leaned back and cleared her throat. "What about you?"

Harry shrugged. "Nope."

"No one?" she persisted.

He shook his head. "I guess you could say I've adopted a hermit lifestyle. I feel like Robinson Crusoe out here, building my own version of paradise.

"But even Robinson Crusoe had Friday," Hermione pointed out softly.

Harry leaned forward. "So, are you applying for the position of Girl Friday?"

Hermione matched his movement. "Maybe."

Harry's head jerked up in surprise. "You can't!" he protested. "You're a Hogwarts Professor and Assistant Head. You can't just pack up and leave." Hermione noted to herself that he did *not* say he wouldn't want her in that role. But she wasn't quite ready to lay everything on the table, so backed off for now. But not completely.

"I suppose you're right," she conceded with a dramatic sigh. "But it does sound appealing."

Harry agreed, sensing what was happening and deciding to follow her lead.

As the evening wore on, the talk turned eventually to the details of her visit. "When can I see you again?" she wondered.

"I could send you another portkey for your birthday next year," he suggested, tongue in cheek.

She responded with a stern glare. "Not funny, Potter."

"You could come back during the summer," he offered, more seriously this time.

"How about Christmas holidays?" she countered.

"Sure," he agreed readily, not at all unhappy at the opportunity to spend time with her again.

"All right then," Hermione decided. "But if I'm not going to see you for three months I'm going to maximize my time with you. Let's go up and look at the stars."

Somehow, the recliner became large enough for both of them, and the evening ended with her snuggled securely in his arms. By this point she had made up her mind that they were ready to step up their level of intimacy, and it was up to her to take the first step.

When it was time to turn in for the night she simply informed that she intended to sleep in his bed. He professed to be shocked at this, although not opposed to the idea.

"Why?" Hermione asked. "We fell asleep together more than once in the tent, if you remember."

Harry shook his head. While that was true, there was one very essential difference. Neither of them had been romantically interested in the other

back then. By this point now it was abundantly clear that this was no longer the case.

"Well, for one thing, I don't wear anything to bed," he admitted. Hermione's initial reaction was surprise, but then she nodded in understanding. After all, he was all alone here.

"Well, I'm going to put on a nightgown, you can transfigure some shorts if you want," she replied. She tried to say it nonchalantly, but her red face betrayed her.

Harry's only response was a wide-eyed stare. Hermione met his stare with the same solemn gaze he'd favored her with earlier in the day, and returned his explanation with the same intensity.

"I trust you."

Hermione woke early the following morning, feeling Harry snuggled up against her back. She smiled, recalling the look on his face when she came out of the bathroom last night in a thigh length nightie with a spaghetti strap top. It was time to up the stakes.

Wiggling a bit, she managed to pull the hem of the nightie up above her waist, then spooned back into him. She was thrilled at the tingling feeling that welled up inside her as she felt his hardness pressed against her bum, and delighted when he unconsciously wrapped his arm around her waist.

Carefully, she moved it up higher and positioned his hand against her breast, holding it in place. Her breath caught in her throat at the sensation of how wonderful this felt! She gradually fell back into a blissful sleep, wishing all this could have happened years ago.

Harry woke some time later, and immediately noticed their position. He let out a long sigh of relief that she was wearing knickers under her nightie. He tried to gently remove his hand from her breast without waking her, but discovered that her grip was too strong, and decided she wanted it there.

He couldn't believe how fast this was happening, but it didn't feel wrong at all. He flexed his fingers for a little subtle exploration – after all, this was uncharted territory. It didn't take long for him to decide that it felt amazing, and that he would greatly enjoy doing it again! His ministrations elicited a contented moan from the witch in front of him, suggesting that she had similar thoughts on the matter. He spooned more tightly against her and drifted back asleep.

The next time he awoke, he was alone in the bed. He got up, rearranged his sleep shorts to make sure he was completely covered, and reached out with his senses. He felt for Hermione's location and determined that she was in the mouth of the cave. Stopping in the kitchen to pick up the tea she had set brewing, he joined her to watch the sunrise.

She'd settled into one of the lounge chairs and was lying on it wrapped in a blanket. When she saw him she broke into a wide smile and leaned forward to indicate that he should sit behind her. She then snuggled back into him, wrapping them up together. It was quite a cozy picture, and perfectly matched the mood they both were in.

"Sleep well?" he inquired.

"Very," she responded simply. They both shared a knowing smile.

They were quiet for a time as the sun rose over the valley, painting an enchanting picture of pure serenity. "This is most beautiful place I've ever been," Hermione breathed softly. Harry nodded his agreement. "I don't want to leave ... I think I could stay here forever, but I have to go back." Harry nodded again, clearly hearing the other message in her words.

"How did you set up the portkey?" she asked, gesturing to the necklace that was still around her neck.

There were two types of portkey: one-way and round trip. The former was easier to create, since only a single destination was required. The latter required considerably more magic, and skill, since the return destination was variable and wasn't determined until the moment the portkey was activated. These were customarily created with a specific time limit for their reactivation. Complicating matters was the nature of the Hogwarts wards – any portkey could be used inside the grounds to leave the school, but only the Headmaster could make a portkey to come into the castle from the outside, unless it was a round trip journey that originated from within. Accordingly, the portkey Harry had sent Hermione was of the round trip variety.

Harry had experienced both types while a student at Hogwarts – Dumbledore had used the first type to send him back from the battle at the Ministry of Magic at the end of his fifth year, and Voldemort had used the second to capture him during the third task of the Triwizard Tournament in his fourth year. He'd originally thought that Voldemort had made a mistake by enabling his return after the resurrection ritual, but later realized that his foe's intention had been to terrorize the wizarding world by sending his dead body back.

"Twenty-four hours," he sighed. He wished now it would have been more, thirty or thirty-six perhaps, but that length of time had seemed reasonable back when he'd created it.

Hermione nodded, having the exact same thought, but knowing there was nothing to be done about it now. Either of them could create an alternate, single trip replacement, or she could apparate, but both of those options would leave her outside of the Hogwarts gates. She didn't really want to be observed walking back to the castle with an overnight bag and generating either questions or speculations about where she'd been.

She decided to make the best of the situation. "All right. Enough time for breakfast and a swim, then," she declared.

Hermione’s pulse raced with nervous excitement as she pulled a pair of shorts over her swimsuit bottom, and deliberately left off the bikini top. After putting on her tank top she encountered Harry outside the room, who she saw was just as apprehensive. He fidgeted as he informed her that he didn’t even own swimwear. Since there was no one else around he never bothered with it. They both knew that he could easily conjure or transfigure a swimsuit, but that wasn’t the real question. Hermione swallowed hard and replied that it was OK with her if he went without.

Then she had another thought. “What about when Luna visits?” she inquired.

An uncomfortable look crossed Harry’s face. “Given what you know about Luna, how do you think she’s attired when she’s here?” he asked.

Realization dawned on Hermione. “She’s nude all the time?” she guessed. Harry nodded.

“After all, the animals don’t wear clothing, why should we?” he quoted her in a passable imitation of her unconcerned attitude. Hermione’s face fell.

“So, you and Luna skinnydip together?” she deduced dejectedly. But Harry shook his head violently, hastening to correct her assumption and relieve her concern.

“She only found me swimming one time,” he assured her. “We actually have little contact when she’s here. I try to stay out of her way.”

Hermione was quite relieved at this revelation, but now was curious, and shot Harry a puzzled look at the vehemence of his response. After all, Luna was not unattractive. (Although she now understood why the blonde woman was always so tan.)

Harry read the question in her expression. “Besides the obvious, talking to her for more than fifteen minutes gives me a headache.” Hermione smiled at this, very relieved, as well as comprehending completely his reaction to their unconventional friend.

Harry apparated them back to the pool with the waterfall, landing on the ledge where he’d first encountered Teddy and Tori. Before he could lose his nerve, he stripped off his shorts and dived in. Hermione watched as she gathered her own courage, then removed her shorts, folded them, and placed them on a rock. Turning away, she pulled off her tank top, folded it as well, and laid it on top of the shorts. *OK, she thought as she took a deep breath, she was now officially in a topless swimsuit. Lots of women did this at beaches all over Europe; there was no reason she couldn’t too.*

She turned back to face the pool, where Harry was treading water, watching her every move. His mouth had gone dry as he stared at her, amazed that they were actually doing this. He was entranced with the way she looked, standing there in the sun attired in just a small bikini bottom. After a few more seconds she took another deep breath and dove in.

They swam around for a while, constantly sneaking looks at each other, gradually becoming bolder. Finally, they embraced and shared their first kiss.

One thing led to another and the kisses continued and grew more fervent as hands began to roam. But after several minutes of ecstasy, they began to calm down, by mutual unspoken agreement. They didn’t want to rush this or move too fast – after all, she would be leaving in half an hour. It was not an appropriate moment for them to make love for their first time.

Instead, they enjoyed each other’s state of undress for as long as possible, exiting the pool and hurriedly dressing and casting quick drying charms with minutes to spare. After sharing one last kiss, she pulled away and gazed lovingly into his eyes.

“Why don’t you come to visit me?” she proposed. Harry needed only a second or two to consider this, and nodded quickly. “How about Halloween?” was her follow-up suggestion. He nodded again, musing about how appropriate that would be, as it was on that day that they’d first become friends. And fortunately it, just like her birthday had, fell on a Saturday that year. (2)

“I’ll be there,” he promised.

-xox-XOX-XOX-xox-

Coming Back

Part 3 - Returning

Coming Back, Part 3 – Returning

October 31

Once again, Hermione's anxiety had steadily mounted over the last week as this day had approached. Now she paced back and forth in her room, reviewing her plans for the day in her mind. At breakfast that morning her announcements to the students had included a reminder of the costume party that evening. It had ended with the admonishment that costumes must be within the bounds of propriety.

In a good mood, she had continued on to inform Miss Weasley that dressing as Lady Godiva would not be appropriate. All the muggleborn students laughed, along with some of the others who were more familiar with muggle culture. The students in general were amazed at the more playful attitude they had been witnessing lately from the formerly stern professor. Victoire took the teasing good-naturedly, cheekily suggesting that the Assistant Headmistress might want to consider a Tarzan and Jane theme for her own costume.

Now, Hermione checked her watch for probably the tenth or twentieth time, and was gratified to see that it had finally reached the appointed hour for Harry's arrival. She'd been pleased that Harry had agreed to two-way communication, and now one of the school owls was able to find his valley. He'd given her a charmed band to clip to one of its talons that would negate the magic that kept his valley hidden from regular post owls, and she'd used it to send him a portkey that would bring him directly into the castle.

Suddenly he materialized right there in her room, and she had him in an immediate hug, almost before he'd completely landed. Once again the hug threatened to continue indefinitely before they broke it off, but this time it included a welcoming kiss as well. She outlined her ideas of how they could spend the day, and where they might visit, and he agreed.

First they flooed to Hogsmeade where she took some time to show him how the village had changed in the past fifteen plus years. From there they apparated to the cemetery at Godric's Hollow. Harry had confessed to her during her visit to his valley that he hadn't returned since that Christmas during the horcrux hunt, as the memories were still too painful. But he was willing to give it a try if he had her with him for support again.

While he spent time paying his respects to his parents, as well as to Remus and Tonks who were also buried there, Hermione reflected that their previous visit had probably been when she had felt closest to Harry on an emotional level of all the time she'd known him. With the way they had been hugging each other as they left, she wondered if their relationship might have changed that night had they not gone on to the disastrous encounter with Nagini immediately afterward.

Before they left, she conjured more flowers for the graves, repeating her action from before, causing Harry to smile and squeeze her hand in gratitude for her thoughtfulness, both then and now.

Their next stop was at her parents' house where she was finally able to introduce him to them. It seemed incredible that they'd never really had the opportunity to get to know him during all those years in school when he'd been her best friend. She firmly avoided the knowing looks her mother was shooting her way the entire time they were there.

They stayed for lunch, and Harry enthralled the elder Grangers with tales of his travels during the past decade and a half. (She noticed that he avoided any mention of his exploits during his school years, especially his conflict with a certain dark lord.) By the time they ended their visit, both of her parents had no doubt that their daughter had found her life mate, and both were entirely satisfied with her choice.

After that it was on to Diagon Alley, and they first went to Gringotts to see Bill and Fleur, both of whom were astounded at his appearance, despite having heard the report from their daughter on how dreamy he looked. While they stared at him, Harry eased the tension by noting that Fleur was as beautiful as ever, but commenting cheekily that Bill was showing some signs of his advancing age.

This broke the ice, as Fleur blushed prettily while Bill scowled, griping in jest that he got that enough from his kids and didn't need to hear it from some young upstart wizard. That got them all laughing, and the older couple spent an enjoyable half hour being mesmerized at hearing some of the things Harry had done. Bill in particular was interested in some of the ancient magic Harry had uncovered and they agreed to get together some time to discuss it further.

Finally it was time to move on to Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, and the encounter Harry was most anxiously anticipating. The store was bigger and gaudier than ever and as they entered, Hermione spotted a certain clerk.

"Felicia, are Ron or George around?" she inquired. The pretty blonde witch (of course, she would be a blonde, Harry thought to himself) looked up and gave a smile of recognition to Hermione.

"Ron's available, George is in the back," she replied cheerfully.

Hermione shot a sly smile to Harry as they approached Ron, and when they caught his attention she took his arm and turned him toward Harry. "I'd like to introduce you to an old friend – James Evans," she announced. Harry had caught on to what she was doing and quickly made a small motion with his hand.

Ron's eyes went wide in recognition. "H....!" He frowned, and shot a puzzled look at Hermione when he discovered that he couldn't say his friend's real name out loud. Hermione merely smirked, so he shrugged his shoulders and turned back to Harry. He gave him a quick once over, shaking his head at how different his best mate looked.

Where've you been for the last fifteen years?" he demanded good-naturedly.

"Seventeen," Hermione corrected with a smile, thinking that it felt just like old times. True to form, Ron rolled his eyes at her and all three of them chuckled.

"Traveling," Harry responded with a grin.

Ron gave him an odd look. "That's it? Just traveling?"

Harry shrugged. "Mostly. Spent my time learning all about magic, building a new world, that sort of thing. You know, the usual." Ron shook his head, amused at his old friend's antics. They'd always known, down inside, that Harry was destined to be different.

"So why'd you come back then?" he asked.

"Hermione," Harry answered straightforwardly. The witch being referred to beamed as she moved closer and took his arm. Ron looked back and forth between them several times, and nodded in understanding as a grin spread across his face.

"Like a sister, huh?" he commented. Harry grinned back, and took her hand in his.

"I may have been mistaken about that," he acknowledged.

Ron clapped him on the back. "Well, good on you. Both of you," he declared. "It's about time." He leaned forward and continued in a conspiratorial whisper. "I should warn you, though. Right scary that one is."

Hermione glared and hit Ron on the shoulder, and they all laughed as Harry put his arm around her and she leaned against him. They went to the back room to meet George, and spent the next hour catching up and reminiscing. Throughout it all, Hermione kept an eye on Harry, concerned about how he was adjusting to being the center of attention again after all the years spent in isolation. Harry caught her eye and smiled, nodding that he was all right. At this, she broke into a broad smile of her own. Everything was turning out splendidly.

Before the party that evening, Hermione introduced 'James Evans' to McGonagall, Neville, and Teddy and Tori. The Headmistress gasped, her hand held over her heart as though it was in imminent danger of failing, while Neville's eyes bugged out. Teddy and Tori just grinned.

Tori took the opportunity to tease her professor about the costume she'd suggested that morning. "I can't wait to see him in a loincloth!" she gushed, eyeing him up with a suggestive leer. Harry laughed, having heard about her antics from Hermione, and shook his head.

"How about this?" he countered. Then he concentrated for a moment, and suddenly his beard and hair began to grow out, until both were several feet long. He turned it silvery gray, and added a pair of half glasses. As the finishing touch, he transfigured his robes to a garish purple color with gold stars. Dumbledore! Quite impressed, the onlookers broke into applause, and all agreed that his choice of disguise was perfect for the occasion.

Harry and Hermione circulated through the Great Hall during the party, acting as chaperones, and studiously avoiding too much touching or other intimate contact with each other. His presence set the students buzzing with speculation nevertheless. But the next morning, the hottest topic in the castle would be Professor Granger's new beau.

Back at her rooms after the conclusion of the festivities, Hermione asked him to stay the night with her. Harry raised an eyebrow in silent inquiry as to her intentions.

"Just hold me," she requested, as they both thought back to how wonderful it felt the previous month, sleeping in each other's arms.

He agreed.

The next morning before he left she invited him to come to the Gryffindor quidditch match in November. Both Teddy and Tori were chasers, and she pointed out that it would be a nice opportunity to see them play. He allowed with a grin that he supposed he could manage another day away from his valley.

-ooOoo-

Christmas Break

Harry looked around the cave again for perhaps the tenth or twentieth time that day, checking that all was in readiness for Hermione's visit. He'd enjoyed his two trips to Hogwarts to spend time with her, and had been surprised at his lack of discomfort and relative ease of readjustment to being around other wizards and witches again. But for the next step in the progression of his relationship with Hermione, he preferred the comfortable, familiar surroundings and privacy of his magical valley. Either way, it was unbelievable how much he missed her, and he couldn't wait to see her again!

Back at Hogwarts, Hermione let loose a long sigh, but then broke into a smile. It was Friday evening, and she'd finally finished seeing the students off and finishing up her paperwork for the term, and she was eagerly looking forward to spending the holiday with Harry. She checked her to-do list one more time and nodded, satisfied that everything was in order, then activated her portkey. In the blink of an eye she was back in Harry's valley, somewhat fatigued but bubbling with enthusiasm.

He greeted her with a hug and they shared a nice, long kiss. After a bit of cuddling they broke for supper, followed by an evening in the recliner watching the stars while sharing some of the things that had happened in the past month. Then it was off to bed.

They slept in their now customary position, with Harry's arm wrapped around Hermione's torso. Except that Hermione no longer bothered with a nightgown.

The next morning they enjoyed a companionable breakfast, but Hermione was visibly anxious to get on with the day. She went to the bedroom to finish getting ready while he cleared up the dishes.

He was just finishing when she came out wearing a new outfit she'd selected specifically for this occasion. It consisted of a short, thigh length pareo in a blue and green floral print, tied low on her hip, with a matching bandeau style strapless top. She completed the effect with a colorful flower in her hair, which was pulled back behind her ears.

"What do you think?" she inquired with a coy smile, eagerly anticipating his reaction.

Harry let out a long soft whistle. "Wow. You look like a Polynesian princess," he enthused. "Fantastic!"

"Well, perhaps you can help me," she informed him. "I can't decide whether to wear it like this ..." she paused, then reached behind her back and untied the knot of her top, and pulled it off, dropping it to her side. "... or like this."

Harry was speechless. It was abundantly clear that she was ready to take up where they'd left off at the pool with the waterfall. He stammered for a while, then blurted out, "But I'd planned on some hiking first."

Hermione pouted, then glided forward and wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her bare breasts against his similarly unclad chest.

Harry caved immediately.

At the pool Harry stripped and jumped in first, as before, while Hermione waited. When he surfaced and looked back so she was sure she had his attention, she slowly untied the pareo. He gasped as he realized she was wearing nothing underneath. She then walked, as calmly as she could manage, down to the small sandy beach area and waded in, smiling broadly that she'd made him speechless again.

For a time they alternated passionate kissing with some swimming, both of them aware of where this dance was heading. Finally they got out and Hermione began arranging the blanket she'd brought on the flat rocky surface. When she looked up she caught his eye and smiled shyly.

"I'm ready," she announced breathlessly. But Harry knelt down beside her and halted her efforts.

"I have another spot in mind," he told her. Pulling her to her feet, he wrapped an arm around her and apparated them (both fully nude) to the top of the waterfall. Then he summoned their things up to join them while Hermione looked around at the new location.

It was another pool, this one perfectly calm, with a small sandy spot at one end. Constructed in this area was a thatched roof palapa, similar to those found at many beach resorts, with a double width, very comfortable looking padded sun bed.

"Oh Harry, this is perfect!" Hermione gasped.

They lay down together, both clearly nervous. "I've never done this before," she confessed.

"Me neither," he responded sheepishly.

"How can you be thirty-five years old and still be a virgin?" she asked in surprise.

"Hey, look who's talking, Miss Thirty-six year old virgin," he pointed out with a grin. "I have an excuse; I'm the one who's been living like a hermit all these years, remember?"

"I already told you I didn't date that much," she replied with a huff of mock indignation. "And you have to agree that there aren't a lot of opportunities for a professor living in that castle." She decided against revealing at this time her mother's contention that she was saving herself for him. (And she still wasn't ready to admit that the woman might have been right.)

They both laughed. "I think we'll figure it out," Hermione assured him. "I imagine it will come naturally."

"Besides, I'm sure you've read up on the subject," Harry teased. She playfully hit him and they both laughed again. Then she reached across him (very deliberately rubbing her body against his in the process) for her wand and cast two spells.

"I recognize the contraceptive spell but what was the other one," he inquired as she snuggled up against him.

"Something I looked up – it's a charm that's supposed to help for a woman's first time," she informed him.

"In the library?" he teased, raising an eyebrow.

"The Restricted Section," she grinned back.

"OK," he replied, then added hesitantly, "What do you say we start with kissing and touching and work our way into it?" Her answer was to run her hand down his chest and keep on going when she got to his waist

Hermione opened her eyes and sighed. It was perfectly wonderful. Harry had been determined that she enjoy it fully, so had stroked her to orgasm before entering her. She'd climaxed again just after he did.

Now she squirmed a bit. The charm had helped, but she was still a bit sore. Harry felt her moving and pulled her tightly against himself.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

After another long, lingering kiss, Harry rolled to his feet, then reached down and pulled her up. He concentrated for a moment, and waved his hand at the water, moving some rocks to divert a thermal spring into the pool. At her questioning gaze he smiled.

“Hot soak,” he explained. She rewarded him for his thoughtfulness with a tender kiss.

They waded in and paddled around a bit as he adjusted the hot water flow until they were satisfied with the temperature. Eventually they found a smooth underwater ledge to sit on. After relaxing for a while, Hermione began feeling frisky again. She took hold of him and stroked him until he was hard, then climbed onto his lap. She relished the feeling of him inside her.

For his part, Harry was simply amazed that things had progressed so rapidly to this point, and that his childhood friend could be such a passionate, uninhibited lover. He picked her up and carried her back to the lounge bed. This time they did it with her on top. Harry was entranced by the vision of Hermione astride him, head thrown back, hair cascading down her back, her wet skin glistening in the golden glow of the morning sun, and soon lost himself in ecstasy.

They repeated the snooze, soak, lovemaking cycle two more times, prompting Hermione to question whether there were some sort of healing and rejuvenating potions in the water! Harry allowed with a satisfied sigh that there was a larger quantity than usual of raw magic in this pool, which was one of the reasons he'd selected this site. He theorized that their bodies used the magic as needed. Hermione agreed with a sultry smile that the experience had indeed been quite magical.

In time they began to get hungry, and decided to head back to the cave. Hermione wrapped her pareo around her hips for the walk back, but Harry surprised her by offering her a ride. He transformed into his panther form and with some slight trepidation she climbed onto his back.

She quickly discovered an unexpected effect of this mode of transportation. Feeling his powerful back and shoulder muscles rippling between her legs, and with his fur rubbing against a very sensitive spot (that had become even more so after four rounds of lovemaking!), she was extremely turned on by the time they reached the cave. Harry, in his animal form, could easily detect the scent of her arousal and hear her moaning and whimpering, and so was likewise quite aroused as he bounded over the last rock into the cave mouth and transformed back to his human self.

Not willing to wait an instant longer, Hermione demanded that he take her right there on the table. She bent forward and he entered her from behind, and as he did so she fleetingly recalled reading about how this position increased the amount of penetration.

A second later she was able to confirm – Oh yes, it most definitely did! They were screaming each other's names in no time.

After they caught their breath, Harry apparated them to his bed, where they took a few moments to recover their energy. Hermione noted with satisfaction that they were in the same position that they slept in, but with one very significant difference. And she fully intended to make that modification permanent.

They did eventually get up to eat lunch, when Harry jokingly inquired whether they were going to do anything else that day. Hermione smiled demurely and gave a one word answer. “Maybe.”

That got them both laughing again. “So, what are you going to wear for the rest of the day?” Harry wondered as he dressed again. “Much as I enjoy seeing you in that wrap, I'm not sure it's practical for some of the things we'll be doing.”

Hermione pondered this for a moment, then decided that she would wear the same thing he did – cargo shorts with no top, and a pair of boots when necessary. As she pulled on the shorts Harry noticed that this also meant no knickers.

“You're going to be driving me crazy all day with that get-up, you know,” he moaned (not complaining, though). “Don't be surprised if I can't control myself and decide to have my way with you at some point.”

Hermione merely shot him a seductive smile, and reached out to run a finger slowly down his chest. “Well, if that happens I know the perfect place for it,” she declared impishly.

They spent the next few days with Harry showing Hermione in more detail how much was involved in establishing and maintaining the magical wildlife preserve. It was much like one of the larger open range style muggle zoos, she decided. Before he introduced a new species, he studied it carefully, then had to create the proper habitat, paying attention not only to what it ate, but what it nested in, etc. It was clearly a full time occupation.

He regularly made the rounds of the domains of each of the varieties of creatures that lived there, paying special attention to a half dozen of the newer residents. Through his ability to sense and identify magical signatures, he could keep track of the spread of each magical species, both plant and animal, and curb their movement if necessary. It wouldn't do at all to have two incompatible creatures come into contact with each other and begin to battle for dominance. This had happened a couple of times when he'd first started out, and it had been a difficult task to separate them before one or both were wiped out.

One afternoon, a week into her visit, Hermione persuaded him to show her more how he was able to feel magic. She was having trouble with it, so he took her to a small, peaceful location in the woods where they could concentrate without too many distractions. He sat down, leaning back

against a smooth tree, and had him sit in front of him. Then he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her unclothed torso back against his own. (She briefly thought he would be tempted to fondle her a little before they started, but he managed to resist.)

First, he pushed his own magic outward until she was able to sense it through her skin where it was making contact with his. It began with a tingle against her back, then spread out through her shoulders, arms, and stomach.

"Can you feel it now?" he asked. She nodded excitedly. "OK, now try to maintain contact." Now that she knew what to look for he gradually retracted it while she followed it back into his body. She gasped at the sensation. It was highly erotic, one of the most intimate things she'd ever experienced (second only to their lovemaking).

Once she had adjusted to that, it was time for the next step. "Next, reach out your senses and try to feel for the magic in other places," he instructed. She complied, first detecting a slight tingling coming from the tree he was leaning against, then from some nearby bushes. He informed her that these were magical plants, and she concentrated until she could distinguish the feeling she got from each of them.

"The stronger the magic, the easier it is to detect," he explained. "But eventually you'll even feel trace amounts in nonmagical things." She nodded again, the familiar thrill associated with the discovery of new knowledge coursing through her body. Harry smiled affectionately at the enthusiasm for learning that was so characteristic of his longtime friend.

Suddenly Hermione sensed another magical presence, this one much larger and of an entirely different nature from the others. And it was moving! Her initial concern eased when she realized that Harry was not bothered at all, and she concluded that it must be a highly magical creature that was familiar to him.

And then Luna Lovegood walked into the clearing.

Hermione, startled, first instinctively tried to cover her bare breasts, but then stopped. After all, Luna was completely nude, so what did it matter? As her mind pondered that thought, she realized that her breasts were resting comfortably on Harry's arm, which had moved up slightly from her waist. That she hadn't noticed this until just now was a pleasant indication of how accustomed she had become to the level of intimacy the two of them now shared.

Luna came to an abrupt halt when she spotted the two of them sitting there and cocked her head, studying them curiously (but making no effort to cover herself). "Hello Hermione," the slender blonde greeted her. "I've never seen you here before. Are you helping Harry look for nargles?"

Hermione couldn't help but chuckle at the off the wall, but totally in-character query. "No, actually, Harry's helping me feel the magic." She promptly felt herself blush as she realized the possible double meaning of what she'd just said. But Luna didn't seem to notice, and just nodded her head.

"Yes, Harry would be good at that," she decided. "Then she studied the two of them for several more seconds. "The wrackspurts seem to have left both of you," she declared. "You must have finally realized something that should have been obvious for a long time."

Sheepish grins spread across both of the new lovers' faces at an obvious interpretation of Luna's proclamation, as she sat down to join them, her physical assets fully on display. The part of Hermione's mind that wasn't yet completely flustered noted that the other woman must have Swedish ancestry, since she was still a natural blonde in her mid thirties. Then things got more awkward as Luna seated herself, facing them, and pulled her knees up to her chest. While that covered her breasts, she was now displaying a view customarily afforded only to a gynecologist. But while Hermione had to battle her discomfort with the situation, and could feel Harry's uneasiness behind her, their free-spirited friend continued her conversation with an air of complete nonchalance.

"... but you should still watch out for the nargles," Luna cautioned.

"There aren't any nargles in this valley," Harry reminded her. Luna pondered that assertion for a moment, then nodded.

"You're right, I'd forgotten that," she corrected herself. "Do you want me to find some for you?"

"We don't have any mistletoe, so they wouldn't have anyplace to nest," he pointed out.

Luna nodded thoughtfully, then brightened. "I can bring you some of that too," she decided. "We grow it at the Rookery, you know." Satisfied with herself that she was able to make a contribution to Harry's magical creature collection, she bounced up to her feet and bid them good day.

"How is it that you know so much about nargles?" Hermione wondered. "Do they even exist?"

Harry shrugged. "I'll guess we'll find out," he replied. "And Luna mentioned the mistletoe thing in a DA meeting during fifth year, remember?"

Hermione found herself worried about Harry's reaction to Luna's nudity, her insecurities about her own body returning. After all, Luna had a nice, slender figure much like Ginny and Cho, which she had always assumed was Harry's preferred body type in a girl, while she was more full figured. Her concern escalated after Luna left and Harry asked her if she wanted to go swimming. Would Luna be there? What if he began to compare the two of them?

Harry picked up on her agitation, but it took him a while to work out the reason for it. When they reached the pool, he noticed her looking around anxiously as they disrobed. Then it came to him. Stepping up behind her he put his hands on her hips, then ran them lightly up to her waist and torso, continuing around to her front, gently cupping her breasts. She shuddered at the delightful sensation generated in her body by his intimate touch, and leaned back into him.

"Hermione," he whispered lovingly into her ear. "You have absolutely nothing to worry about. Let me assure you – I'm more turned on by you wearing just that pair of shorts than I ever am by Luna, no matter how she's dressed or what she does. It was all I could do to keep from touching

you like this while we were sitting there.”

A beaming smile broke out on her face, and she turned in his arms to face him, hugging him tightly to herself. “And when you wear that little wrap thing you tie around your waist, and I know there’s nothing under it, it drives me crazy,” he added. “I can hardly think of anything but ripping it off and making love to you.”

“Well, I guess I’ll have to wear that more often then,” she teased, punctuating her declaration with a kiss. Then she stepped back and ran her hands over him like he’d just done to her. “Now, the only thing we need to decide is are we going to swim first, or ...” she glanced meaningfully up toward the top of the waterfall where the other pool and the sun bed were.

Harry hesitated, clearly torn between two attractive choices. Hermione laughed and pushed him off the ledge into the water.

They didn’t swim for very long.

By the end of the holiday they both knew they couldn’t live apart from each other any longer. Indeed, they both seemed to be determined to make up for all the years of celibacy! They’d grown closer, even more than they’d been before – and not just in the physical sense.

As teens they’d still been immature, and each had characteristics that annoyed the other. For Hermione it was her strident bossiness, her attitude that she knew better, and her impatience when others didn’t live up to her expectations. Harry was a procrastinator, was loath to study, and tended to make snap decisions without thinking things through. But now they’d largely grown out of those habits. They worked together well, and were a good fit as a couple. And they intended to keep it that way.

After discussing their needs and desires, they worked out a compromise. Harry would go back to Hogwarts with Hermione, but would make frequent trips to this valley. He’d plan on spending two or three days a week here. They would alternate where they slept, but it would definitely be together. It would take him longer to finish his work here, but that would be offset by having her help him during the time she was here too, especially during the summers.

She was confident that he would be able to teach at Hogwarts, and this led to a conversation about his teaching abilities. She reminded him of how successful he’d been with the DA, and he admitted that he had enjoyed that experience. They settled on a plan for him to begin by offering advanced magic classes and quidditch clinics.

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January, Start of Term

As the students settled into their seats, the Assistant Headmistress stood to make an announcement.

“I’d like to take this opportunity to introduce our newest staff member, who also happens to be one of my oldest and dearest friends. Please welcome James Evans.”

Harry stood up and waved his hand over the assembled students to cast the misdirection charm, continuing the motion into the normal gesture of acknowledgement for their polite applause of greeting, and then seated himself again.

“He will be a visiting professor, teaching several advanced elective courses, such as dueling, animagus transformation, and wandless magic,” Hermione continued. This caused a considerable stir among the students, who now sat up and paid closer attention as they realized that this was not an ordinary announcement. This could be an amazing opportunity, as these were topics that were rarely, if ever taught at Hogwarts!

Harry leaned over to whisper something to Hermione, and she nodded, allowing a small smile to creep onto her face. “I should add that James was a rather decent quidditch player in his time here at Hogwarts, and is willing to offer tips to any house team that is interested,” she added.

Several students had begun to realize exactly who this new professor was, and turned to whisper excitedly to their housemates. But they discovered to their puzzlement that they were unable to say his real name aloud, or even write it down. Some of the older students recognized that it was some sort of magical privacy spell.

One clever student worked out a way around it, calling out to ask if How To Defeat a Dark Lord might be one of the course offerings. This caused the whispering to increase dramatically.

“Actually, the key to that is having good people helping you,” Harry responded cheerfully. “Neville, or I should say Professor Longbottom, and especially, erm, Professor Granger actually did more than I did.”

The murmuring grew louder at this declaration, with many looks now directed at Neville, who shook his head modestly, and at Hermione who just gave Harry a knowing smile.

The Head Girl, a pretty Ravenclaw with long dark hair, who reminded Hermione of Cho Chang, shouted out that she’d be willing to learn anything he’d care to teach her, generating gasps and considerable giggling among the older girls, many of whom nodded vigorously in agreement.

Hermione decided that she needed to cut off this behavior before it got out of hand.

“I should also note that you are likely to observe the two of us spending a considerable amount of time in each others’ company,” she remarked pointedly, taking Harry’s hand in her own.

This led to a chorus of sighs from the females, especially the upper years. The young Assistant Headmistress was strict, but warm and caring. She was well liked by the student body, so they were happy for her evident good fortune.

Victoire Weasley now stood. "Professor P..." she stumbled over the word and stopped, putting her hands on her hips and glaring at the head table. "How are you doing that?" she demanded.

Harry grinned at her. "Magic."

Tori shook her head and smiled, then began again. "Professor *Evans* , on behalf of myself and all the others here who owe our very lives to you, and wouldn't even be here without what you did ..." She was interrupted by shouts of agreement and cheers, and waited for them to die down before she continued.

"Thank you. And welcome back."

Harry, now embarrassed, was at a loss as to how to respond, but Hermione prompted him with an affectionate smile. He rose to his feet, and the Great Hall went silent.

"It's good to be back."

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